

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Platonic Memories

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to English immigrant parents, Richard H. Collin (March 4, 1932 - January 19, 2010) came to New Orleans in the early 1960s and fell in love. It was a love for the wonderful cuisine of the city of New Orleans. If the local dish was truly exceptional, his love was "platonic" - not in the sense that it was chaste and unconsummated (such as the love of a friend), but past the penultimate when it came to perfection.

When he deemed an *entrée* "(a platonic dish)", his definition was: "This is my own personal accolade; the term is derived from Plato's *Republic*. It means simply the best imaginable realization of a particular dish. If you prefer, perfect is a good translation."

He also had other worthy designations, "(highly recommended)", meaning "Nearly platonic. Still extraordinary." and "(recommended)", denoting "An excellent dish and one of the best, or the best, of the house."

Collin became a New Orleans restaurant critic in 1970 when he first heard about the "Underground Gourmet" series of restaurant guidebooks originating in New York City, published by Simon and Schuster. He cleverly wrote to the publishing company to see if he might be allowed to do a New Orleans version and, to his amazement, the publishers said yes to this aggressive foodie and yet unknown food writer. *The New Orleans Underground Gourmet* made its *début* that year with the following subtitle:

"Where to find great meals in New Orleans for less than \$3.75 and as little as 50c."

It would indeed be "platonic" to return to those prices!

New Orleans States-Item editor Charles A. Ferguson said, "He was the first and in many ways you could say the most influential" restaurant critic."

He became a food columnist for the States-Item, a cookbook writer (with his equally food-centric wife, Rima), as well, and a popular history professor at UNO. He focused particularly on Theodore Roosevelt.

With some dining establishments Collin wasted no words in finding fault. If they did not meet his meticulous expectations, he did not go easy on them. The Smoke House on Canal Boulevard, he commented, had "the dubious distinction of serving the worst barbecue in New Orleans." And he wrote that at a busy lunch spot in the CBD, "the featured Greek salad is not particularly Greek nor particularly good."

Collin found Greek philosopher Plato's ultimate state of being in but a few dishes, but it goes without saying that New Orleans has far more than most other cities. Some culinary creations he deemed worthy of "platonic" were Antoine's Oysters Rockefeller; LeRuth's fried soft-shell crab stuffed with crabmeat in a butter sauce; Galatoire's Shrimp Rémoulade, Trout Marguery and Trout Meunière Amandine; Eggs Hussarde at Brennan's; Oysters Bienville at Commander's Palace; and Casamento's fabulous oyster loaf (and at \$1.95 "one of the more expensive," he wrote, but Collin loved the "well over a dozen beautifully fried oysters"). Many readers were somewhat reluctant to follow his advice on consuming Manale's "platonic" barbecued shrimp. He recommended eating "the whole works, *including* the tail, the head, and the shell." But happy, indeed, were the establishments who were bestowed Collin's great philosophical designation.

Collin gave only two four star ratings (Galatoire's and LeRuth's), but there were a number of three star greats (Antoine's, Brennan's, Commander's, Crescent City Steakhouse, Pascal's Manale, Mosca's and Acme Oyster House). Some three star restaurants are no longer in business, sad to say, such as the soulful Chez Helene, the Pontchartrain's Caribbean Room, Gin's Mee Hong in the Quarter, Elmwood Plantation and the all too short-lived Christopher Blake's.

Mayor "Dutch" Morial dubbed Christopher Blake "Gourmet Laureate of New Orleans". Richard Collin wrote that Chris was "a New Orleans playwright, writer, *bon vivant*, and cooking-school operator *extraordinaire*," describing Christopher Blake's at 916 Lafayette Street "on the fringe of" the CBD as "a first-rate French restaurant" with "the courage not to feature the famous New Orleans cuisine. It is different, stimulating, and excellent" and "a breath of fresh air." Collin also wrote that Chris "prides himself on being a gifted amateur," and his modesty continues to this day. On a recent visit to New Orleans (April 2011), Chris told me quite modestly, "I am not a chef."

If not, why did Tom Fitzmorris devote three pages of his culinary history of New Orleans, *Hungry Town*, to Chris? Why was Chris chosen to prepare a gourmet feast as the cover story for New Orleans

Magazine's 1975 Christmas issue? With beluga caviar, raw oysters, salmon trout with truffles and the "Vol-au-vent of Veal Sweetbreads and Duck Breast Financière with Soufflée of Mirlitons"! And why did Brigadier General Walter S. McIlhenny of Tabasco (remembering his own experiences with C-Rations during World War II) have Chris create a small cookbook for the troops in Viet Nam. *The Charlie Ration Cookbook* taught GIs how to spice up their C-Rations into gourmet meals such as "Combat Canapés" and a "Fox Hole Dinner for Two, Turkey and Chicken Poulette". The cookbooks came wrapped around two-ounce bottles of Tabasco Pepper Sauce along with some P-38 type can openers all in a camouflaged waterproof canister. Chris Blake was a young GI himself during World War II, and he found himself in Paris, France.

He became Gertrude Stein's last protégé after she read his short story, *The Bride Chewed Gum*. After he left her, Alice B. Toklas told Chris that she only saw Gertrude cry twice, once when James Joyce published *Ulysses* and the other when Chris left. "She was trying to manipulate my life," he said.

Art critic for the *New York Sun*, Henry McBride, raved about Stein's "most potent" art collection at 27 *Rue de Fleurus*, and observed that she "collected geniuses rather than masterpieces. She recognized them a long way off."

In Paris, Alice B. Toklas gave Chris his first real cooking lesson. She taught him how to make mayonnaise with hazelnut oil. Gertrude Stein, besides the famous quote, "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," is remembered (in 1922) as the first writer to use the word *gay* in a published text to refer to a homosexual relationship. She also came up with the appellation "Lost Generation," a term that Hemingway popularized in *The Sun Also Rises*. He later revealed that it was actually something Stein yelled at her mechanic for failing to repair her car. "You are all *une génération perdue*," she shouted. She told Hemingway, "That's what you all are ... all of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation."

But now it was 1945 and the end of a second world war, and Stein was dying of stomach cancer. She could only eat gruel, but found pleasure from Blake's regular dinner visits. Alice fed the hungry young GI meat and potatoes and apple pie. Stein died on July 27, 1946. And in 1954, Alice wrote one of the bestselling cookbooks of all time, thanks to that famous recipe for hashish fudge.

From his childhood days in New York to his experiences in Paris, Chris eventually found himself in his beloved New Orleans. He and his then roommate shared a charming residence in the Faubourg Marigny where Chris began to entertain friends.

Word spread about his flamboyant and fabulous dinners and parties. Soon he received a phone call with a request to entertain Craig Claiborne for lunch. But playwright Blake read only the drama and literary sections of the *New York Times* and, at the time, had no idea who its renowned food editor was. He did entertain Craig for lunch, however, and wowed him ... by keeping it simple but great. He served a soup of red beans, fresh trout, an uncomplicated but delicious salad and Chris' own rum pie. An inexpensive California wine completed the divine *déjeuner*. Claiborne's praises launched Blake's gourmet career as *restaurateur* (with Roc Johnson) and the opening of his eponymous eatery, Christopher Blake's.

There, according to Richard Collin, Chris served "lunch, dinner and French *souper* every day but Monday". Every time Collin visited the remodeled 1820 house on Lafayette, it was a "tour de force in virtually every course". Collin loved Chris' white bean *cassoulet* (or rich, slow-cooked stew) "(highly recommended)". He listed numerous "(recommended)" offerings, especially the dinners, and then there was the "fine innovation" of the *souper* ("served after the theater from 10 P.M. to midnight"). There one could delight in a *croque-monsieur* sandwich or fresh mushrooms on toast (the *champignons frais sur canapé*). Chris also offered spruced up leftovers for the *souper* called the Samuel Pepys supper potluck for only \$2.50. The famous diarist, after all, liked wine and plays, and the company of other people.

Easy Elegance is a popular and ample cookbook written by this Chris in the words of a cook, "not a chef". But many of his recipes (like for the GIs) have been released in cookbooklets. One such mini cookbook was the result of Congresswoman Lindy Boggs suggesting that Chris do another one of his extravagant dinners. Emceed by David Frost, the feast had the musical accompaniment of none other than Louis Armstrong on his horn. Louis related to Chris that he was unable to eat his beloved red beans and rice due to the meds he was taking. The result was *Red Beans and Rice-ly Yours* (still in print and available at the Southern Food and Beverage Museum).

Chris has lived around the world in cities such as Paris, London, and Sitges, Spain. There have been benefactors and benefactresses, and at times overindulgence in wine and other alcoholic beverages. That eventually led him to rehab in Costa Mesa, California, where he has been the live-in chef and writer-in-residence at the Plumer House Recovery Center for the past 15 years. There he prepares gourmet meals that are just as wonderful, but without alcohol. The men and women of all backgrounds greatly appreciate Christopher Blake's extraordinary culinary skills. A good meal, after all, is only good when shared with others. And it prompted another great cookbooklet:

Cooking for and with Alcoholics, in which Chris offers such dishes as the "Alkie 'You-Forgot-to-Flame' Bananas"*

* "No, I didn't," Chris writes. "There's just no alcohol."

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