

# Belle New Orleans: The History of Creole Cuisinieres

by

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Zella Palmer, educator, food historian, author and filmmaker serves as the Chair of Dillard University Ray Charles Program in African-American Material Culture. Palmer is committed to documenting preserving and teaching about the legacy of African American and Latino culinary history in New Orleans and the South. As the Chair of the Dillard University Ray Charles Program in African-American Material Culture, Palmer orchestrated the Story of New Orleans Creole Cooking: The Black Hand in the Pot academic conference, Dr. Rudy Joseph Lombard lecture series, The Nellie Murray Feast, Invisible Chefs: Where are New Orleans Black Chefs? and in collaboration with British-Nigerian photographer Juliana Kasumu launched the exhibit, From Moussor to Tignon: The Evolution of the Head-Tie.

## Abstract

This paper recaps the history and role of New Orleans African-American women in the culinary industry from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present as was presented at the Black Arts Movement Conference at Dillard University in September 2016. It realizes their major contributions to the making of the world famous New Orleans signature Creole cuisine. Also, the paper explores the exploitation and branding of African-American southern cooks for American consumption and consumerism.

**Keywords:** culinary history; women; African-American; New Orleans; Louisiana; Senegal; West and Central Africa; Nellie Murray; Leah Chase; Willie Mae Seaton; Lena Richard; Rose Nicaud; material culture; food studies; restaurant; food; Creole.

## Introduction

The 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century launched a series of World's Fairs to exhibit Western power and dominance in the world. At the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, America celebrated its independence, industrialization and consumerism.

Contributions African-Americans made to American progress since 1619 were silenced. African-Americans saw the Columbian Exposition as a slap in the face after only 25 years of freedom against more than 250 years of forced labor benefiting American progress. Stereotypical images of people of color were exhibited as “barbaric”, “child-like” and so-called scientifically proven as sub-human.<sup>1</sup>

In a bold statement of protest, Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass published and distributed a pamphlet to fair-goers entitled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*. The pamphlet's preface written by Ida B. Wells was translated into three languages. The pamphlet encouraged the fair-goer to not ignore the contributions made by African-Americans to American prosperity and civilization since 1619. The pamphlet was an attempt to factually prove the many contributions made by African-Americans to the American Republic in spite of the racist ideologies being exhibited to millions of fair-goers.

These racist ideologies at the World's Fair were exhibited on a grand scale to millions of national and international fair-goers.

Indeed, it would not be too much to say that the World's Columbian Exposition was one vast anthropological revelation. Not all mankind were there, but either in persons or pictures their representatives were...representatives of living spaces in native garb and activities, photographs and drawings, books and objects connected with every phase of human life, seemed to be everywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the fair, restaurants, state homes and commercial booths were built. At a few well-attended booths, images of the “happy” African-American southern cook on Cream of Wheat and Aunt Jemima pancake boxes invited the fair-goer to taste a viable American breakfast food product. The pancake mix called “Aunt Jemima” introduced American southern breakfast to the average national consumer. The stereotypical “happy” African-American southern cook would serve as brand ambassadors for many food products.

At the fair, Nancy Green would portray “Aunt Jemima”, a headscarf wearing southern female cook. Davis Milling Company who owned the “Aunt Jemima” pancake mix employed Nancy Green to introduce the pancake mix to fair-goers. At the exhibition booth, Green served thousands of pancakes to long lines of future American and global consumers. By the end of fair, Davis Milling Company made over 50,000 orders.

At the same fair, another southern female cook named Nellie Murray would introduce New Orleans Creole cuisine to fair-goers. Nellie Murray's persona and celebrity status would challenge stereotypical ideologies of southern black female cooks and pave the way for future New Orleans African-American and female culinary entrepreneurs.

## **African Matriarchs**

Historically, women in West and Central Africa have always dominated the culinary arts, agriculture and the market. Africa's matriarchal society placed women at the center of trade and politics. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Early European male traders in West African coastal cities documented the roles of elite African women as food producers and arbiters between European males and African men.

The Senegalese *signares* on the island of French colonial Gorée were documented for their political status, powerful trade network and *teranga* (Senegalese cooking and hospitality). In Lagos, 19<sup>th</sup> century business tycoon, Madam Efunroye Tinubu was documented and hated by British colonial powers for her massive trade network and political power. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Tinubu established major trade alliances with Europeans. Tinubu built an empire trading palm oil, commercial crops, cotton, slaves and firearms up until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

Although oppressive colonial and slavery systems devalued and dehumanized women of African descent in the New World as nothing more than expendable commodities and mere sexual objects for building European nations and wealth, cultural memory, skills and traditions survived and transcended.

## **The Tantes**

In the New World, Louisiana was seen as an undesirable colony for European settlers. Reports of dangerous swamps, alligators, slave revolts, starving settlers and pirates made it a very difficult to sell to reputable French society. To build a more welcoming infrastructure, enslaved Africans were forced to build a city and state that would be more suitable for incoming French and European settlers. They also had to build a cuisine and dining culture that would satisfy the French palate and lifestyle.

In New Orleans, a port city similar to many of the coastal cities in West Africa that traded enslaved Africans, goods and crops, women of African descent brought their skills, trades and traditions from West and Central Africa beginning with the arrival of the first shipload of enslaved Africans in the 1720s. Louisiana census, slave and runaway notices gave detailed accounts of enslaved Africans nationalities, ethnic origins, physical descriptions, tribal markings, spoken languages and in some instances their trade as "excellent" or "good" cooks.<sup>1</sup>

Many enslaved African women to Louisiana assumed the role of cooks on the plantations and in private New Orleans homes to French and other European settlers. Some of the earliest documentation of enslaved African women reveals their roles as *marchandes*, street food vendors who sold cooked food, produce, *pralines* (pecan candies), *calas* (fried rice fritters) and *café noir* or *café au lait* (drip coffee) along the levees and throughout the French Quarter. An eighteenth century coffee vendor named Rose Nicaud was documented for her beloved drip coffee sold from her pushcart and stand in the French market.

A 1764 court document gives insight into the lives of eighteenth century enslaved New Orleans African women and how African culinary practices and market skills were transferred from Africa. The court document of runaway African maroons also mentions the earliest documentation of re-interpreted West and Central African okra soup, gumbo:

Comba and Louison, both Mandigo women in their 50s, were vendors selling cakes and other goods along the streets of New Orleans. They maintained an active social life, organized feasts where they ate and drank very well, cooked gumbo file and rice, roasted turkey and chickens, barbecued pigs and fish, smoked tobacco and drank rum.<sup>1</sup>

Like Saint-Louis Senegal *signares*, New Orleans was known for its class of free women of color who wielded some authority and oftentimes owned or managed real estate, grocery stores, butcher shops, bakeries and taverns. In the 1795 New Orleans Census, a *morena libre* (free woman of color) named Carlota Denerville was noted as a tavern keeper and owner of several rental properties.<sup>1</sup> Both enslaved African women and free women of color (*gens de couleur libres*) in New Orleans were the original matriarchs of New Orleans signature Creole cuisine.

## **Creole Cuisinieres**

In the making of New Orleans signature Creole Cuisine, no matriarch of African descent became more famous than a formerly enslaved cook once owned by Louisiana Governor Paul Octave Hébert named Nellie Murray. Murray learned haute Creole cuisine from her mother and grandmother at the Hébert Bayou Goula plantation. By the end of slavery, Murray moved to New Orleans where she became the most famed caterer of elite New Orleans society.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, *The Daily Picayune*, New Orleans mainstream newspaper celebrated her persona and refined culinary skills. Murray was noted as an “expert”, a “lady”, an “aristocrat” and the “Queen of New Orleans Creole Cuisine”.<sup>1</sup>

*The Daily Picayune* reported that Murray assumed the role as Chef de Cuisine at the Louisiana Mansion Club for the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. Fair-goers waited in long lines to taste New Orleans signature cuisine. For the first time, New Orleans Creole cuisine would be served to a massive global audience. Murray became an instant celebrity and society ladies in Chicago, New York, Paris and New Orleans booked her months in advance. By the time she died in 1918, Murray amassed a fortune, owned real estate, donated to charity and sent her grandson and nephew to historically black colleges and universities in New Orleans.

The legacy and contributions of New Orleans women of African descent to the making of New Orleans signature Creole Cuisine would pave the way for countless women in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. The transferrable skills and practices learned in Africa and the Caribbean would solidify the role of New Orleans black women as culinary matriarchs. Their roles as cultural bearers and business icons would be revered and emulated for centuries. Their image would be caricatured on tourist memorabilia, illustrated in books, branded on New Orleans inspired food packaging or stereotypically portrayed on American television commercials. Their contributions would pave the way for culinary giants such as Lena Richard, Leah Chase and Willie Mae Seaton. And together, New Orleans African-American male and female cooks throughout the centuries would build a multi-million-dollar tourist industry that capitalized on New Orleans' most prized creation, Creole cuisine.

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