

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Well-fed Writers

Long renowned as a center of gustatory greatness, New Orleans has a long list of literary figures that have raved about the delectable dishes they have devoured in the Crescent City. The famed author of "Vanity Fair" and "Pendennis", William Makepeace Thackeray, came to lecture in New Orleans in the spring of 1856. Mention is made of "Pendennis", for it was in the Pendennis Club of Louisville, Kentucky (founded 1881), that the "Old-fashioned" was first "fashioned". A cocktail of Bourbon, bitters, superfine sugar (or simple syrup), a muddled orange slice and a cherry (but NEVER soda water), it has become a local favorite.



The original Pendennis Club of Louisville, Kentucky, circa 1906

And New Orleans (also home to its own Pendennis Club) was a favorite of Thackeray's in spring when he wrote in his "Roundabout Papers":

"As for New Orleans in spring-time, just when the orchards were flushing over with peach-blossoms, and the sweet herbs came to flavor the juleps—it seemed to me the city of the world where you can eat and drink the most and suffer the least. At Bordeaux itself, claret is not better to drink than at New Orleans."

Thackeray stayed at the St. Charles Hotel, imbibed at the Old Absinthe House (his name's on the plaque outside) and was wined and dined in Milneburg at a famous restaurant run by Lucien Boudro. Monsieur Boudro's Lake Pontchartrain establishment specialized in preparing an excellent *court bouillon* and other remarkable seafood dishes. Boudro had been hired by the Baroness Pontalba to cook for Jenny Lind on her visit to the city five years earlier. Thackeray wrote of the meal:

"At that comfortable tavern on Pontchartrain we had a bouillabaisse than which a better was never eaten at Marseilles: and not the least headache in the morning, I give you my word; on the contrary, you only wake with a sweet refreshing thirst for claret and water. They say there is fever there in the autumn: but not in the spring-time, when the peach-blossoms blush over the orchards, and the sweet herbs come to flavor the juleps."

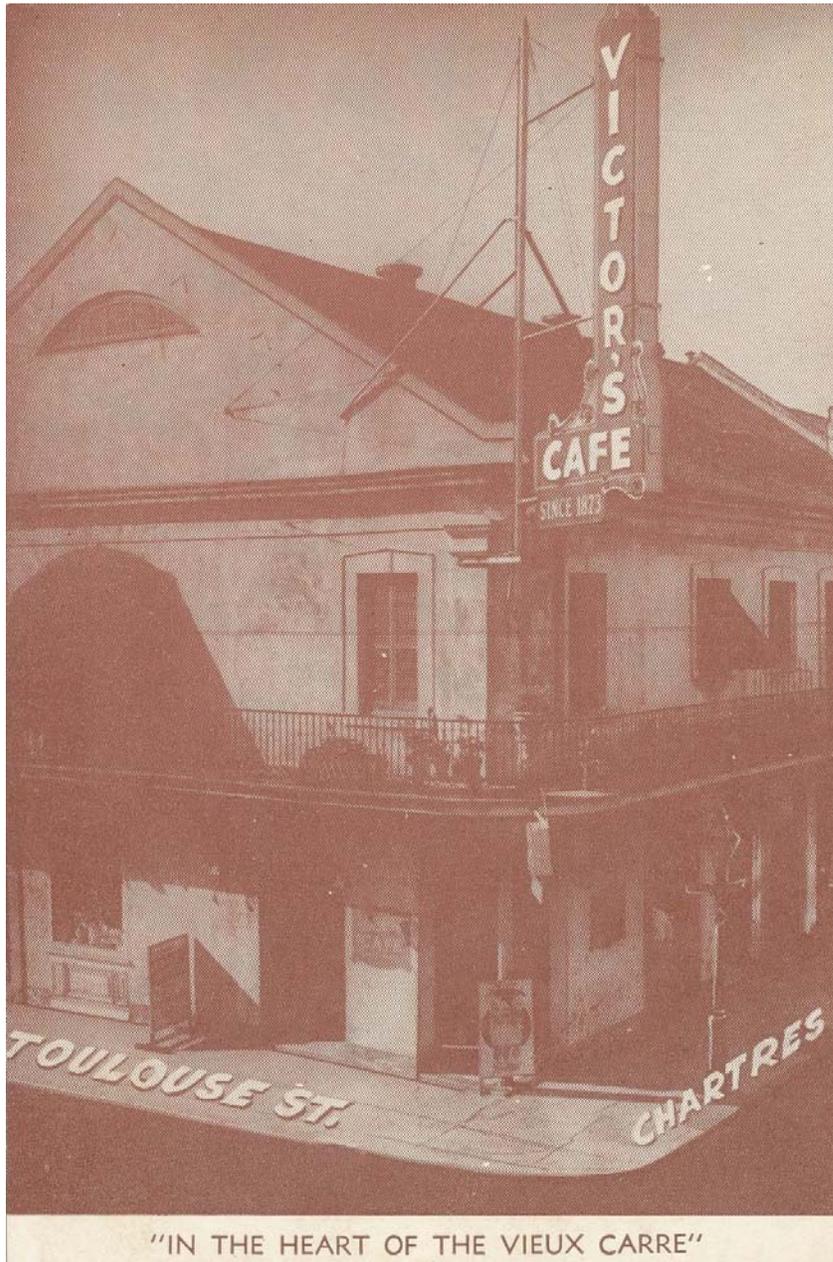
Mark Twain wrote in 1884 that "New Orleans food is as delicious as the less criminal forms of sin." In "Life on the Mississippi" he introduced the world to the local custom of *lagniappe*, an "excellent word" he determined to be pronounced "lanny-yap":

"It is the equivalent of the thirteenth roll in a 'baker's dozen.' It is something thrown in, gratis, for good measure. The custom originated in the Spanish quarter of the city. ... If the waiter in the restaurant stumbles and spills a gill of coffee down the back of your neck, he says 'For lagniappe, sah,' and gets you another cup without extra charge."

O. Henry (William Sydney Porter), who lived on Chartres Street during his short stay in the city, frequented the restaurant of Madame Begué on Decatur Street and later used her in one of his short stories. Before surrendering himself to authorities back in Texas on charges of embezzlement, he had gathered enough background material for four of his stories about New Orleans: "Cherchez la Femme", "Blind Man's Holiday", "Renaissance at Charleroi" and "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking".

Tennessee Williams is so much a part of the French Quarter, that he naturally had a fondness for its culinary pleasures. Sometimes when

he needed a respite from writing, he sought solace at Victor's Restaurant on the corner of Chartres and Toulouse. There he would enjoy a Brandy Alexander over the harmonies of the Ink Spots on the jukebox.



Postcard view of Victor's on Chartres and Toulouse, from the collection of Ned Hémard

No longer in business, this Victor's is not to be confused with the original Victor's at 209 Bourbon Street (Galatoire's since 1905 when Jean Galatoire bought out his partner, Victor Bero). Galatoire's was also Tennessee Williams' favorite restaurant, where he could be found at a corner window table several times a week. He also enjoyed Brennan's on Royal and Broussard's on Conti (also a William Faulkner favorite). Williams' play, "A Streetcar Named Desire", has provided the

name for another Quarter restaurant, "Stella!".

Another Quarter resident, who lived in the Beauregard Mansion, wrote a whole novel about dining in New Orleans' oldest restaurant (1840). Entitled "Dinner at Antoine's", Frances Parkinson Keyes wrote lovingly about those dishes she had learned to cherish. In one paragraph she explained the Alciatores' creation of *Huitres Rockefeller* and *Foch*:

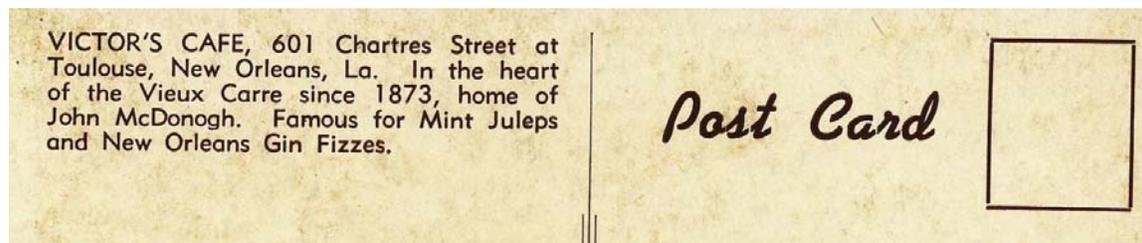
"The term 'Rockefeller' was chosen merely to indicate richness – not richness in money, but ingredients! The name 'Foch' has a great deal more significance: back in '21 the Knights of Columbus feted General Foch at Antoine's. Roy's father, Jules, announced that he would create a special dish: Alsace-Lorraine had been redeemed by Papa Foch from the thrall of the hated Boche, and Jules had served his apprenticeship as a chef in Strasbourg. So he spread toast with *paté de foie gras*, and heaped fried Louisiana oysters on top of that, and poured Madeira sauce over the whole thing."

Le Maréchal Foch, who would also have a street named for him in Lakeview, enjoyed his *Huitres Foch* exceedingly. Writers and warriors, they have all come to love New Orleans *haute cuisine*.

Postscript to the 2007 article:

The current structure on the northwest corner of Chartres and Toulouse streets once occupied by Victor's Café was constructed in 1796 by well-to-do merchant Joseph Reynes, who purchased the site by exchanging a plantation tract on the Mississippi River for this corner property. According to historian Stanley Clisby Arthur, Reynes made the exchange with Madame Louise Briot, widow of Francois Caisergus, by including with the plantation tract "a slave named John Henry thrown in for *lagniappe*". Not exactly what Mark Twain meant when he explained the term earlier. Reynes later sold his residence in 1830 to Francois Gautier de Boismagny for \$20,000.

In 1873, Victor Valentinien (not Bero) opened a grocery store that later became Victor's Café, a beloved haunt for Bohemian artists and writers (most notably Tennessee Williams). It is reported that the famous playwright would revive himself at Victor's bar and at the small courtyard swimming pool, now covered by the fountain.



As mentioned on the postcard above, Victor's was famous for "Mint Juleps and New Orleans Gin Fizzes", which were popular on hot summer days. One of Victor's favorite personalities was Estrellita, an African woman in her 70s who made perhaps the best roux in the city. The postcard also brags that the property at 601 Chartres was once home to John McDonogh, but Clisby Arthur explained "the train of realty transactions fails to show he ever owned, much less occupied it."

After Victor's closed its doors in the 1960s, the structure was vacant until it re-opened as the Stage Door Lounge. In 2004 it was reopened as Chartres House, which is its name today.



Present-day view of Chartres House, once Victor's Café

Currently (April 2013), there is trouble in French Quarter restaurant paradise. The original Brennan's, a culinary landmark since 1946, is fighting to avoid the auction block as a result of unpaid mortgages.

Tujague's, the second-oldest restaurant in the Crescent City, is also in danger. New Orleanians are up in arms over the fact that the historic establishment may be sold to T-shirt store chain owner Mike Motwani. All of this was set in motion on February 18 by the death of proprietor Steven Latter, who operated the restaurant for three decades.

Guillaume and Marie Abadie Tujague of Bordeaux, France, began their restaurant in 1856 by serving breakfast and lunch on Old Levee Street (now Decatur) to hungry waterfront dockworkers and seamen. Guillaume Tujague sold his business to Philibert Guichet from Lafourche Parish, whose chief competitor was a fantastic cook - the legendary Bavarian-born Madame Elizabeth Begué (whose breakfasts were so elaborate they lasted for hours). She'd been cooking for the French Market crowd since 1863. Her establishment was just a few

doors away at 823 Decatur Street at the corner of Madison.

In 1906, Madame Begué died and her restaurant was taken over by her daughter and son-in-law, the Anouilles. An employee, Jean-Dominic Castet, joined forces with Philibert Guichet and in 1914 they bought Madame Begué's restaurant on the corner of Decatur and Madison from her now-widowed daughter and renamed it Tujague's.

New Orleans businessman Steven Latter took over operations from the Guichet family in 1982, and continued the tradition of multiple courses, including a piquant shrimp *remoulade*, succulent beef brisket served with a delicious horseradish sauce, "cap" bread (named for the length of dough that's baked atop the French loaf) and dark coffee in shot glasses. With Latter's passing, tradition-minded diners are worried.

People are now hoping a white knight like John Besh will buy Tujague's and save it from T-shirt death. In the meantime, they're busy making reservations because they believe it may be their last meal at one of the French Quarter's most historic dining destinations.

Numerous presidents and notables have dined there, and Tujague's Guichet is also famous for creating the popular *Crème de menthe*-flavored after-dinner cocktail, "The Grasshopper". To learn more about this historic drink, read my article entitled "A Big Hop Over the Ditch".

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