CRESCENT CITY BRUNCH

ARE YOU A BRUNCH HATER? BLAME IT ON THE BEGUÉS.

By Rien Fertel

The Historic New Orleans Collection, acc. no. 1981.261.29

Begué's dining room

BRUNCH: WE LOVE IT. We hate it. We adore brunch for the promise of breakfast, lunch, and booze before noon. And we blame brunch for a host of ills: shoddy service, gummy eggs, and afternoons wrecked by bottomless mimosas. There's a thin line between love and hate, as the song goes, and often a very, very long line to wait for brunch. In New Orleans, where I call home, a recent art installation blamed brunch for raising rents in one particularly hipsterized neighborhood. A satirical takeoff of old carnival cutouts or amusement park stand-ins, the piece asked, "Who needs neighbors when we've got brunch?" as if Eggs Benedict might be the scourge of gentrification. But brunch is as much a part of New Orleans as Dixieland jazz, Carnival season, and Sunday second lines.

The Historic New Orleans Collection, MSS 527

LEFT: ***Madame Begué;*** **RIGHT:** ***Monsieur Begué***

Its origin story dates to the mid-nineteenth century, in the French Quarter. An enterprising young woman who would come to adopt the grand title Madame Begué not only popularized brunch here but had a hand in creating a global demand for that decadent mid-morning meal. From the kitchen of her restaurant at the corner of Decatur and Madison, Madame Begué served a single meal each day, promptly at 11 A.M. A maximum of thirty diners sat communally at two long tables. She did not use the word brunch, but rather "second breakfast," which she defined as a morning feast, stretching three to four hours into the afternoon and consisting of eight to ten courses, chicory coffee, and pour after pour of French wine and Champagne.

Omelets were at the center of Begué's second breakfasts, hearty and stuffed with robust ingredients: Gulf oysters, slices of fried veal, sweetbreads, fried potatoes. Her specialty, Liver à la Begué, was a Saturday standard: lobes of of beef liver skillet-fried in lard.

Born in Bavaria in 1831, Elizabeth Kettenring, the future Madame Begué, came to New Orleans at the age of twenty-two to join her brother Philip, a butcher in the stalls of the French Market, which ran along the river opposite the Lower French Quarter. There, Elizabeth met and married another butcher, Louis Dutrey, and in 1863 they opened Dutrey's Coffee House at 207 Old Levee Street. He served coffee and tended bar downstairs. She cooked and served late breakfast, or early lunch, upstairs for butchers who shuttered their stalls at 11 A.M. to avoid the heat of the midday sun.

After Louis died in 1877, she married a butcher-turned-bartender, Hippolyte Begué. He joined her business, which they renamed Begué's Exchange. For the next several years, the Begués continued at this pace, serving late, hearty breakfasts, coffee, and wine to French- and German-born butchers.

Their fortunes dramatically shifted in the winter of 1884,

BY 1890, TOURISTS HAD SUPPLANTED THE BUTCHERS AT BEGUE'S TABLES, AND RESERVATIONS WERE REQUIRED WEEKS IN ADVANCE.

when scores of New York and Boston newspapermen and -women descended on New Orleans to report on the World's Fair, held in what is now Audubon Park. Many remained to document a city in the midst of a social and cultural renaissance. At the time, New Orleans boasted the nation's most vibrant theatre scene, an influential circle of literati and other public intellectuals, and storied restaurants like the St. Charles Saloon and the Jewel.

But it was Begué's shabby surroundings, juxtaposed with the extravagance of the meal, that captured the hearts and pens of those writers. "No sign marks the entrance," wrote one, "and up one must go by the darkest, narrowest, most tortuous of stairways. This lands one in a plain room with sanded floor, just large enough to hold a table."

Begué's was the semi-secret speakeasy of its day: elaborately designed to feel authentic, romantic, and a bit crusty. "The table is unadorned," the account continued, "the linen coarse...the china common, but all this one forgets with the first course... shrimp salad served with a pepper sauce.... Then came boiled fish with potatoes. Finally Monsieur Begué entered with an immense omelet, which he carried around the table, so all could view its size and lightness.... By this time our stock of adjectives was so diminished we could say little, but merely wondered what next."

Dozens of articles detailed Begué's second breakfast. As much as they praised the food, they reveled in the ritualistic lavishness of the experience: the dirty stairwell; portly Monsieur Begué, seated at the table's head, commencing the feast by dipping a cap of French bread into a glass of red wine; the midday hours disappearing under the weight of massive omelets and too much Champagne; a peek into the Madame's simple kitchen; finally, coffee served with brûléed sugar soaked in Cognac. Shared tables, conviviality, drunkenness: This was Begué's.

Around this time, in 1895, Guy Beringer coined the portmanteau "brunch" in the short-lived British magazine *Hunter's Weekly*: "Instead of England's early Sunday dinner, a post-church ordeal of heavy meats and savory pies, why not a new meal, served around noon, that starts with tea or coffee, marmalade and other breakfast fixtures...before moving along to the heavier fare?" He continued, "By eliminating the need to get up early on Sunday, brunch would make life brighter for Saturday night carousers." Almost immediately, brunch became a symbol of overindulgence and wealth, its origins as a butchers' repast fading from view.

Meanwhile, a broader New Orleans restaurant culture took shape. By 1890, tourists had supplanted the butchers at Begué's tables, reservations were now required weeks in advance, and cookbooks circulated. Madame Begué's second breakfast had made her the nation's first female celebrity chef. "Madame Begue [sic] is dead," wrote one Boston magazine upon her death in 1906. "No more Epicurean breakfasts in the Quartier Latin for the *bon-vivants* of the nation."

Rather than close the restaurant and miss out on an opportunity to cash in, Hippolyte Begué married the Madame's kitchen apprentice, Françoise Laporte, who was crowned the second Madame Begué. Like Marie Laveau or Louis Armstrong, Begué's name was mythologized, and she became part of the fabric of New Orleans lore. This second partnership continued for a decade, until January 1916, when Hippolyte sold the business to his neighboring rivals. Today, in the former Begué's, Tujague's Restaurant still serves a Madame-esque brisket with Creole horseradish. (If you visit, head upstairs to examine a cabinet of Begué memorabilia.)

As the Begué era drew to a close, brunch faced an uncertain future in the United States. Prohibition all but eliminated the possibility of

The Historic New Orleans Collection, partial gift of Dr. James W. Nelson, acc. no. 2008.0216.59

An early-twentieth century etching by Louis Oscar Griffith depicts Begué's building

The Historic New Orleans Collection, acc. no. 1981.261.29

Begué's kitchen

a boozy breakfast in public, while shifting social and economic norms domesticated the meal. Newspaper columns encouraged ladies to serve the meal at home. A sober home brunch could save time and money for the modern middle-class household. "Make Sunday a two-meal day," one columnist in Ohio suggested, and "we're just as well fed and lots happier. Much of the brunch can be prepared on Saturday...and Sunday in our house is now a day when each one of us has a chance to rest."

Brunch would soon return to the public sphere. By midcentury a new generation of brunch-centric restaurants rose to fill the void left by Begué's. Brennan's, opened in 1946, kept the term "breakfast" while serving New Orleans' brunchiest of brunches: brandy milk punch, turtle soup drizzled with aged sherry, and rum-flambéed Bananas Foster.

Over the ensuing decades, live music, for better or worse, has become synonymous with brunch. In 1974 five members of the Brennan family—Ella, Adelaide, Dottie, Dick, and John—decamped from their family's flagship to revive an old Garden District restaurant, Commander's Palace. Even before bringing on Chef Paul Prudhomme the following year, they rolled out Saturday and Sunday jazz brunch. They tapped Alvin Alcorn, a journeyman trumpeter with over a half-century of experience, to lead a four-piece band that serenaded diners from the Garden Room. In 1976 he released an album called *Soft and Over Easy at Commander's Palace* (give it a spin on Spotify).

The Brennans were brilliant marketers. Soon advertisements sold the Commander's Palace Jazz Brunch as "Pure New Orleans, part of the heart and soul of this city we all love." The marriage of jazz and eggs proved so popular that brunch spots throughout city, and eventually the world, copied the idea. Today, the jazz brunch is a staple in New York and Paris and even Dubai, where the super-luxury Jumeirah Hotel hosts a New Orleans-themed jazz brunch on Saturdays, complete with jambalaya and Creole baked chicken.

New Orleans cannot claim invention of jazz brunch's first cousin, the gospel brunch. That

L. Kasimu Harris

Breakfast at Brennan's, summer 2015

trend likely originated in New York City circa 1985, at the Southern soul food restaurant Lola's, in Chelsea. The Crescent City can probably claim responsibility for jazz brunch's rowdier sibling, the Drag Brunch. A twice-monthly affair since 2010, the Drag Brunch at the Country Club in the Bywater neighborhood is one of the toughest reservations in town. It features live entertainment—lip-syncing, catwalking—by the famous Mimosa Girls, who pour bottomless pitchers of their namesake cocktail.

A century after the closing of Begué's, the history of brunch has come full circle: a mid-morning meal, invented in New Orleans, and grounded in sociability. But, to return to the question posed by the incendiary art installation: In today's New Orleans, can historic neighborhoods coexist alongside the newest brunch spots? We might do well to remember that, since the days of the first Madame, brunch has served as an introductory meal, a welcome mat of sorts, to visitors and new acquaintances across the expanse of the common table. Butchers and drag queens, journalists and jazz trumpeters, and several Begués have all hosted and toasted brunch with mimosas in hand. If we make room for all of our neighbors among the Benedicts and booze, there might be hope for brunch yet.

Rien Fertel writes, teaches, and calls New Orleans home. He spoke about Begué's and brunch at the 2015 SFA Summer Symposium.