



MME.

BÉGUÉ'S

Recipes

of

OLD

New Orleans

CREOLE

COOKERY.



AS IT WAS IN THE GAY 90's

**Mme. Bégue's Celebrated New Orleans Restaurant
at Decatur and Madison Streets
opposite the
French Market**



By Elizabeth Kettenring Dutrey Bégué
Foreword and revised recipes by Poppy Tooker



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≡ FOREWORD ≡ MADAME BÉGUÉ AND ME

YOU hold in your hand a very important piece of New Orleans food history. By using *Mme. Bégué's Recipes of Old New Orleans Creole Cookery*, as if by magic, you can recreate the authentic flavors of true Creole cuisine, served up from the most gilded age ever experienced in the Crescent City. Originally published in 1900, this useful manual was one of the earliest cookbooks ever printed in New Orleans. It became a sought-after souvenir of a Bégué's dining experience, used and treasured by countless housekeepers and housewives throughout the twentieth century, but it last appeared in print in 1937.

The word Creole, originating from the Spanish word, *criollo*, translates as "native." Elizabeth Kettering Dutrey Bégué and her cuisine personified the "New Orleans born" Creole concept at its finest. Creole cuisine marries together all nationalities that immigrated through our port city. French, Spanish, African, German, and by the golden age of Madame Bégué's restaurant, Sicilian Italian, all combined in the pots and pans of Madame.

In 1853 at the age of twenty-two, German born Elizabeth journeyed to New Orleans to join her brother, Philip, a French Market butcher. At that time, the French Market stretched for blocks along the Mississippi riverfront. The inspiration of seasonal foodstuffs was astounding. Native Americans sold sassafras, known as filé powder, from colorful blankets spread on the ground along with herbs and other seasonings. African okra for gumbo appeared for sale along with live crabs and crawfish and braces of game and songbirds. Within separate sheds allocated for fruit, vegetables, meats, and seafood, on any given day shoppers could choose from five hundred vendors hawking the ingredients that inspired New Orleans' unique Creole cuisine.

Just across the street from the market, Elizabeth met her first husband, Creole coffee house proprietor, Louis Dutruil. In the earliest days of "Dutry's Coffee House," (Dutry being the Anglicized version of Dutruil) Elizabeth's customers were butchers and other French Market vendors who, having worked since predawn, were ready for the big midday meal. Elizabeth bore no children with Louis, but together they gave birth to the long, leisurely late-morning meal known nationwide today as brunch. When Dutruil died Elizabeth married her bartender, Hippolyte Bégué, a man eight years her junior. They changed the name of the business to Bégué's Exchange and the increasingly famous midday meal became known as "Breakfast At Bégué's."

In his Oxford Symposium essay, published in *Eggs in Cookery*, "Bégué's Eggs," New Orleans food scholar Rien Fertel points out that it was Gascony born Louis Dutruil, Elizabeth's first husband, who should be credited for what became one of

the most famous courses served daily at Bégué's—the omelet. The Gascon region of France, known for poultry such as the fattened goose that produces foie gras, is also known for omelets thanks to the abundance of eggs. Eggs were a luxury item in late-nineteenth-century America, costing more than most meats. The massive omelets carved and distributed at Madame's table included veal sweetbreads, oysters, and even crispy, buttered toast points depending on the day of the week.

But breakfast at Bégué's was so much more than just remarkable omelets! Again and again, travelers would write of passing through the downstairs saloon to a sawdust-covered staircase where you ascended to a coveted place in the upstairs room. Only thirty guests could be seated at the long tables. Service began promptly at 11 A.M. There was no printed menu. Guests were served the dishes Madame Bégué and the market were inclined to provide.

The multi-course affair began with a piece of cap style French bread, ceremoniously dipped in red wine as demonstrated by Hippolyte Bégué, who presided tableside. Cooking each course entirely by herself, Madame Bégué provided the diners a glimpse of each exciting dish to come. She could be seen, a step up from the dining room through a wide doorway as she stood at the iron, coal-burning stove. Surrounded by strings of garlic and pepper, her copper pots gleamed in the light as the Crescent City's first celebrity chef wielded the great implements of her trade.

Crawfish bisque, complete with stuffed crawfish heads; turtle soup; or a gumbo, all uniquely Creole, was ladled into bowls from a large, steaming tureen. Cauliflower enrobé

in an egg sauce became its own course. Unfamiliar Gulf fish also swam in Madame's rich sauces. Liver, kidneys, tender lamb chops, thick cut steak, even "mutton feet à la Creole" provided the hearty meat course. A green salad, cheeses, and a small apple were served near the meal's conclusion in the classic French style. Hot, black chicory coffee appeared in small shot glasses, topped if desired by a flaming spoonful of brandy.

In 1884, when the Cotton Exposition opened in Uptown New Orleans (on the site of today's Audubon Park) Bégue's French Quarter restaurant acquired cult-like status among the hordes of visiting Americans. This popularity continued, unabated, until Madame Bégue's death thirty years later. For the uninitiated, a meal at Madame Bégue's was like embarking on an exotic journey. Understandably, reservations became required weeks in advance. Hippolyte was one of the first restaurateurs to have a telephone installed in New Orleans. A business card from that time, kept as a memento by Newcomb student Frances Dreyfus, reveals the number as "Hemlock 1231."

By 1898, the *New York Sun* newspaper reported "nine people out of ten that visit New Orleans have heard of Bégue's." The *Dallas Morning News* wrote of "Famous Creole Cooks—An Unpretending Little Restaurant Where the Fare is Divine." Tables were added to the third floor so that nearly fifty guests could be accommodated, but many more still were turned away. Canal Street jeweler Coleman E. Adler created a sterling silver spoon as a souvenir for visitors who wanted to take a bit of Bégue's home with them. The spoon depicted the

images of Madame and Monsieur Bégué, a rendering of the dining room, a string of fishes, a bottle of wine with a glass at the ready, and a French Market scene on the back.

Every guest was requested to record a memory of his or her Bégué's experience in large registers that came to include famous names of the day. Actors, writers, poets, soldiers, and ordinary tourists alike declared their undying fidelity to the Cuisenaire.

“Oh Madame Bégué, your liver has touched my heart.”

Joseph T. Brown, Jr. was inspired to write:

*“O! may my palate never fail
To relish thee—O woman snail,
And may I never start to kicken’
At second course of Creole chicken,
Or even disdain to take a sliver,
Of Madame Bégué’s tender liver,
Nor will I ever more forget
The mem’ries of sweet omelette;
And now before the muses damn
Let’s say a word about that lamb,
And let no man, in future, sneeze
At Bégué’s coffee and his cheese.”*

Mrs. Walker, from Washington, provocatively inscribed the book with:

*“I came here full of fluttering,
For I am a timid bride;*

*I leave here full of something else,
And the fullness is inside.”*

And, a haunting message left by H. M. Mayo:

*“Now comes a ghostly epicure,
His breast filled with dismay,
Ah me, he signed, then loudly cried
I never should have gone and died
Until I met Bégué.”*

In 1900, barely six years before her death, Madame Bégué was persuaded to record her recipes for the publication of a small book. Recipe books were very rare at the turn of the century, so the Southern Pacific Sunset Route Passenger Railroad conceived of the book more as a New Orleans guide for tourists who flocked to the city, all wanting a taste of the now renowned Creole cuisine.

Other recipes were included in the guide. Mrs. E. W. Ott of Fair Oaks Plantation in Mount Herman, Louisiana, contributed “Country Recipes.” New Orleans writer Ella Bentley Arthur’s “Oysters and Fish Dishes of Distinction” added many Creole classics to the collection, but her Oysters Rockefeller recipe (which includes bacon) is clearly not a version of the Antoine’s Restaurant original.

Of particular note are the recipes from Victor Béro, owner and proprietor of Victor’s Restaurant. Since Victor first opened his doors in the 1830s, 209 Bourbon Street has been a destination for gourmets. In 1905 Jean Galatoire purchased

the restaurant from Bero, but many of the dishes that Victor's was renowned for remained on the menu at Galatoires. More than a century later, those famous dishes are still served there—Gumbo, Filet Bearnaise, Poisson Provençal, and Truite Marguery—but you will find Victor's rarely seen original versions recorded within this volume.

Madame Bégué's death in 1906 made national news. The *Times-Picayune* obituary called her "The Queen of Culinary Arts." She was mourned in the pages of the *Boston Cooking School Journal* as well as the New York and Chicago newspapers. After remaining closed for just two days, the restaurant reopened. Hippolyte then insured the food's consistency by shortly thereafter marrying Madame's apprentice, Françoise Laporte, coincidentally, also the widow of a French Market butcher. Just before Hippolyte's death in 1917, Bégué's was sold to long-time Decatur Street competitor, Tujague's, the restaurant that continues to operate in that location today.

Despite the fact that the venerable dining establishment has been closed for almost a century, the fame of Bégué's lives on. In 1941, American author Edna Ferber immortalized breakfast at Bégué's in her novel, *Saratoga Trunk*. Ferber also wrote the 1945 screenplay for the movie of the same name. Through that classic, film buffs can still enjoy a virtual visit to the old French Market, where calas vendors sell their sweet rice cakes and see Ingrid Bergman seduce Gary Cooper over Bégué's sumptuous midday meal.

In the spring of 2000, the Newcomb Center for Research on Women along with the New Orleans Culinary History Group hosted a symposium and exhibit entitled "Three Women and

Their Restaurants: Elizabeth Bégué, Marie Esparbé and Corinne Dunbar.” The research and resulting presentation brought Madame Bégué back into focus for twenty-first-century culinary historians who continue to marvel today at her achievements.

If you wish to recreate what has long been regarded as the penultimate Creole meal, you will have to utilize the recipes found in this small book. The novice cook may find this task a bit daunting as the original recipes are reproduced exactly as translated from Elizabeth Bégué’s French. The resulting text is more of a culinary guidebook, a passport to a time long past.

Often, exact measurements are not given, but by applying a modicum of good sense, the curious cook will ascertain that “a glass each of white and Madeira wine” can be approximated from a traditional six-ounce wine glass and that a “spoonful” is likely to be the amount held in a large oval soup spoon from your flatware drawer, yet sometimes could be as much as a third of a cup. Fresh snails, described by Madame Bégué as coming “from France in baskets” will have to be substituted with canned, but the Gulf’s bounty of seafood—red fish, snapper, sheepshead, and trout as well as shrimp, crab, and crawfish—are as readily available as ever in New Orleans today.

To make this old guide a bit more twenty-first-century friendly, I have undertaken the task of recreating the most significant and lasting of Madame Bégué’s creations. Immediately following her original recipe text for classic dishes such as Creole gumbo, crawfish bisque, and jambalaya, you will find my clear instructions in a format appearing more familiar to modern-day cooks. I believe that by going back and forth between the

two versions, you will begin to find her original recipes more approachable.

Staying as true to each original recipe as possible, I did take the greatest license when it came to cooking oils. Although Madame Bégué's German proclivity for frying in lard has begun to return to vogue now that we know the perils of polyunsaturated oils, lard is still difficult to source and not commonplace in American homes. Consequently, I substituted vegetable oil and butter in my revised recipes with delicious results.

In recreating Madame Bégué's famous dishes, again and again I found myself cooking familiar favorites in completely new ways. For instance, by disregarding my normal instinct to avoid overcooking the shrimp by adding them raw at the end of the jambalaya, I instead followed Madame's instructions. She advised to first boil the shrimp, then peel them, then sauté them till browned with the rice and seasonings before finally adding the liquid to finish the dish. Perhaps her methods were born of food safety issues due to the lack of refrigeration then or maybe it was because she knew the pleasing results of the finished dish. What I know for certain is that my days spent recipe testing with the ghost of Madame Bégué were some of the most delightful in recent memory. In our nineteenth-century style cooking classes, Madame taught me new things about a cuisine I have immersed myself in all my life.

My best advice? Have fun! Time travel with me and Madame Bégué and you will learn how to authentically cook the most prized renditions of classic New Orleans Creole cuisine to be found. Bon Appétit!

Poppy Tooker



MADAME BÉGUÉ



MONSIEUR BÉGUÉ

