

## Ode to Plum Street Snoballs

by Donn Cooper

Nothing on a blistering, subtropical day could beat a snoball at Plum Street Snoballs, especially with your grandfather. In my case it was my step-grandfather, Francis Favaloro, a man who, for a boy reared in the New South of North Georgia, symbolized New Orleans' Old World exoticism. (His family had manufactured tomato paste in Sicily, where a pope had given them their coat-of-arms.) On those humid days, after the final bell at St. Andrew, he and I would walk to Plum Street, and as we made our way over the sidewalks ruptured by muscular roots, he would carefully describe the city to me. I never could understand the Byzantine network of pumps keeping the neighborhoods dry. But I learned Brocato's had been selling the best cannoli for almost a century. For muffulettas, there was a shop off Carrollton near the levee; and the best shrimp po-boys, well....

I think it was his supreme knowledge of the best things in New Orleans that inspired Francis to take me to Plum Street, which is what everyone called it. He certainly knew the menu. Like most kids, I was devoted to favorite foods and had little imagination in my appetite. My abiding allegiance was to Plum Street's velvety chocolate offering. But I would discover there were options better than a snoball sopping with juices. Who knew you could order half-chocolate, half-spearmint—or whatever odd marriage you might dream? Francis demonstrated his rational system for consuming the pair: a spoonful of one, the other, then both together. Repeat. I often went for more impetuous alternatives, hollowing out the chocolate slowly and waiting for the spearmint or strawberry to crash into the other side. But the combinations didn't end there, and the hundreds of new flavor possibilities could be overwhelming. What was this? Canary-colored flavored ice cream was just as good as chocolate. What about nectar cream or ice coffee or popeye (whatever that was)? What about topping it off with homemade condensed milk?

For the optimum experience, it was vital to beat the school rush; otherwise, you'd be left in a sweaty line running out onto Burdette Street. The heat was magnified by the rumbling invitation of the ice machine within and the constant exit of patrons blasted with synaesthetic pleasure. Inside, the counter was only ten feet across, and once you stepped through the screen door, the wait was cool and short. You ordered the size first. Then you moved down to pick from shelves of syrups, dry-mouthed as the teenage jockey swashed the juice until the ice dome crumbled. Next you were through the other screen and into the sunlight, perhaps reclining underneath the awaiting parasol. Or if you hadn't been blinded suddenly with ecstasy, you admired an urban dilapidation so meticulous and baroque it was art.

Plum Street's particular cleverness was to serve their goods in Chinese paper take-out baskets, which were only slightly less porous than colanders. Armed with straw and spoon, you felt charged with a sacred mission: to retrieve every last particle before it dripped through the cracks and soaked the skirt of napkins. It demanded swiftness and agility, the grit to push through a monstrous brain freeze, and the keenest grasp of snoball physics. If a chunk dislodged at the top, you had to read it as if you were spotting the fault line of an avalanche. When I was really deft, I could coax the snoball into a blissful sludge of cold sugars at the bottom. Francis would nod at me in approval. And together we would walk to his orange Camaro, two friends who had touched New Orleans' sweet, evanescent Grail.

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Plum Street Snoballs is one of the few stands opening their doors every spring to purvey the South's most exquisite, warm-weather delicacy. Each stand riffs on the genius of Ernest Hansen, Sr., who invented his incomparable Sno-Bliz machine in 1934. Attacking a block of ice like a roidy meat slicer, the Sno-Bliz spit out shaved granules as soft as cotton candy, all deposited directly into a waiting cup. Hansen had been dissatisfied with the local Italian ice vendors' untidy habit of digging their fingers in the goods. After some inspiration with high-speed pulleys, he could now serve his children a cold and hygienic alternative. Hansen's original machine, a constant reminder of the do-it-yourself brilliance of his tinkering, is still cutting away at the family's Tchoupitoulas Street stand.

The various improvisations on Hansen's invention, however, haven't made it outside of New Orleans. Perhaps it's because the insipid, bludgeoned snocone has already taken hold in the rest of the South.

Perhaps it has something more to do with that particular conflict New Orleans has always had with the rest of Dixie: For the city's French Catholics, those "Americans"—more worried about their bank accounts than their taste buds—have always lacked a sensibility for the finer things. And the snoball is indeed just that: a rapture of pure spring water, cane syrup, and secret ingredients held close to the vest for half a century.

Frankly, the natives would prefer to keep the snoball under house arrest. Inside the city, there's always been pride that New Orleans may be the last bastion of taste. Locals are happy to keep Satusmas and Sazerac cocktails on a leash; add to them the local bakery's buttermilk drops, the frigid glass bottles of Barq's root beer, the hellish spices soaked through the corn and red potatoes and leaking onto the newspapers draped over the tables at a crawfish boil. And there's always been the underlying supposition that the Crescent City might be the last real place left in the country: a true city built on neighborhoods, on families, and on generations. In New Orleans, at least before Katrina, those public assets that make up a vibrant cultural life—culinary and musical—were always where they should be: just where your parents and grandparents had left them.

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