

***Un vrai jambalaya* — ‘a real mess’**  
**The Southern French Origins of Louisiana’s Famous Dish**  
**and its Surprising Connexions to ‘Hopping John’**

### **1 Introduction**

That the culinary culture of modern Louisiana derives in large measure from France is obvious and in part indisputable, 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 connexions are sufficiently numerous that there was a tendency for casual observers to assume that the gastronomy of New Orleans and southern Louisiana was in essence virtually all of French origin, albeit with substantial adaptations to the local environment’s offerings. In recent decades, however, as there has developed an increasing appreciation of the rôle played by African-Americans in the formation of American culture, 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 rôle played by the marginal, poor French colonists and with that a real misunderstanding of the creolisation process (AUTHOR 2016a). Louisiana’s popular cuisine, like Louisiana’s French Creole language, is the product of a complex evolution through which non-elite French influences and African influences gave rise to a new cultural form with a distinct ‘culinary grammar’ (AUTHOR 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 AUTHOR (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.

## **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 which illustrates issues of far 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 connexion 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 archetypical 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 being usually included. Tomatoes are a very common addition as well 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 considered ‘authentic’ additions. Of other meats, chicken is the most common one, 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 used, 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 very 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(/au) jambon’. Given the weakness of the etymology, one can call 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 no evidence for a noteworthy Valencian presence in Louisiana nor for the consumption of paella in the Canaries during the relevant period.

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. 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 (Hall 1992). 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 connexion 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.

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 Connexion

Remarkable is the fact that these amateur etymologies have been advanced and 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 (1878) entry in his Provençal dictionary for ‘jambalaya’ was noted already in the 1930’s (Read 1933). 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 traveled 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>1</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 connexion 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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. 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. Nonetheless, the possibility of ‘jambalaya’ being (re-)introduced to Provence from Louisiana remains; I will treat that question in detail elsewhere.

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:

**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.

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.

## 5 French Connexion 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 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 (2007:103-105) 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. 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>2</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>3</sup>

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.«

— 1846 (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«

— 1878 (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, p. 256), we find another related word, *jhibbëlôto*, 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>4</sup> This form also appears in Azaïs (1876:337) as *gimbeloto* and is

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<sup>2</sup> The sources are: for the dialect of Toulon, Arnoux 1940; for Nice, Compan 1967:125; for Menton, Andrews 1995.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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 *jhibbëlêto* from It. *ciambella* (cf. Prov. *gimbeleto*, *jambeleto*, Fr. *gimblette*). The complex suffix has as first element a

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.

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

In AUTHOR 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 American vegetables allowed for the creation of the ratatouille-like dishes (p. 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 *jhimbĕloto*, 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 featured tiny

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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 of leftover meat which potentially connects this dish to the category of ‘bad stew’ (commonly also referred to in old sources as *ratatouia/ratatouille*).



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 pejoratives, which is appropriate for a peasant stew and corresponds perfectly with the etymological evidence for the Neapolitan *ciambotta*, etc. discussed in my 2006 paper.

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

jamb-al-aya	*jamb-al-alha
jamb-in-eto	*jamb-in-eta
jhimb-ël-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. AUTHOR 2013a, 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 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**

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>5</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 realised that rice fields were also breeding grounds for malaria and a strain on water resources.<sup>6</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 jambalaya 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>7</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 ‘jambalaya’.<sup>8</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 marginalisation of the word ‘jambalaya’ in Provençal. Southern French meat stews of the sort known as *carbounado*

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<sup>5</sup> E.g. 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.”

<sup>6</sup> 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.”

<sup>7</sup> 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 fricot” (‘a soupo courto is not a soup but a stew’); the recipe offered there is stretched with pasta.

<sup>8</sup> 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) and Azaïs’ (1876) dictionaries also gloss *soupo courto* as a dish of *abatis*.

were also stretched with rice and this is attested as well 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 ‘jambalaya’ was unknown or foreign. There are two counterpoints to be made here. First, a very 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 ‘jambalaya’ 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 (Brasseur 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 ‘soupe 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), 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 characterised 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>9</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 *Lagniappe*: How the Dish ‘Hopping John’ Got Its Name**

Bearing in mind this just-so story for the name ‘jambalaya’, let us turn to the name of another iconic regional dish of the American South, namely, that of Hopping John, originally a supremely simple preparation of field or cow peas, cured pork, and rice, which is attested as a popular dish of the Carolina Low Country since the 1830s. Hopping John is currently identified more broadly with Southern cookery and with Soul Food and has gained in popularity outside Southern and African-American contexts especially in its association with New Year’s Day feasts as a dish that brings good fortune in the coming year. Modern versions are typically elaborated with various aromatics and

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

seasonings and black-eyed peas are the legume most-widely used today; in the Low Country there remain those who prefer local legume varieties and relatively simple recipes which strongly resemble the first one recorded, namely that of Sarah Rutledge (1847:83) which includes only bacon, ‘red peas’, and rice and for seasoning salt, pepper and (optionally) fresh mint (cf. Thorne 1996:283ff.; Taylor 2011).

From the earliest literary references of the mid-nineteenth century it is clear that, although the dish was already consumed widely in the South, it was still closely associated with the lowest economic strata of society and in particular with African-Americans and the poorest whites who shared many cultural elements with them.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, strong reasons for believing that Hopping John arose specifically in slave communities: the American dish not only has close analogues in many parts of the Americas where enslaved Africans were demographically and culturally important but it also has close analogues in parts of West Africa whence many slaves were taken and, indeed, the varieties of legumes most characteristic of these dishes are of African origin (cf. Twitty 2012); similar preparations were, moreover, institutionalised in a sense by slaveholders seeking foods familiar and palatable to their workforce that were also nutritious and cheap (AUTHOR 2016a:6).

While the West African heritage of Hopping John — be it direct, indirect, or, as I suspect, both — seems indisputable, the origins of its name are obscure; it is, in fact, the sort of name that usually resists etymologising, bearing no discernable connection to its presumable African origins nor any obvious one to the ingredients, cooking method, etc. In other words, it appears to have been the product of the linguistic imagination and folksy poetics of some anonymous person in a long forgotten situation. Naturally, some have been inspired to fill in the gap and invent possible but unconvincing post-factum just-so stories and the most widely-circulated etymologies are of this sort. For example, one asserts that there was a crippled African American who sold the dish on the streets of Charleston and it was his name that was transferred to the dish; another claims the name derives from the behaviour of children who would hop around the dinner table in anticipation of the beloved dish. More formal attempts to provide an etymology have been no less unconvincing. A widely cited one vaguely asserts that ‘Hopping John’ is somehow a ‘corruption’ of the French *pois pigeons* (‘pigeon peas’). A particularly infelicitous attempt at an etymology for ‘Hopping John’ was proffered by Hess in her otherwise outstanding book on the Carolina rice kitchen (1992:98ff.): through pseudo-linguistic legerdemain she derives ‘Hopping John’ from a fanciful Hindi-Malay compound *\*bahatta kāchang* of her own invention (AUTHOR 2013b:153-4).

One of the close analogues of the Anglophone South’s ‘Hopping John’ belongs to the cookery of the Gulf Coast and is called in Louisiana French *jambalaya au congri(s)*, that is, ‘jambalaya with congri(s)’; the dish is also called in Louisiana French Creole *jambalaya defèv* (‘bean jambalaya’) and simply *kongri* (Valdman 1998), conceivably made with any kind of bean but traditionally made specifically with field peas. This term *congri* is nowadays best known from Cuban Spanish where it is the name of the staple rice-and-bean dish of the eastern part of the island (*congrí*) but it is also a dialect word in

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<sup>10</sup> Hopping John as a good but humble dish known to the white elite, see Gilman 1838:124; as a beloved Sunday treat for slaves, see Stroyer 1885:11; as a beloved dish among poor whites, see Olmsted 1856:506.

Haiti where it is an adjective meaning ‘with beans’ (AUTHOR 2016a:3-4). Various unsatisfactory African etymologies for this word have been proposed but in 2014 I presented in conference papers a new French etymology that better fits the linguistic and historical facts: it is in origin the Haitian Creole form of the French adjective *congru* extracted from the phrase *la portion congrue*, meaning ‘the minimum appropriate portion’ and by extension an ‘unfairly meager portion’; the Haitian use must have arisen in the context of plantation kitchens where the usual ration of a basic starch (corn, millet, cassava, rice) was occasionally augmented with boiled legumes. The presence of the word in Cuba is then surely the result of the diaspora of white landowners and their slaves from Saint-Domingue in the wake of the first wave of the Haitian Revolution (early 1790s), many of whom settled for a time in eastern Cuba before moving elsewhere, including to Louisiana; the Creole word *congri* may have been introduced to the Gulf Coast in this manner, though it may have spread there earlier, as the two French colonies were in regular contact. In any event, the Gulf Coast use of *jambalaya au congri* and *jambalaya defèv* would seem to indicate that the term ‘jambalaya’ had shifted conceptually from a specific kind of fowl/offal stew which could be stretched with a starch to the combination of a seasoned stew with rice added before the coining of these names for the rice and field pea dish.

Early references to *jambalaya au congri* are far fewer than those to *jambalaya tout court* but a recipe appears in one of the first regional cookbooks, namely the Picayune’s publication (1901:182 ;Table 1:xii) which is composed only of rice, cowpeas, salted meat and a little ham. Also noteworthy here is the entry for ‘jumballaya a la Creole’ in Eustis’ recipe collection (1903:13; Table 1:xiv), to which the following comment is added: “Hopping John is made in the same way with small pieces of fried ham, fried sausages, to which you add some cow peas that have been partially boiled. The St. Domingo Congris is like the Hopping John.” Eustis, though born in France, was raised in New Orleans and her mother was a native French Louisianan; later in life, she moved to South Carolina and perhaps there first encountered Hopping John, which for her was essentially the same dish as the ‘congris’ she knew, presumably through contacts with refugees in the US from Saint-Domingue. It is also clear that for her *congri*/Hopping John was conceptually related to *jambalaya*, presumably on account of the fact that these dishes involved the cooking of rice in the same pot with the stew involved.

One of the very earliest recipes that appears under a variant of the name ‘Hopping John’ is, in fact, not a recipe for the cowpea/bacon/rice preparation but is rather the very first known recipe for *jambalaya* (Table 1:i), which was published in the *American Agriculturalist* in 1849 and contributed by Solon Robinson of Alabama (cf. Sigal 2007: 108). Robinson’s *jambalaya* is quite simple, featuring a stew of chicken with onion and red pepper and stretched with the obligatory rice, and though the recipe’s name is given as ‘Hopping Johnny’, it is also glossed parenthetically with the expected name ‘*jambalaya*’. How can we explain this seemingly bizarre equation of the two names?

It is of central significance that Robinson was writing from Alabama. Throughout colonial times and on into the nineteenth century, Alabama was a region of contact between the Francophone community of the Gulf Coast and the ever-expanding southern Anglophone community from the Carolinas and Georgia. In this regard, we should remember that Mobile was the original capital of French Louisiana and, though the French population was never large, its presence in the south of Alabama was long-lived,

where a black French Creole-speaking community survived as late as the first half of the twentieth century (Marshall 1991:74). There are strong reasons to believe that dishes of field or cow peas with rice (and cured pork) were known among African-Americans on both sides of the French-English linguistic divide, as elsewhere in the former English colonies (Jamaica, Bahamas), where this dish is known simply as ‘rice and peas’, and so we might conjecture that in the Anglophone South the dish also originally had no distinctive name.<sup>11</sup> Thus, when French Creole and English-speaking blacks encountered one another in Alabama and recognized the essential identity of their rice and pea dishes, the Creole-speakers’ ‘jambalaya au congris’ stood out. Under such circumstances, a typical outcome would be that the English-speakers would simply borrow the more colourful French Creole name of the dish, perhaps simplifying it by using either just ‘jambalaya’ or ‘conгри’ but, of course, the Southern English name for rice and peas is neither of those but rather ‘Hopping John’.

Given the above background, we can now present an explanation for the name ‘Hopping John’. If we recall the just-so story for the invention of the dish and the name *jambalaya* from the phrase *Jean, balayez!*, I believe we can see a similar, intentionally humorous, folk etymology at work but one which involves both reanalysis and then translation, much as we suggested for the replacement of *jambalaia* by (*ragoût d’escoubilles* in Languedoc. I suggest that ‘Hopping John’ is derived from a jocular reanalysis of *jambalaya* as the Louisiana French Creole phrase *Jean balé*, which we gloss as ‘John the dancer’ or ‘John who dances’. We might also gloss this phrase as ‘dancing John’ or, to use an archaic synonym of ‘dance’, as ‘Hopping John’, as in the phrase ‘Let’s go to the hop!’

This would not be a very strong explanation of ‘Hopping John’ unless there were some motivation for Alabaman French Creole speakers and their Anglophone neighbours to associate the dish of cow peas, pork, and rice with dancing; fortunately, there are excellent reasons to do so. To begin, one recalls that while whites also ate *jambalaya au congris* and Hopping John, there is clear evidence that this sort of rice and bean dish was particularly associated with and popular among the slave communities of Louisiana, Saint-Domingue and the American South. Slave narratives from the southeast attest to the popularity of Hopping John and to its common association with social events such as ‘cornshuckings’ and Sunday evening gatherings where music and dance were central activities. In the New Orleans area, dancing by slaves was by law restricted to Sundays (Fearon 1819:277) when, in addition to more purely social gatherings, there were also voodoo services, most famously at Congo Square but surely realised similarly elsewhere, including Mobile. Music and dancing were central in the practice of voodoo, as were ritual offerings of food, including specifically *jambalaya au congris*, to various gods.<sup>12</sup> In

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<sup>11</sup> Also widely encountered is ‘peas and rice’. In the Bahamas there exists, moreover, the name ‘Hopping John’ for a related dish but I must treat the significance of this evidence elsewhere.

<sup>12</sup> Tallant (1946:22ff.) mentions ‘congris’ no less than six times in the course of his descriptions of voodoo practices in New Orleans, both as an offering at ceremonies and for other purposes; clearly, the dish had important religious associations and this is in my opinion likely also indirectly reflected in the association of Hopping John with New Year’s celebrations and good fortune in the coming year in the Anglophone South.

very general terms, there were noteworthy similarities in the expression of African cultural elements — both profane and sacred — through music, dance, and food at Sunday gatherings of slaves (and freed blacks) in the Anglophone South and in the French colonies of Louisiana and Saint-Domingue.

But were that not enough, there was also a direct motivation for speakers of Gulf Coast French Creole to associate the specific name ‘jambalaya’ with dancing, a reason to come up with the aforementioned reanalysis to *Jean balé* ‘dancing or hopping John’. Throughout French colonial America, there was an extremely widely known and popular character of folk tales whose name was ‘Petit Jean’, and stories featuring this figure have been recorded from the north-west of Canada to the Caribbean. In addition, there was during the colonial period a song that was associated with the hero of the folk tales, a song which was widely known in the American French colonies, especially where there were significant influences from the south of France, as was the case in both Saint-Domingue and Louisiana.<sup>13</sup> The name of this song in French is *Jean Petit qui danse*, that is literally, ‘Little John who dances’ or, put another way, ‘Hopping Johnny’.

Yet further support for my claim that it was a close association of jambalaya (au congri) with festive gatherings of African Americans centrally featuring music and dance which led to the coining of the term ‘Hopping John’ is my etymology of the word ‘jamboree’, which according to all standard dictionaries is of “unknown origin.” Indeed, in my view, both ‘Hopping John’ and ‘jamboree’ were likely coined in roughly the same place and period, namely in southern Alabama near or a little after the start of the nineteenth century, in a context of increasing Anglo-French Creole contact and at a time which would allow for the prior creation of the name ‘jambalaia au congri’ after the influx of Saint-Domingue refugees to Louisiana and also leave ample time for the term ‘Hopping John’ to diffuse through the southeast before its first attestations. ‘Jamboree’ is then the word ‘jambalaya’ borrowed and phonologically adapted into the English of Anglophone African-American communities of the southeast, clearly akin to some variants of ‘jambalaya’ attested from areas peripheral to the French-speaking Gulf Coast or from non-French-speakers, most notably ‘jumberlie’ and ‘jambolin’ (Table 1: vi, xv, from Alabama and Mississippi/Missouri), which are phonologically very close to ‘jamboree’, still with the original culinary sense but closely related to the form(s) which coalesced as ‘jamboree’. In support of this claim, we note that some of the earliest attestations of the word ‘jamboree’, generally extremely racist in nature, render it clear that the word was in origin associated with African-American social gatherings where music, dance and revelry were noteworthy, e.g. (McKee 1873:6):<sup>14</sup>

Massa told us to-day,  
There was no work, so we might play,  
So with the bones and the tambo we,  
Hoop up the dance and jambaree.

In origin, a jamboree was a festive gathering of African Americans where jambalaya (au congri), a.k.a Hopping John, was consumed.

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<sup>13</sup> Noteworthy is the report of a slave-owner in Saint-Domingue having his slaves taught this song (David & Delrieu 1984:165).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Angelo 1880:142, replete with offensive language. The word ‘jamboree’ must have spread to the north of the US in the wake of the Civil War.



As stated above, Hopping John is undeniably a dish of African origins, directly and indirectly, in spirit and (in part) regarding ingredients, but its name, derived in a complex way from the southern French ‘jambalaya’, points also to its status as an element of the Atlantic World and of the Afro-European cultural mix that gives rise to so much of American culture. The Occitan tale told in the rather macabre song of Little John being tortured by amputation of bits of his body — his crime, stealing some food to feed his starving family — resonated sadly enough among the chronically underfed and habitually tortured African slaves in the Americas.

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