

THE CHRONICLE OF THE PETTICOAT REBELLION

Our cookbook is named after a small but significant “rebellion” that occurred in Louisiana's earliest days as a European colony. Soon after the “men” - sent by the French monarchy to explore the northern coast of the Mexican Gulf and punch a hole in the Spanish hegemony of the southern New World of North America - had found the mouths of the Mississippi and built some settlements along the coast to the east of the great river, they began to feel the need for some European women to help populate the new colonial enterprise. The male French and Canadian settlers of Louisiana were soon accommodated as follows:

The first mention of the incident on record is in the Journal of Benard de La Harpe, who wrote his Journal after his return to France in the 1720's.

Entry for July 24, 1704: “. . . the Pelican, arrived at Dauphine Island from France. . . Also on board were two Gray nuns with twenty-three poor girls . . . The girls were married within the month to several Canadians.”

Translated and Edited at USL in Lafayette, LA in 1971 which provides . . .

Footnote 4. Bienville records the marriage of the girls in his lengthy letter to the Compte de Ponchartrain (AC., C13a, 1: 449-465), dated September 6, 1704. (*La Harpe, p. 67*)

My note: this is probably the letter where the so-called “Petticoat Rebellion” is chronicled.

The first classical Louisiana historian to mention the Petticoat Rebellion is Charles Gayarre writing in 1847, his take on the affair is as follows:

“The history of Louisiana, in her early days, presents a Shakespearean mixture of the terrible and of the ludicrous. What can be more harrowing than the massacre of the French settlement on the Wabash in 1705; and in 1706, what more comical than the threatened insurrection of the French girls, who had come to settle in the country, under allurements which proved deceptive, and who were particularly indignant at being fed on corn? This fact is mentioned in these terms in one of Bienville's dispatches: "The males in the colony begin, through habit, to be reconciled to corn, as an article of nourishment; but the females, who are mostly Parisians, have for this kind of food a dogged aversion, which has not yet been subdued. Hence, they inveigh bitterly against his grace, the Bishop of Quebec, who, they say, has enticed them away from home, under the pretext of sending them to enjoy the milk and honey of the land of promise." Enraged at having thus been deceived, they swore that they would force their way out of the colony, on the first opportunity. This was called the petticoat insurrection.”

[History of Louisiana by Charles Gayarré](#)

in the edition published by William J. Widdleton, New York, 1867.

The text is in the public domain.

The modern histories of Louisiana expand upon the tale and provide its current interpretation. Mel Leavitt in his “popular history” of New Orleans, probably offers the best variant on the tale.

“ In 1704, the Bishop of Quebec dispatched 23 young women to the Mobile colony to provide wives for its men. The colonists were exultant, but the women quickly showed a distaste for Indian maize, or corn, and threatened to leave the colony unless they could have French bread. Bienville's gifted housekeeper, Madame Langlois, took the lady rebels aside and introduced them to the secrets of grinding meal for cornbread and preparing hominy and grits and succotash, and the rebellion was soon abandoned.”

(Leavitt, p.17)

Leavitt continues the episode with a humorous snippet, but one that has special import for this

cookbook/history about the origins of Creole food.

“Bienville's food problems were not all so frivolous. The sandy Gulf Coast littoral is generally infertile. Supply from France was undependable, and provisions were many months in arriving. Bienville tried to alleviate periodic privation by sending his men on extended hunting trips, to live as best they could among the Indians. In 1707, the situation was relieved when a large supply ship arrived. Bienville {announced} that the new ship had brought Bordeaux wine. 'The excellent French wine,' (wrote Penigault), 'consoled us for the loss of favors from the girls . . . who were angered at our long trips hunting.’” (Leavitt, p.17-18)

Finally, an earlier cookbook about New Orleans cuisine offers the following:

“A group of about fifty young wives marched on {Bienville's} mansion, carrying the weapons of their craft in their hands. They vigorously pounded frying pans with metal spoons and caused quite a hubbub. They protested to the governor that they were tired of a diet of corn meal mush and that something had to be done to improve the food situation. Fortunately the governor had the solution to the problem right under his own roof. His housekeeper, a Madame Langlois, had been among the Choctaw Indians and had learned from their squaws many of their cooking secrets: how to make lye hominy and grits; how to use powdered sassafras (file') and make gumbo; how to make corn bread, cook rice, and make jambalaya; how to cook fish, crabs, shrimp, crawfish, and wild game. Bienville put the petticoat rebels under the charge of Madame Langlois, who opened a cooking class and taught them all these bright new ideas. Creole cookery was off to a rousing start.”

Howard Mitcham. Creole Gumbo and All That Jazz, 1978, p. 4.

This “Petticoat Rebellion” is now considered to have been the affair behind the creation of the very first “cooking school” in North America. Madame Langlois' efforts to help the New Orleans ladies (or at least the Louisiana ladies) deal with their usually awful food situation can be taken as nothing less than the birth of Creole Cuisine. The talents and techniques of these European and African women in turning the often meager culinary resources they found in the colony into flavorful and nutritious sustenance for their families is indeed the very stuff and spirit of Louisiana cooking that has made it the unique food culture that we find here today.

References to what would become the basis of Creole cuisine appear as early as Iberville's journal of his explorations in 1699. On his way, literally, to discover the mouths of the Mississippi, he noted that he and his men dined on “some rather tasty oysters”. Of course, this could not have been “creole” food, since a Creole is a person born in the New World of parents from the Old World. So, by extension, Creole food must be food created by both Old and New World cooks and ingredients IN THE NEW WORLD, using ingredients available to them in the “colonies”.

Today, almost every conversation in New Orleans usually in some way involves food. Every event, no matter how small, will involve food. When eating breakfast, New Orleanians consider what to eat for lunch, and while eating lunch, discussions about the upcoming dinner hour are common. Food from all cultures are welcomed in this culinary-obsessed city, but it is the local ingredients and recipes that define Creole cuisine.

The culinary enterprise was not always this easy, though. In the early 1720's, colonists were faced with a myriad of problems involving their food. By 1735, though, French Colonial Louisiana had settled into somewhat of a routine. Regarding the production and consumption of food, several known factors had fallen into place. Farms had been established all through the colony from Mobile Bay to the Bayou St. John village to the Tchoupitoulas and German Coasts upriver from New Orleans. Every concessionaire (planter) in the region, as well as all the homes in New Orleans itself had a

potagerie (a household or kitchen garden) in every yard.

The various Indian towns and villages supplied an ongoing supply of crops and wild game, large and small. Domestic meat production was also underway, including hogs, cattle, and poultry. Fishermen, both native and colonials, were busy supplying the colony with seafood. The Ursuline convent and kitchen had a steady supply of foodstuffs to feed their sisters, boarders, and charges. None of this, however, should be understood as a time of plenty.

There were constant food shortages, poor harvests, corrupt food supply chains, and individual cheating and stealing of food. The much fabled French Market existed but was not regulated at all. New Orleans would have to wait for Spanish rule for a real organized market. Along the river landings of the city, the French and German farmers, the Indians, and even the African slaves bartered and sold various food products on a daily basis. Through all of this activity, the foundations of Creole Cuisine were being laid.