

Awaken to Reveillon holiday dinners

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An image illustrates a traditional 19th-century French reveillon. (From the culinary encyclopedia, *Larousse Gastronomique*, 1938)

What would lure you to a reveillon dinner this year? Seared Crawfish Ravioli? Oyster and Leek Stuffed Flounder? Bowfin Caviar? This year, 48 restaurants in New Orleans are hosting elaborate four-course dinners to celebrate the “awakening” of a new year.

Interestingly, in the early European days of this tradition, reveillon dinners were reminiscent of today's IHOP restaurant breakfast. Vanilla porridge, sausage and waffles were made as simple meals after a long day of fasting before Christmas mass. Even after the tradition was passed down in New Orleans within the Creole tradition, the meal was relatively humble.

“As Christmas became Christmas as we know it today, and restaurants evolved, reveillons were revived as part of celebration,” explains Susan Tucker, expert foodie and curator of books and records at the [Nadine Vorhoff Library](#) of the Newcomb College Institute on the Tulane University uptown campus, which includes a historic [culinary collection](#).

In fact, the tradition had vanished from New Orleans between World War I and the 1930s. The term was rediscovered and defined in *The New Orleans City Guide* (1938), a Federal Writers' Project of President Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration.

In the 1980s, as part of an economic push for tourism, French Quarter Festivals pulled from the WPA guide to reintroduce the meal into wintertime festivities. Organizers turned to local experts, including Richard Stewart of the Gumbo Shop and historian Anne Masson, to reconstruct a traditional Creole menu.

Today, chefs have continued to tweak the meal to reflect their own tastes.

“Today the dinner is special because we have named it *reveillon*,” explains Tucker. “The name recalls the language and tradition behind the meal.”

She pulls from a favorite encyclopedia, the *Larousse Gastronomique*, to further define “reveillon” as “a new watch.”

So if you celebrate a reveillon this year, in the French Quarter or at home, keep in mind the idea of a new period of watchfulness ? of cuisine, taste and the evolution of tradition.

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