

A New Orleans Glossary

New Orleans has been called a great many things in tribute to its distinctive culture: The Paris of the Americas, America's International City, the Gateway to the Americas, The City that Care Forgot, and down-home, by natives, simply The Big Easy.

Napoleon called it "Isle d'Orleans," the only independent Island state in America. Its attitude and language was rooted in French, spiced by the Spanish, influenced greatly by its blacks (many of them free people of color) and embellished by large immigrant waves of Irish, Germans and Italians. Thus, despite frequent misrepresentations by movie makers, the people do not speak with Southern accents. They speak a fairly representative English, with the exception of certain waterfront neighborhoods where something that sounds very much like Brooklynese can be heard. Because of the rich ethnic mix, certain local peculiarities of speech, and idioms, are important.

BANQUETTE (Sidewalk) Until the 1900s this reclaimed swamp city flooded frequently. Streets often ran like rivers. Sidewalks were built two to three feet high, mainly to keep water out of the houses. They were called banquettes (literally, little banks).

NEUTRAL GROUND (Middle ground or Median) When the City was divided (1835-52) into Uptown Anglo and Downtown French sections, Canal Street was the dividing line. The broad 90 foot public promenade down the middle was called "The Neutral Ground." Since then, all median strips in New Orleans have been termed neutral grounds.

PO-BOYS (Sandwiches) These gigantic sandwiches are made of whole French loaves, split down the middle and filled with either roast beef and gravy or ham and cheese, tomatoes, mayonnaise. They were created by two Cajun "poor boys," Benny and Clovis Martin, and sold for 10 cents a piece during the 1914 streetcar strike, when several thousand "poor boys," streetcar workers, on strike, could afford little more.

CAFE AU LAIT (Coffee and Milk) The coffee is strong, strong and poured in almost equal measure with hot, hot milk. It is accompanied usually by beignets. This Creole version of the doughnut (without a hole) is fried (never baked) in hot, hot lard with baking soda used to puff the dough.

GUMBO (From *kingombo*, African word for okra) Okra was brought to New Orleans by African slaves, considered to have both spiritual and health-giving properties. It became a principal ingredient in many gumbos, along with rice and seafood (or sausage or chicken), and a powder called *file* ' (fee-lay), the inspiration of Choctaw Indians, made from ground up sassafras leaves and guaranteed to clear the sinuses.

GUMBO YA-YA Old French Creole expression, inspired by large, gregarious, family talkfests -- meaning "All Mixed up and Talking (Ya-yaing) at Once."

LAGNIAPPE (A little bit more) Small neighborhood stores (and all good New Orleans hosts) still offer lagniappe. It's sort of like a "baker's dozen." The Acadians brought this practice to New Orleans. They sold grain to their customers in a woolen cloth sack called *"la nappe."* To compensate for grain that might spill or stick to the bottom they threw in a little bit more without charge. *"C'est pour la nappe,"* they would exclaim. ("This is for that caught in the sack.")

PICAYUNE (Small, trifling) We have the only newspaper in the world called the (Times) Picayune. Originally, the term referred to the newspaper's price (one picayune) which was the smallest Spanish coin, valued at 6 1/4 cents. Two picayunes were a bit, and "two bits" added up to a quarter.

BAYOU (From the Choctaw *bayuk*, river or creek) A natural canal, having its rise in the overflow of a river, or draining of a marsh, lacking any current.

Continued
See GLOSSARY, page 14