

# Un Vrai Jambalaya – ‘A Real Mess’: The Southern French Origins of Louisiana’s Famous Dish

*Anthony F. Buccini*

*Kan to fe en janmbalaya, to me to zepi e to touf en pe to lavyann e to me diri. Se kofèr ye pèl sa janmbalaya. To gen tou sa melanje ansanm.<sup>1</sup>*

## I. Introduction

That the culinary culture of modern Louisiana derives in large measure from France is obvious, with many food products (such as *andouille*), composed dishes (such as *étouffée*) and foodways (*la boucherie*) that not only bear French names but also ‘make sense’ in terms of traditional French regional cookery: the connections are sufficiently numerous that there was a tendency for casual observers to assume that the gastronomy of New Orleans and southern Louisiana was essentially all of French origin, albeit with substantial adaptations to the local environment’s offerings. In recent decades, however, as an increasing appreciation of the role played by African Americans in the formation of American culture has developed, that view has had to be modified. In terms of the culinary culture of Louisiana, there is indisputable evidence of African influence, which seems obvious now that we understand so much better the general demographic and sociocultural impact of African Americans from early colonial times. But with this very much necessary correction to the Euro-centric view there has come – perhaps inevitably – a sort of overreaction, a tendency with regard to Louisiana’s foodways to attribute all popular influences not just to African Americans but to give them explicitly African origins. In some cases, this reasoning is justified with facts linguistic, culinary and historical, but in other cases the argumentation is weak, based on false and anachronistic assumptions and a disregard for the role played by the marginal, poor French colonists and with that a real misunderstanding of the creolization process (Buccini 2016a). Louisiana’s popular cuisine, like Louisiana’s colonial French dialect and its French Creole language, is the product of a complex evolution through which non-elite French and African influences gave rise to a new cultural form with a distinct ‘culinary grammar’ (Buccini 2016b) and limited number of more or less direct surface inheritances from both France and Africa.

In this paper I argue that the famous Louisianan dish jambalaya was in origin a southern French peasant stew featuring *abatis* (giblets, neck, wings, feet) which was often eaten as a *soupo courto*, that is, a stretched dish to which water was added and then a starch requiring cooking, namely, either pasta or rice. Moreover, both the dish and the name jambalaya are related to the family of messy peasant stews investigated

in Buccini (2006) (*ciambotta*, *xamfaina*, etc.). In Louisiana, where there was a relatively great abundance of poultry and game birds, jambalaya came to feature the meat of the fowl, rather than just the *abatis*, and was stretched through the addition of cornmeal or rice (pasta was unavailable). In the course of the eighteenth century, the name jambalaya came to be applied in Louisiana to a style of stretched stew made with any core ingredients, especially poultry/fowl but also other meats and seafood, and stretched specifically with rice.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Two Widely-held Views on the Origins of Jambalaya

A single dish cannot stand for an entire cuisine, but with jambalaya we have a case that illustrates issues of more general application in the study of Louisiana's culinary culture. Jambalaya is an emblematic dish for the region and is clearly associated with the broader French and French Creole cultural milieu of the Gulf Coast. Unattested in any text from Louisiana's French and Spanish colonial period (ending with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803), it is described in anecdotes and recipes starting in the mid-nineteenth century in connection with Mobile, Alabama, the original capital of '*la Louisiane*', as well as New Orleans and the rest of French-influenced southern Louisiana; elsewhere, it is mentioned in a nineteenth century Provençal dictionary. Though now known throughout the world, there is no other older evidence for jambalaya having been known in northern France or Saint-Domingue or the other French colonies, nor is the word found in other Atlantic World areas (West Africa, the Spanish-speaking Americas, etc.).

Jambalaya is a stew made from meat and/or seafood and some vegetables to which is added stock and then rice, all cooked in one pot, in essence an archetypal peasant dish, whatever its origins may be. Nowadays, while the combinations of meat and seafood vary considerably, the rest of the ingredients and the basic cooking method has become rather set. The flavourings consist of the so-called Louisiana French 'Trinity' of bell pepper, onion and celery, as well as garlic, and also typical now is the addition of hot sauce and Worcestershire sauce, with bay leaves also usually included. Tomatoes are a very common addition, but so made the dish is said to be 'Creole jambalaya'; without tomatoes, the dish is called 'brown' or 'Cajun jambalaya'. Regarding the choice of proteins, a pork product is normal, with andouille sausage being very popular but ham, tasso ham and salt pork are also considered 'authentic' additions. Of other meats, chicken is the most common, though all manner of game birds and many game meats are also used, whereas beef and veal are not. Shrimp is the most common seafood, though again, considerable variation in the choice of crustaceans, shellfish and, less often, finfish is accepted.

Received opinion regarding the origins of jambalaya among both popular food writers and scholars is nearly unanimous in seeing the dish as not being of French provenance but divided on whence it came between two camps. The older position, offered in the *Penguin Companion to Food* (Davidson 2002: 146), sees it as a Spanish

dish, deriving from *paella*. The newer and clearly ascendant position is that it is of West African origin and should be seen as a variant of *Jollof* rice or some other, roughly similar one-pot composition with rice. There are two main reasons for seeking the origins of jambalaya outside French culinary traditions: 1) there seems to be no corresponding rice dish in France’s modern regional cuisines and, indeed, in the view of most food writers, rice is a marginal element in traditional French cookery; 2) the name of the dish has no obvious French source and seems at least superficially altogether outlandish in that regard.

The historical justification for the derivation of jambalaya from paella is, of course, the Spanish ownership of Louisiana from 1763 to 1800. From a culinary standpoint, the two dishes are clearly similar in a general sense – meat and/or seafood with aromatic vegetables and rice added to the cooking vessel – though there are certainly differences with regard to the cooking procedure, the rice being sautéed and then boiled in paella and simply boiled in jambalaya, and the vessels used; the paella pan is unknown in traditional Louisianan cookery. Much then rides on the strength of the etymology, mentioned already by Hess (1992: 66) as the standard one and repeated by many others since. It is claimed that ‘jambalaya’ is a contracted compound of Spanish *jamón* or French *jambon* and the Catalan word *paella*. From a linguist’s perspective, the derivation is wanting on several points and ultimately seems absurd: First, though ham or some other pork product is regularly included in jambalaya, it is normally a secondary, seasoning ingredient rather than the primary and featured ingredient. Second, the phonological development from *jambon* + *paella* to *jambalaya* is odd and warrants explanation if it is to be accepted. Third, the syntax of the compound is fine for English but totally alien to both Spanish and French, where one would expect ‘*paella de jambon*’. The weakness of the etymology calls into question the merits of the historical justification. The Spanish demographic presence and impact on popular culture in Louisiana was quite limited, and the only abiding Spanish settlement was a small group of Canary Islanders (Dessens 2005: 246). While paella is today a national dish of Spain and surely eaten in the Canaries, in the eighteenth century it was a regional dish of Valencia, and there is evidence neither for a noteworthy Valencian presence in Louisiana nor for the consumption of paella in the Canaries during the relevant period.

107

Historical justification for a possible West African source for jambalaya is far stronger, as already in the early decades of the colony, hundreds of West African slaves were brought over, including many from sub-regions where rice was cultivated and regularly consumed (Hall 1992). Indeed, there is good evidence that the French made a point of importing some slaves from such areas precisely to exploit their familiarity with the production of rice. From a culinary standpoint, our lack of detailed knowledge of West African cookery in the eighteenth century makes it impossible to identify any specific dish that jambalaya could be derived from, but one-pot combinations of meat and seafood with rice are certain to have existed in West Africa. Again, an etymological connection between the name ‘jambalaya’ and some African source would greatly strengthen an otherwise vague

relationship, and a number have been offered, though some are linguistically extremely farfetched, such as those of Read (relating it to ‘Congo *cimbolo*, *zimbolo* “biscuit”’; 1933: 371) and Dessens (deriving it from Bambara *niame-niame* ‘food’, 2005: 258). The most commonly cited African-based etymology for ‘jambalaya’ is only partly so: again, it is claimed that the core element is the French word for ham which was combined with an African word, cited as *yaya* or *ya* meaning ‘rice’ (Fertel 2008: 325) – alas, food writers fail to mention any specific African source language, but I have found *ya* meaning ‘cooked rice’ in the western dialect of the West African Dan language (Mande family) (Erman & Loh 2008: 190). Thus ‘jambalaya’ is sometimes claimed to be a contraction of an unattested *jambon à la ya*. While it is possible that there were some western Dan speakers among the slaves of Louisiana, this etymology remains quite unconvincing, given that it again is wrongly based on the idea that ham is the principal ingredient with the alleged French phrase ‘ham with rice’, seemingly incorporating an independent loanword for ‘rice’ which is found neither in Louisiana French nor Louisiana French Creole (*diri* ‘rice’). In the end, it appears this is not so much an etymology as an invention devised to lend support to a pre-existing assumption.

108

Recently a thoroughly African and specifically Wolof etymology has been proposed by anthropologist E.N. Anderson (2009), who suggests ‘jambalaya’ is derived from a putative compound of *jamba* ‘to mix’ and *laax* (*x* = voiceless velar fricative) ‘porridge from a cereal’; Anderson offers no explanation of the phonological development to ‘jambalaya’. He seems not to be a native speaker of Wolof himself, and so whether this particular compound conforms to the rules of word formation in this language remains something for an expert to determine. Be that as it may, the compound is one of Anderson’s own invention, not one attested in Wolof, and one wonders: if this dish is to be connected to the Wolof – well-known cultivators and consumers of rice who were well represented in Louisiana’s slave population – precisely for its putative central use of rice, why does the compound not have as an element the Wolof word for that grain (*ceeb*), as in the famous dish *ceebu jën* (‘rice + fish’)?

### 3. The French Connection

What seems remarkable is that these amateur etymologies have been widely embraced despite the fact that it has long been known that the word ‘jambalaya’ is attested from southern France shortly after the first attestations of it were recorded in the United States: Mistral’s (1879–1886) entry in his Provençal dictionary for ‘jambalaya’ was noted already in the 1930s (Read 1933: 24). Proponents of the Spanish and West African theories generally ignore this point, while Anderson (2009) explicitly dismisses the significance of Mistral’s entry with an unsubstantiated claim and a misunderstanding of the nature of the Provençal corpus: ‘But in fact it occurs in Provence only in writings of people who had travelled to New Orleans. They must have picked it up there. Surely the enormous volume of Provençal literature would have included it if it had been around earlier.’<sup>3</sup>

Hess (1992: 64ff.) is the first food scholar to consider in some detail the possible links between Louisiana’s jambalaya and Provençal cookery, though her primary focus is on South Carolina’s Low Country cooking and the history of *pelaus* (‘pilafs’); her main concern is to demonstrate a connection of Provençal uses of rice to Arab and Persian traditions, and her suggested partial Arabic etymology for ‘jambalaya’ (-*laia* < Ar. *alya* ‘sheep-tail fat’ (p. 67) is not credible.

The most insightful study of the origins of jambalaya is Sigal (2007), based as it is on a broad body of textual evidence and careful analysis without recourse to fanciful etymological speculation; a number of his observations are echoed here. Sigal believes the name ‘jambalaya’ to be of Provençal origin, though he cannot fully demonstrate that conclusion, and ultimately is cautiously noncommittal with regard to the genealogy of the dish (p. 115).

#### 4. The Big Easy – A One-Pot Dish

Before turning to my own etymology of ‘jambalaya’ I would like to consider briefly the attestations of the dish and recipes for it from the United States from the first mention in 1849 to the 1930’s, listed and summarized in Table 1 (overleaf):

First, all these recipes are associated with the Gulf Coast and especially New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama. Second, with regard to the name, there is little variation of the form beyond the orthographic level, though deviant forms are attested from Alabama and Mississippi/Missouri. Third, with regard to the dish itself, it is clear that a degree of variation of ingredients exists, but there is a clear core set of ingredients: chicken or some other fowl (the central ingredient in a preponderance of the recipes), ham or some other pork product and rice; seafood variants are mentioned in several sources. The modern day inclusion of the so-called ‘Trinity’ of vegetables (bell pepper, onion, celery) is conspicuously absent, with onion or garlic being used for flavouring. Tomato seems to be a facultative addition with no clear evidence in the references cited in Table 1 for the alleged Cajun/Creole split mentioned above. In another text I have found (Whitehead 1889: 350), however, we possibly see the beginnings of that distinction: Whitehead lists three varieties of jambalaya, one which is perhaps indirectly referred to as ‘creole’ (chicken, onion, tomatoes and rice); a second referred to as ‘the American planter’s way’ (ham, onion, red pepper and rice without tomato); a third referred to as ‘Florida Spanish’ (fish, ham, onion, tomato and rice).

The overall picture is clear: ham is a common secondary ingredient, occasionally the featured one, but most of the early descriptions of the dish present chicken or some other fowl as the base of the unmarked version, with other, and especially seafood versions, thought of as common variants. If we are going to seek the origins of jambalaya, we cannot take as our starting point the modern dish in which vegetables are a more prominent element and render the dish much more like Louisiana’s gumbo and the putative West African ancestors. Certainly, the old recipes are particularly true to the modern Louisianan sense of the dish as one that is simple and easy to make.

**Table 1. Jambalaya: attestations from the US (see Sigal 2008)**

- i) “jambalaya” Alabama 1849 (Solon Robinson, *American Agriculturalist*). Recipe: chicken, onions, rice (no tomatoes, no pork).
- ii) “jambalaya” New Orleans 1872 (*New Orleans Times*). No recipe.
- iii) “jam-ba-la-yah” New Orleans 1875 (*New Orleans Times*). Recipe: rice, red beans, smoked sausages, ham, red peppers, chicken, oysters (no tomatoes).
- iv) “jombalyeeyah” New Orleans 1875 (*New Orleans Co-operative News*, cited in *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman* (Albany NY)). Recipe: rice, fat pickled pork, various meats (bear, venison, ham, turtle, owl, duck, squirrel, catfish), garlic, onion (no tomatoes). [Intended as a joke?]
- v) “jam bolayah” Mobile 1878 (*Gulf City Cook Book*). Recipe: chicken giblets, neck, wing tips, feet, oysters; onion, tomato, rice, lard.
- vi) “jumberlie” Alabama (presumably) 1881 (*What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking...*). Recipe: chicken, rice, tomatoes, ham.
- vii) “jumballaya” New Orleans 1885 (*Creole Cookery Book*). Recipe: chicken or turkey, rice, ham, lard (also seafood options), (no tomatoes).
- viii) “jambalaya” New Orleans 1885 (*La Cuisine Creole*, Lafcadio Hearn). Recipe: fowl, rice, ham (no tomatoes).
- ix) “jambolaya” New Orleans 1893 (*Favorite Dishes*, A Columbian Autograph Souvenir). Recipe: chicken or turkey, rice, lard, onion, tomato.
- x) “jambalaya” Laurel, MS 1900 (*Laurel Cook Book*). Recipe: chicken or turkey, rice, ham, lard, onion, tomatoes, oysters.
- xi) “jambalaya” New Orleans 1901 (*Mme. Begue and Her Recipes*). Recipe: chicken, ham, lard, onion, tomato, rice; recipe for a variant: shrimp, lard, onion, rice (no tomatoes).
- xii) “jambalaya” New Orleans 1901 (*Picayune’s Creole Cook Book*). Recipe: pork, sausage, ham, onion, garlic, rice (no tomatoes); recipes for other versions given: crab; shrimp; jambalaya au congris.
- xiii) “jambalaya” Lake Charles, LA 1902 (*Southern Pacific Rice Cook Book*). Recipe: pork, onion, ham, sausage, rice (no tomatoes); variants (all with tomatoes): crab, shrimp, oyster, crawfish.
- xiv) “jumballaya” New Orleans 1903 (*Cooking in Old Creole Days*, Celestine Eustis). Recipe: chicken, rice. Optional: tomatoes, peas, okra.
- xv) “jambolin” Gulfport, MS & St Louis MO 1937 (*Tried and True Recipes*). Recipe: ham or bacon, tomatoes, onion, rice.

## 5. French Connection II

In 2004/2005, while researching vegetable stews of the western Mediterranean, I concluded primarily on the basis of Mistral’s entry that ‘jambalaya’ was related to the group of names I was studying but due to time and word-count constraints, left the issue out of my article of 2006. When I returned to the topic several years later and encountered Sigal’s piece, I knew that was the case in light of the nineteenth century American material he presented.

In addition to Mistral, Sigal (2007: 103-05) discusses two other nineteenth century Provençal texts which use the word (cited by Mistral):

1837, in a poem by Chailan: *jambaraia* (in the sense of ‘rabble’ or ‘mishmash’)  
1865, in a poem by Peise: *jambalaia* (in the sense of ‘rabble’)  
1878, Mistral’s Provençal dictionary: *jambalaia*, *jabalaia*, *jambaraia* (*mot arabe*)  
s.m. *Ragoût de riz avec une volaille, macédoine, meli-mélo, cohue, v. mescladisso, pelau*. Sigal’s translation: “(Arab word) Stew of rice with fowl, mixed vegetables, mish-mash, rabble, see *melange*, *pilau*.”

The first two poetic texts do not use the word in a culinary sense but rather figuratively in the sense of ‘rabble’ or ‘mishmash’. The third attestation, in Mistral’s dictionary, gives those figurative senses but also two culinary senses: the first of these, ‘a stew of rice with fowl’ is clearly directly relatable to Louisiana’s famous dish, while the second meaning is a ‘*macédoine*’, glossed elsewhere as a mix of vegetables. Given the late date of Mistral’s mention of the rice and fowl preparation, it could represent an import from Louisiana to southern France in the nineteenth century, a possibility that Sigal suggests. A broader consideration of the problem, however, shows that explanation not to be straightforward.

III

In this regard, let us consider some more recent attestations of a culinary use of this word in Provençal dialects in the twentieth century.

1940, Toulon (Provence): *jambalaio* (vegetable stew, of cianfotta/ratatouille type?)  
1967, Nice (Provence): *jambalaia* (included in a list of words denoting meat dishes)  
1995, Menton (Provence): *giambalaia* (vegetable stew of cianfotta/ratatouille type) <sup>4</sup>

Two of the three probably reflect Mistral’s vague definition of a ‘*macédoine*’ and are apparently local names for the famous summer vegetable stew that in Nice is known as *ratatouille*. In Compan’s lexicon of Niçois, however, the word ‘*jambalaia*’ appears in a list of meat dishes but down amongst those which clearly feature ‘variety cuts’ of meat, and one is tempted to wonder if the offal involved is *abatis* – giblets, wings, feet and neck of a fowl, the central ingredients in one of the earliest American recipes (Table 1:v) from Mobile.<sup>5</sup>

## Offal: Rejected and Reclaimed Food

The use of ‘jambalaia’ in Nice perhaps links up with another, obviously related word attested in Mistral and other earlier Provençal dictionaries, the first of which was published in 1785.

1785 (Achard’s dictionary of Provence and le Comté-Venaissin: »**jambinetto**, s.f. *Fricasée, ragoût, sorte d’étuvée faite avec de petits oiseaux au nids, & cuits dans un pot avec du lard.*«

1847 (Honorat’s Provençal dictionary): *jambineta* s.f. *Fricasée, ragoût, sorte d’étuvée faite avec de jeunes oiseaux. Éty. de jambineta, dit pour petite jambe, ragoût de petits pieds*«

1879-1886 (Mistral’s Provençal dictionary): *jambineto* s.f. *Sorte d’étuvée, de fricassée, faite avec des oisillons.*«

The word in question, *jambineta* (-o), appears to have the same root as ‘jambalaia’ but a different complex suffix and in all three attestations the meaning is the same: a wet cooked dish comprised of cured pork and very small birds, in a sense, another offal dish.

Finally, in a dictionary for the Occitan dialect of Languedoc immediately to the west of Provence published in 1756 (de Sauvages: 256), we find another related word, *jhimbêlôto*, again with the same root but a different complex suffix, which is defined as ‘une Blanquette, sorte de ragoût q’on fait des blanquettes d’Agneau & d’un reste de gigot coupé en petites tranches auxquelles on fait une sausse’ [‘a kind of ragout, that one makes from fresh slices of lamb and the leftovers of a lamb roast sliced thin, for which one makes a sauce’].<sup>6</sup> This form also appears in Azaïs (1876: 337) as *gimbeloto* and is there described briefly as a stew of hare or rabbit pieces. Thus, in the mid eighteenth century, words clearly related to ‘jambalaya’ were current in different parts of southern France with meanings related in a general way to the sense that eventually emerges in the later attestations from Louisiana and Alabama.

112

### 6. More ‘Peasant Slop’: Western Mediterranean Offal Stews

In Buccini 2006, I argue that the many western Mediterranean summer vegetable stews, of which the Provençal *ratatouia/ratatoulha* (Fr. *ratatouille*) is the most famous, are in fact historically related in complex ways and, further, that one of the families of names for the dish, and possibly the dish itself, originated in the region of Campania in southern Italy. There we find two forms of the name, *cianfotta* and *ciambotta*. The linguistic evidence points to the first of these variants being the source for the Catalan word denoting such a vegetable stew, *xamfaina*, with adaptation of the initial consonant and replacement of the Neapolitan suffix *otta* with one that is specific to the dialects of north-eastern Iberia, *aina*. On the basis of relictal evidence from southern Italian dialects where words related to *cianfotta* indicate offal stews and the fact that Catalan *xamfaina* was further borrowed into Spanish (and Portuguese) where it (*chanfaina*) indicates only offal or meat preparations, I also argue that *cianfotta/ciambotta* most likely were originally designations of peasant offal stews before the introduction of the

## Un Vrai Jambalaya – ‘A Real Mess’

American vegetables allowed for the creation of the ratatouille-like dishes (141).

While it was the Neapolitan *cianfotta* variant that was borrowed into mainland Catalan dialects, it was the other variant, *ciambotta*, that was borrowed into the Catalan of the Balearic Islands, where we find a related vegetable dish under the name *tombet*, with a different choice in adapting the Neapolitan initial *ci-* (ch-sound) to the Catalan sound system. And there is every reason to believe that Neapolitan *ciambotta* is similarly the source for the Occitan/Provençal stew names discussed above.

**Table 2. Diffusion and Adaptation of Peasant Stew Names.**

Np. cianf-otta	⇒ Ct. xamf-aina, samf-aina ⇒ Sp. chanfaina, etc.
Np. ciamb-otta	⇒ BCt. tomb-et ⇒ Oc./Pr. *jamb-al-alha/*jamb-in-eta/*jamb-el-ota

The initial voiceless affricate of Neapolitan was in southern France adapted to the near equivalent in the sound system, namely *j-*. As in Catalan, the Neapolitan suffix was replaced but in this case with different sets of complex suffixes. In the case of *jhimbêloto*, the double suffix was *\*el-ota*, perhaps with diminutive force; in the case of *jambineto*, it was *\*in-eta*, surely with diminutive force, given the dish was based around the use of tiny birds. In the case of Louisiana’s ‘jambalaya’, the original Occitan/Provençal form must go back to an unattested *\*jambalalha*, again with a double suffix composed of the semantically neutral *al* and the widely used suffix *alha*; the palatal *l* (spelt traditionally »lh«) is rendered in many dialects of Occitan/Provençal, as well as in the cognates in French, as *y*. This suffix has two semantic functions (Adams 1913: 70ff.): it denotes collectives, thus very appropriate for a stew bringing together different but related items, and a pejorative, which is appropriate for a peasant stew and corresponds perfectly with the etymological evidence for the Neapolitan *ciambotta*, etc. discussed in my 2006 paper.

113

**Table 3. Derived Forms with jamb- from Neapolitan ciamb-otta.**

jamb-al-aya	*jamb-al-alha
jamb-in-eto	*jamb-in-eta
jhimb-êl-oto	*jamb-el-ota

It is important to note that while ‘jambalaya’ is not attested in Provençal texts of the eighteenth century or earlier, its diminutive correlate is, and it stands to reason that these two stews, based on birds, need to be viewed together, with the diminutive following from the stew using the offal (or meat) of full-grown birds: the diminutive implies the existence of a base form. It is also surely no coincidence that we find evidence in southern France of the same semantic shift, from offal (or meat) stew to summer vegetable stew, that took place both in southern Italy and the Catalan-speaking lands, i.e. in three regions with strong cultural and specifically culinary ties dating back to the Middle Ages (cf. Buccini 2013, 2015 on the spread of pasta): Mistral indicates ‘jambalaya’ denotes both kinds of stews, while the twentieth century dialect evidence from Provence shows Nice apparently with the offal/meat sense and Toulon and Menton with the vegetable sense.

In the end, one must conclude that this kind of formal and semantic embedding in Occitan/Provençal of peasant stew names with a root *jamb-* fitted with double suffixes, together with the strong links of that group of names and dishes to etymologically related forms and their referents in Italy and Iberia, renders it certain that Louisiana’s ‘jambalaya’ – the dish and the name – hail from the south of France.

### 7. *Soupo courto*: Making Ends Meet

II4

One question remains, however: is the addition of rice to the stew a feature contributed to the Louisianan dish by the Spanish or, more plausibly, West Africans? Such a development cannot be ruled out, but I believe that there is very strong evidence that it was the French settlers themselves who included rice in the dish and that some of them were accustomed to doing so already before emigrating to the Gulf Coast.

Most food historians work on the assumption that rice was seldom eaten in France in the Early Modern period, with only a few of the writers, notably Hess and Sigal, who have studied jambalaya acknowledging that the composed dishes known as *pelaus* (pilafs) were very much a part of the cuisine of the middle and upper classes of southern France; yet both Hess (1992: 71) and Sigal (2007: 114) reject the idea that rice was broadly consumed across social classes. Judging from the etymological evidence, however, there is no reason to connect ‘jambalaia’ with the more well-to-do classes: jambalaia and jambineta are non-elite or specifically peasant dishes and that class association would account for their extremely marginal representation in texts, where they appear almost exclusively in dialect dictionaries.

A careful examination of the evidence for rice consumption shows common opinion to be wrong. It is certainly true that in northern France, rice was seldom consumed except in the form of *riz au lait*, that is, rice pudding, but somewhat surprisingly rice was a food that was associated with hardship and poverty, for it was used as an emergency ration for the poor in times of famine, when wheat and other widely produced grains were in short supply.<sup>7</sup> It was also a secondary ration for both the French navy and, at times, the French army, the members of which were hardly considered worthy of being

offered luxuries. Rice could be and was purchased in bulk from abroad, especially from Spain and northern Italy, but since rice was a useful crop with a very high yield, the French also established fairly extensive rice fields in the far south, both in Provence and Languedoc, and this endeavour was quite successful from the sixteenth century until the mid-eighteenth century, when the central government realized that rice fields were also breeding grounds for malaria and a strain on water resources.<sup>8</sup>

It is then not surprising that, during this period, not only did the more well-to-do enjoy their *pelaus* but the lower classes also consumed rice to a degree, the self-same people who likely enjoyed jambalaia and jambineta. One use of rice that we know lower classes enjoyed was in a kind of dish called in Provençal and Occitan a *soupo courto*, described in texts from the twentieth century but also attested already in the seventeenth century. A *soupo courto* was simply a stew or ragout that was stretched either through the addition of pasta or rice.<sup>9</sup> In an Occitan text of 1636 we are explicitly told of a *rougnounado*, a stew of lamb and lamb kidney, cooked with rice and, of specific relevance here, is the mention in a Provençal dictionary from 1723 of a *soupo courto* in which the stretching element was pasta but the stew was one of *abatis*, the giblets and trimmings of a bird and one that likely was called ‘jambalaia’.<sup>10</sup> The association between bird offal stew being stretched with rice seems to have been so common that *soupo courto* came to refer to the combination and perhaps this helped in the gradual marginalization of the word ‘jambalaia’ in Provençal. Southern French meat stews of the sort known as *carbounado* were also stretched with rice, and this is attested as well

115

from the eighteenth century (Achard 1785: 155). In other words, in the south of France, whence must come the name and the stew of fowl and cured pork known as ‘jambalaya’, there was already in the period before and during the settlement of Louisiana a custom of stretching such stews with either rice or pasta among the lower ranks of society. There remains one further issue to address, namely the question of the regional provenance of the settlers. It is well known that a large majority of the settlers in Louisiana and other French colonies came from the north and the west of France, areas where rice consumption was surely not high and ‘jambalaia’ was unknown or foreign. There are two counterpoints to be made here. First, a large portion of male settlers in Louisiana were former soldiers and sailors and they surely were well acquainted with rice as a food. We might further wonder whether the southern French word ‘jambalaia’ was part of military jargon for a stew of fowl, just as later another word of Provençal origin, ‘ratatouille’, spread throughout France as military slang for a bad stew.

A specifically military source for the introduction of the word to Louisiana is, however, not necessary. Though the bulk of the French population was from the north and west of France, there were noteworthy numbers of settlers from Occitania and at least some from Provence. But here we must call to mind a concept from sociolinguistics, that of the ‘founder principle’ (Mufwene 1996). In the study of the development of colonial varieties and creole languages, it has been noted that the linguistic composition of the original population of a colony typically has an amplified

influence on the linguistic developments – in effect, they establish a colonial norm to which newcomers tend to adjust. In the case of Louisiana, it is noteworthy that in the very first few years of the colony, when the population was extremely small, of 111 artisans recruited for service there, 89 of them came not from the west or the north but from the south, from Languedoc and Provence (Brasseaux 2005: 11–12). In all likelihood, they brought with them a taste for stews of fowl and cured pork, stretched with rice.

## 8. Swept Away: The Fate of ‘Jambalaya’ in France

Though settlers from Languedoc and Provence were never the dominant demographic group in the Louisiana colony, they did form a noteworthy minority there at least in the early years. In an environment in which fowl of all sorts – domestic and wild – were relatively easily obtained, it is in no way surprising that one of their favoured preparations became established as a local dish, nor is it surprising that with greater availability of the meat of the birds, the tendency was for the dish to be ‘upgraded’ from one of offal and trimmings to one of meat. Given the scarcity of wheat flour and the demand for bread, it is also not surprising that pasta as a stretching element for the stew known as ‘jambalaya’ was not an option in Louisiana for rendering it a ‘*soupo courto*’. On the other hand, the availability of rice, which increased over time as the colony developed, was both a familiar and practical choice for the colonists, starting with those from southern France who originally introduced the dish. But there are unsurprisingly some indications that less well-off people commonly consumed their jambalaya stretched with corn mush when rice was too expensive (Sigal 2008 citing Buchanan), a practice which calls to mind the flexibility of the southern French peasants who stretched their traditional stews with a variety of starchy foods, from turnips to pasta and rice and on to potatoes, when they became an available and accepted resource.

While it is clear that the name ‘jambalaya’ survived in the twentieth century at best only marginally in Provence, be it as a name for a vegetable stew (Toulon, Menton) or apparently as a name for some manner of offal preparation (Nice), a dish very much resembling our reconstructed *ur-jambalaya*, as a stew of *abatis* with cured pork, survives quite robustly in Languedoc, albeit under another name. Here we refer to the regionally still popular *ragoût d’escoubilles*, which permits a considerable degree of variation with regard to the principal and secondary ingredients but can be characterized first and foremost as a stew made of bird trimmings (wings, tail and giblets of chicken, turkey or goose), flavoured with pork products (e.g. *lard fumé* or sausages) and aromatic vegetables (onion and often also celery and carrots and some tomato concentrate) and reinforced with turnips and/or potatoes.<sup>11</sup> It is tempting to believe that this name *ragoût d’escoubilles* at some point replaced completely the older *jambalaya* in Languedoc and the origin of the application of the term *escoubilles* – in Occitan, literally ‘sweepings’ and more generally ‘garbage’, a derivative of the verb *escoubà* ‘to sweep’ – may have been inspired by a folk etymological reinterpretation of the opaque ‘jambalaya’: perhaps Occitan-speakers reanalysed ‘jambalaya’ as *jam* + *balaya* through association

of the latter part with the French verb *balayer* ‘to sweep’ and its derivative *balayures* ‘sweepings’; translated into Occitan, one arrives at a colourful and very local name for a humble food associated with local identity.

Supporting the possibility of this particular folk etymological reanalysis and reinterpretation is an old ‘just-so’ story that has long circulated to explain the origin of the name ‘jambalaya’ in a specifically Louisianan context (e.g. Wikipedia: ‘Jambalaya’). According to this story, a late-arriving guest at an inn in New Orleans was informed that the inn’s offerings were all sold out, so the guest said ‘John, sweep something together!’ – in French *Jean, balayez!* – and the guest bestowed this phrase on the chef’s improvised dish as its name. The story is clearly historically false but demonstrates precisely the folksy poetics at work that likely gave rise to the Occitan name *ragoût d’escoubilles*. In effect, the *abatis* stew of present-day Languedoc represents a continuation of the same dish that was brought to Lower Louisiana in the early eighteenth century and its name almost certainly an indirect continuation of ‘jambalaya’ that arose through folk-etymological reanalysis and calquing into Occitan.

#### 9. *Con de Manon: Les Sources!*

In this article we have demonstrated that the name of Louisiana’s emblematic dish has a clear, linguistically coherent etymology in the Provençal/Occitan language of southern France and also that that word is itself part of a family of related names of dishes in that region. That these words are, moreover, clearly related in complex but, under close inspection, obvious ways to culinary terms attested in southern Italy and the Catalan-speaking lands only strengthens further the case for ‘jambalaya’ being an import to Louisiana from southern France. Demographic data on the founding colonial population on the Gulf Coast lends yet more support to our argument. The degree to which the more purely culinary evidence lends further weight to the linguistic evidence is striking. We have shown that there is overwhelming circumstantial evidence for the existence of a stew of fowl (and more specifically of *abatis*) in Provence and likely Languedoc as well in the period preceding and contemporaneous with France’s colonial efforts in Lower Louisiana. Further evidence has been adduced indicating that the consumption of rice in southern France among the non-elite levels of society was common during this time and that, in fact, throughout most of this period, rice was a local product in both Languedoc and Provence. We have then demonstrated specifically that stews of various types, including ones made of *abatis*, were regularly stretched with both pasta and rice; in Louisiana, where pasta was unavailable but rice was usually on hand, the semantic shift of ‘jambalaya’ from a stew of fowl or fowl offal to a stew cooked together with rice was a natural development, but the unmarked version of this dish on the Gulf Coast has always remained fowl-based. The origins of Louisiana’s dish would, of course, not have been a problem in culinary history, had the dish and its name lived on robustly in direct association in southern France but in this regard too, the evidence of the marginal survival of the name in parts of Provence indicating conceptually

related dishes (peasant summer vegetable stews and some manner of offal stew) and of a closely related dish in Languedoc with a different name that itself appears to be a folk reinterpretation of the old word *jambalaia* completes the picture: Louisiana's jambalaya, both the dish and its name, are undeniably southern French in origin.

## Notes

1. 'When you make a jambalaya, you put your *zepi* (onions and garlic) and you stew a bit your meat and you put in rice. That's why they call that jambalaya. You have all that mixed together' (Louisiana French Creole informant, Valdman 1998: 202). In Louisiana French, 'jambalaya' has the figurative meanings of 'mixture', 'muddle' and 'mess'. Many thanks to Amy Dahlstrom.
2. This article is envisioned as the first part of a longer consideration of certain key aspects of culinary culture not only within the Louisiana colony but also with regard to its relationship to the culinary cultures of the Anglophone southeast of the United States, the French colony of Saint-Domingue, and additionally to metropolitan France. The seemingly Eurocentric starting point presented here will be shown in this further work to be a part of the basis of a reassessment and re-appreciation of the crucial role played by Africans and African Americans in the genesis of the new Atlantic World cuisines of the American South and the Caribbean region.
3. Provençal is amply attested from the Middle Ages on but the corpus has its limitations and no European language is so strongly attested as to ensure the recording of all words, especially not ones belonging to the lowest registers; in addition, one notes that Provençal came under strong pressure from French as a written language already in the sixteenth/seventeenth century. Finally, demonstrably old names of peasant dishes in more robustly attested languages often remained unrecorded until the nineteenth or twentieth century. Regarding the travels of Mistral and the two poets he cites, neither Mistral nor Chailan ever travelled to the Americas; in the case of Peise (born/died Toulon, 1820-1878) I can find no detailed biography. That said, the possibility of 'jambalaya' being re-introduced to Provence from Louisiana remains but I will treat that question in detail elsewhere.
4. For the dialect of Toulon, see Arnoux 1940; for Nice, see Compan 1967: 125; for Menton, see Andrews 1995. Another relatively recent reference to 'jambalaia' from Provence is in Jouveau (1990: 140), a work focussing on the traditional cookery of the region, but it is difficult to assess the status of the word in the author's personal knowledge of Provençal: he offers a traditional recipe with chicken that is without doubt closely related to Louisiana's dish but he sets the name off in quotation marks, indicating it is Provençal, but it is not clear whether this particular name for the dish was retrieved, as it were, from Mistral. Nonetheless, the traditional recipe he gives, in the context of our general discussion, is suggestive.
5. Compan's work is a thematic word list, not a dictionary, and details given are few, but in the case of *jambalaia*, he adds parenthetically and rather cryptically '(la ratatouille frite)'. Given the context, it seems clear he is not referring to the summer vegetable stew here but rather uses the word 'ratatouille' in its old pejorative sense of a bad stew, a stew of leftovers or offal.
6. It is not wholly clear why the initial vowel in this form appears as *i* rather than *a*: it may be the result of a purely lexical influence/reanalysis or it may be the result of a minor phonological change. More study of the dialect is required but one notes that in the same dictionary, the name of a ring-shaped pastry appears as *jhibèlèto* from It. *ciambella* (cf. Prov. *gimbeletto*, *jambeletto*, Fr. *gimblette*). The complex suffix has as first element a variant of the one in 'jambalaya', namely *el*; the second suffix, *ot-*, is common, typically with diminutive force. Note that in Occitan/Provençal, many but not all dialects have undergone a regular sound change of unstressed final *a* > *o*; some orthographical systems reflect this change, others do not, hence the variation in forms cited here. Noteworthy is the inclusion here

## Un Vrai Jambalaya – ‘A Real Mess’

- of leftover meat (ambiguously as addition or alternative) which puts this dish in the category of a ‘bad stew’ (commonly also referred to in old sources as *ratatouia/ratatouille*).
7. For example, Bloch 1900: 21, in reference to famine in the mid-eighteenth century: ‘À défaut de pain, c’est avec du riz qu’on assure la subsistance des habitants.’
  8. Heller 1996: 73: ‘Grain yields normally did not exceed 5 or 6:1 anywhere in France. Because rice culture can produce yields of up to 40:1, the cultivation of rice was increasing rapidly in Provence according to Quiqueran de Beaujeu [writing in 1551].’ Buc’hoz (1770: 158) comments on the current cultivation of rice in Languedoc and Provence, but shortly thereafter, Bouche (1785: 5) laments the French government’s elimination of Provence’s rice fields, ‘more beautiful than those of Piemonte’ and the former source of ‘considerable commerce’.
  9. Literally ‘short soup’, with ‘short’ referring to the lack of liquid in the final product. Chanot-Bullier 1988: 74: ‘*La soupo courto n’es pas uno soupo, mai un fricoi*’ [‘a *soupo courto* is not a soup but a stew’]; the recipe offered there is stretched with pasta.
  10. The 1770 poetic text refers fondly to ‘*rougnounado en de ris*’ (Le Sage 1636: 16). *Soupo courto* is glossed as ‘*terme de pasticie* [involving pasta] *Potage d’Abatis*’ by Pellas 1723: 65. Achard’s (1785), Azaïs’s (1876) and Mistral’s (1879–1866) dictionaries also gloss *soupo courto* as a dish of *abatis*.
  11. Many recipes demonstrating the range of ingredients used are available online in French. A readily available recipe in English can be found in Conran 2012: 201; her version uses chicken wings and giblets and is a fairly typical one, though it does not include any pork products.

## References

- Achard, Claude-François. 1785. *Dictionnaire de la Provence et du Comté-Venaissin* (Marseille: Mossy).
- Adams, Edward L. 1913. *Word-Formation in Provençal* (New York: Macmillan).
- Anderson, E.N. 2009. ‘African Influences on Maya Foods’, Society for Economic Botany annual conference, Charleston, SC <<http://www.krazykioti.com/articles/maya-ethnobotany-four-studies/>> [accessed 15 May 2016].
- Andrews, Colman. 1995. ‘Please, Hold the Jerusalem Artichokes’, *Los Angeles Times* <[http://articles.latimes.com/1995-10-05/food/fo-53381\\_1\\_jerusalem-artichoke](http://articles.latimes.com/1995-10-05/food/fo-53381_1_jerusalem-artichoke)> [accessed 15 May 2016].
- Arnoux, Carle. 1940. *Breviari dón gènt parla prouvençau* (Toulon) <<http://www.cieldoc.com/libre/integral/libro347.pdf>> [accessed 15 May 2016].
- Azaïs, Gabriel. 1876. *Dictionnaire des idiomes romans du midi de la France, Vol 2* (Paris: Maisonneuve).
- Bloch, Camille. 1900. *Études sur l’histoire économique de la France (1760-1789)* (Paris: Picard).
- Bouche, Charles-François. 1785. *Essai sur l’histoire de Provence* (Marseille: Mossy).
- Brasseaux, Carl A. 2005. *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma. A Primer on Francophone Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press).
- Buccini, Anthony F. 2006. ‘Western Mediterranean Vegetable Stews and the Integration of Culinary Exotica’, in Richard Hosking (ed.), *Authenticity in the Kitchen. Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2005*, 132–145 (Totnes, Devon: Prospect).
- . 2013. ‘Lasagna: A Layered History’, in Mark McWilliams (ed.), *Stuffed and Wrapped: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2012*, 94–104 (Totnes, Devon: Prospect).
- . 2015. ‘The Merchants of Genoa and the Diffusion of Pasta Culture in Southern Europe’, in Mark McWilliams (ed.), *Food and Markets: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2014*, 54–64 (Totnes, Devon: Prospect).
- . 2016a. ‘From *Kongri* to *Diri ak Djondjon*: Slavery, Creolisation and Culinary Genesis in Saint-Domingue and Independent Haiti’, Dublin Gastronomy Symposium, May, 2016 <<http://arrow.dit.ie/dgs/2016/May31/20/>>.
- . 2016b. ‘Defining “Cuisine”: Communication, Culinary Grammar, and the Typology of Cuisine’,

## Offal: Rejected and Reclaimed Food

- in Mark McWilliams (ed.), *Food and Communication: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium 2015*, 105-121 (Totnes, Devon: Prospect).
- Buc'hoz, Pierre-Joseph. 1770. *Dictionnaire universel des plantes, arbres et arbustes de la France*, Vol. 3 (Paris: Lacombe).
- Chanot-Bullier, Calixtine. 1988 [1966]. *Vieilles recettes de cuisine provençale* (Marseille: Tacussel).
- Compan, André. 1967. *Glossaire raisonné de la langue niçoise* (Nice: Tiranty).
- Conran, Caroline. 2012. *Sud de France: The Food and Cooking of Languedoc* (Totnes, Devon: Prospect).
- Davidson, Alan. 2002. *The Penguin Companion to Food* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- de Sauvages, Pierre Augustin Boissier. 1756. *Dictionnaire languedocien-françois*, Vol. 2 (Nîmes: Michel Gaude).
- Dessens, Nathalie. 2005. 'From Saint Domingue to Louisiana', in Bradley G. Bond (ed.), *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World*, 244-264 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press).
- Erman, Anna and Japhet Kahouye Loh, (eds.). 2008. *Dictionnaire Dan-Français (Dan de l'Ouest)* (N.P.: MeaBooks).
- Fertel, Rien. 2007. 'Jambalaya', in Andrew F. Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, 325 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. 1992. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press).
- Heller, Henry. 1996. *Labour, science and technology in France, 1500-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Hess, Karen. 1992. *The Carolina Rice Kitchen: The African Connection* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press).
- Honnorat, Simon-Jude. 1846-1847. *Dictionnaire Provençal-Français* (3 vol.) (Digne: Repos).
- Jouveau, René. 1990. *La cuisine provençale de tradition populaire* (Aix: Paul Roubaud).
- Le Sage, Daniel. 1636. *Les Folies du Sieur Le Sage*. Montpellier: Jean Pech.
- Mistral, Frédéric. 1979 [1879-1886]. *Lou trésor dóu Felibrige ou dictionnaire provençal-français* (vol. 2, G-Z) (Barcelona: Marcel Petit).
- Mufwene, Salikoko S. 1996. 'The Founder Principle in Creole Genesis', *Diachronica* 13: 83-134.
- Pellas, Sauveur-André. 1723. *Dictionnaire provençal et françois* (Avignon: Offray).
- Read, William A. 1933. Review of Jay Ditchy, *Les Acadiens Louisianais et Leur Parler*. *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 57: 365-75.
- Sigal, Andrew. 2007. 'Jambalaya by Any Other Name', *Petits Propos Culinaires* 84: 101-19.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. 'Jambalaya: History, Origins and Etymology', <<http://www.sigal.org/culinaryhistory/jambalaya/jambalaya.htm>> [accessed 20 April 2016]:.
- Valdman, Albert and others (eds.). 1998. *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- Whitehead, Jessup. 1889. *The Steward's Handbook and Guide to Party Catering* (Chicago).
- Wikipedia contributors. 'Jambalaya', *Wikipedia* <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jambalaya>> [accessed 31 July 2016].