

Mr. Horace's New Orleans Style

Roast Beef Poor Boy

By
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I was searching for a New Orleans type roast beef poor boy sandwich. Have you ever eaten a sandwich that was more like a meal? One with a golden brown crust wrapped around a thick foot long loaf of soft, chewy bread? A sandwich filled with thick slices of roast beef, leafy lettuce, sliced juicy red tomatoes? Does this make you hungry yet? He he heeee.... It will....

So where do you find such a mouth watering munch loaf? Why you go to "Market by the Bay" in Fairhope, Baldwin County, Alabama.

Baldwin County, Alabama (between Mobile Alabama and Pensacola, Florida) is filled with trees like maple, oak, pecan, willow, persimmon, magnolia, cypress, and many other varieties. The people of the Eastern Shore revere their trees. In fact, they name their streets after the many varieties found in the area. They even name their subdivisions after the mighty trees and forests, names such as Lake Forest, Timber Creek, Belle Forest and other majestic names.

The area is a natural beauty. Residents love their surroundings. In fact, they rejoice in planting various types of annual flowers along their streets and roadways. They decorate their trees near those passageways during the holidays, also. It is not uncommon for a visitor to describe the little quaint cities as storybook cities. My first impression of Fairhope was that it reminded me of Disney World. It is a busy little city with small shops, clean streets, trees and plants everywhere, decorating the landscape like a natural aura of colors. The people, who are walking from shop to shop with smiling, pleasant faces, looking for arts, crafts, clothing or other items to adorn their homes or to cover their body. Oh, did I mention that this area has the highest concentration of creative people in the southern United States. I found artists, sculptors, writers and musicians, easily. The area has a plethora of imaginative folks.

People with rich imaginations and creative minds love to eat uncommonly good foods. Hence, my story.

I drive compass-south on Greeno Road in Fairhope, Alabama. Greeno Road is also known as U.S. 98 East. During appointments with my clients, I heard that the local Fairhope restaurant, "Market by the Bay," produced a New Orleans style poor boy sandwich. I determine that I must learn more about this restaurant's sandwich, the history of the poor boy and something about the man who worked his magic to make the culinary delight. This is my discovery.

Poor boy sandwich, you ask? What is it? What is its origin? Some people call it a hoagie or a submarine sandwich, sub for short. However, in New Orleans, the name has its derivation during the days of the great depression.

Many men and boys sought jobs to earn money in order to feed and to clothe their family. Funds were short; people were hungry. They milled about looking for work or for scraps of food that they might scavenge from garbage piles behind restaurants and food shops. Some of the owners of the restaurants knew that the many poor required nourishment. They took foot long loaves of bread, round-nosed on each end, cut them open and placed slices of meat, lettuce, tomatoes and condiments on the halves. The halves were put together and sold at a reasonable and affordable price, usually for about a nickel. (Five cents. That was a get real deal.) In some cases the sandwiches were given away, to those who were unemployed and who milled about in search of food. Thus, the sandwich became known as the poor boy sandwich. The poor boy became popular. Even after the depression ended, working men required a hearty meal that was quick and affordable.

Some explain the history thusly:

A po' boy (also po-boy, po boy, or poor boy) is a traditional submarine sandwich from Louisiana. It almost always consists of meat or sea-food, usually fried, served on baguette-like Louisiana French bread.

There are many stories describing the origin of the term poor boy. One account claims that po-boy was coined in a New Orleans restaurant owned by Benny and Clovis Martin. Clovis was a former streetcar conductor. In 1929, during a four-month strike against the streetcar company, Martin served his former coworkers free sandwiches. Martin's restaurant workers jokingly referred to the strikers as "poor boys", and soon the sandwiches were labeled that name. In Louisiana dialect, this is naturally shortened to po-boy.

Trapani's Restaurant, in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, insists that the name po-boy came from a sandwich shop in New Orleans. If a new customer to a bar bought a nickel beer, he got a free sandwich, a po-boy, thrown in. This was some-times called a "poor boy's lunch", which the sandwich came to be called.

Today, you can find poor boy sandwiches made with many differing ingredients. The poor boys are made with roast beef, shrimp, oysters, combinations (called half-and-half) of shrimp and oyster, luncheon meat, ham and cheese, and other types of food added to the long, chewy bread loaves.

I pulled into the parking lot of "Market by the Bay," at 365 S. Greeno Road. I opened the glass front door entrance, walked into the dining room and noticed tables and chairs to either side of the entrance. The walls were decorated with nautical items, fishing lures and poles, rope art, paintings of marine life and other sea-theme artwork. In front of me was a counter with the register and a telephone. To the right of the counter, were the food preparation and cooking areas, with people busily assembling customers' orders.

There he stood, Mr. Horace. Did I say, "stood?" Ha. He was a man constantly in motion. He always displayed a great big smile on his round, mustached face. Mr. Horace wore his blue jeans and New Orleans Saints t-shirt, all covered with his white overalls. He wore a multicolored bandana wrapped about his head, like a proud chef's cap with a laid-back attitude. Though he focused on the food preparations in front of him, I sensed the music in his head that controlled the rhythmic sway of his bodily actions. I became aware that he was about to "break-out" into a second line dance. (Oh, that's a dance that is performed either in or around a jazz funeral procession line in New Orleans. People in New Orleans celebrate a person's Life, not a person's death. So there is music and dancing, like a party, to rejoice in the person's life.) Yep, Mr. Horace had to be a New Orleanean. I reminded myself to ask him.

"May I help you, sir?" the counter-lady asked.

“Yes. I’d like one of those New Orleans style roast beef sandwiches that I heard you started to offer. I want it ‘dripping to the elbows.’ Mr. Horace knows what I mean.”

The lady laughed, “Yes, sir. We’ll take care of that for you.”

After I placed my order for that tell-tale roast beef sandwich, I removed myself to the end of the order-counter. From that location I could observe the process and the artwork of a legendary sandwich maker.

When it became my order’s turn, Mr. Horace pulled it from the que. He took that paper list from the metal pressure clips. I watched his smile grow larger as he connected his love of the sandwich with the customer’s desire. *Yes, I said desire. It is a sensual want, a need almost, that drives one into a heightened mood. We, from the Crescent City, call it an envé (ohn vee).*

Mr. Horace grabbed the Gambino’s bread loaf from the bread drawer. He sliced it open from end to round nosed end. He grabbed the condiment spreader and stuck it into the mayonnaise jar. After he scooped the creamy off white spread onto the rubbery blade, he smoothed it, thickly, over the two halves of the soft, chewy loaf. Next he handled the meat tongs, repeatedly, grabbing the thick slices of the juicy, savory roast beef, he piled them onto the open loaf. Oh, you can smell the hint of sautéed onions that marinated into those marvelous morsels of meat. (*Are you salivating yet?*) Now comes the piece de resistance. In most areas in and around Mobile, roast beef sandwiches are served with a side cup of a thin, watery dip called au jus (aw ju). However, Mr. Horace (I discovered that he was a resident of the Ninth Ward of New Orleans for thirty years) knew that the taste buds would dance better with a sauce of substance. He snatched a gravy ladle and filled it from a pan of thick gravy made from a roux of beef stock. Mr. Ho-race carefully poured the brown creamy gravy over the piles of roast beef slices until it began to overflow the sides of the bread, so soft and chewy.... (*Are you there yet?*) Next, he topped the roux made gravy with leafy lettuce. Then Horace crowned that with thick slices of red, juicy tomatoes. He closed the halves. With a razor sharp, serrated edge knife, he made a diagonal cut near the middle of the loaf, making the man-sized sandwich easier to handle. Mr. Horace’s smile never left his face. You saw his thoughts, thoughts of the tantalizing sandwich as it touched the salivating taste buds of his customer’s mouth. The pressure of Mr. Horace’s hands closed the halves and wrapping the poor boy with sandwich paper created just enough force required to mix the thick roux made gravy with the creamy off white mayonnaise. *Oh, why did he have to cover it?* I asked myself.

The lady at the register said, “Here is your order, sir.” I paid my seven dollars plus tax. *The current price is much higher than the one from the depression days; but it is still a bargain to pay that amount for such a filling, delicious meal.* She handed me a red platter containing the desirable fixation of my wanton thoughts. She also gave me a paper drink cup.

“Thank you. Thank you very much!” I replied as I walked to the drink fountain to fill my cup with Mugg root beer. I located an empty table facing one of two widescreen televisions, neither of which I bothered to view, because I was entertained with these delicious morsels of long sought food.

I removed the wrappings from the poor boy. I uplifted one half of the sandwich, held firmly by both hands now graced with the drippings of the gravy and mayo mix. I reaffirmed my view of the roll of paper towels placed on each table. My roll was full of the wiping paper.

I began to take my first bite. As my teeth sank, in slow motion fashion, into the Gambino’s scrumptious bread, the roux-gravy and mayo mixture blended with the bursting moisture from the leafy lettuce and juicy tomatoes. They danced and swirled about my taste buds in a culinary waltz. Oh, mon ami (my friend). Ouis, ouis (wee wee; i.e. yes, yes). It was everything that a

person could ask for in a New Orleans style sandwich!

I looked up to see Mr. Horace looking at my satisfied face. He wore a victorious smile of triumph. He had won another customer.

I don't know if you are there yet; but I can exclaim, with due integrity and honesty, that I have arrived at the eatery of choice for my workdays in and around Fairhope. See you there.