

Before Foodies, There was Solari's

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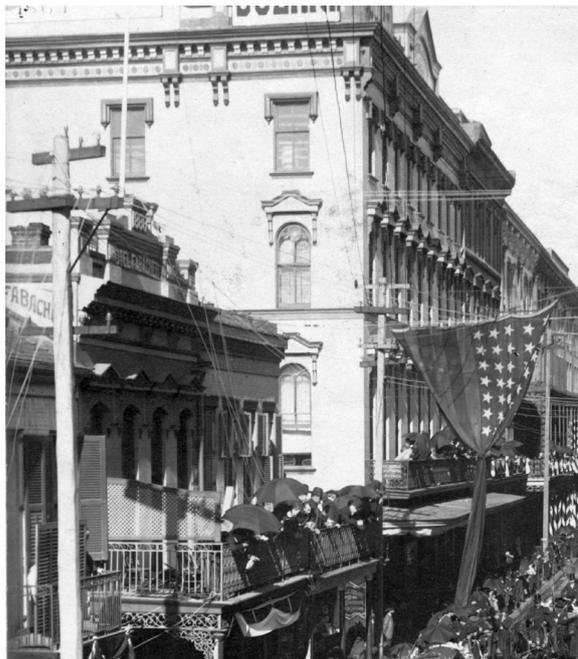
THE YEARS 1863-1864 were not an opportune time to launch an import business in New Orleans, much less for fancy foods. War raged across the land; federal troops occupied the region; Union warships blockaded Southern ports; and few residents had the disposal income for edible niceties. Yet somehow, an insurance executive named Joseph B. Solari managed at this time to open a grocery specializing in fine imported foods.

Solari was a new member of a small but prosperous antebellum community of Italian-born merchants who stewarded the trade of Sicilian fruits and delicacies between Mediterranean and Caribbean ports. By 1828, enough Italians resided in the northern apogee of that trade circuit, New Orleans, to become a visible element of local society. Visitor Charles Sealsfield, for example, described the city's diverse population as including "some Italians, amongst whom are several respectable houses" (commercial firms). Likewise, Edward Henry Durell, writing in 1835 under the penname Henry Didimus, noted the Italian merchants in the French Market vending "sundry heaps of West India fruit, [the] Italian's staple in trade." The 1860 census enumerated 893 Italian-born heads-of-households in New Orleans, implying a total Italian- or Sicilian-American population of roughly two thousand. Many, perhaps most, made their livelihoods in the city's food industry.

The Solari family, members of the professional class, first emigrated from Genoa in northern Italy to Iberville Parish in southern Louisiana in the late 1840s and eventually resettled in New Orleans. After Joseph B. Solari established the grocery in 1863 or 1864 (accounts vary), the patriarch shared operations of the enterprise with his sons Angelo and Joseph junior, while he himself became active in the Italian Benevolent Association.

The two brothers made fine business partners. Angelo's forte, according to a 1927 retrospective, was management and customer relations, whereas Joseph's was "adventur[ing] into far countries...for all that was rare and fine in things to eat and drink." Leveraging the sons' compatible skills with their father's tutelage, and despite the economic malaise of the postbellum era, the Solari

family conducted a bustling enterprise of "toothsome morsels" at their shop on Royal Street at the corner of St. Louis and, after an 1870 relocation, at 45 (now 229) Royal Street. A glimpse of their enterprise comes from an 1872 advertisement in the *New Orleans Times*, which extolled "ale, porter, bis-



cuits, Cross & Blackwell pickles, Spanish olives, [and] Holland cheese" amid "an extensive and well selected stock of foreign groceries and delicacies."

Two years later, the shop — by this time known as the A. M. and J. Solari Grocery Company — announced in the *Daily Picayune* the arrival of "500 cases of Italian macaroni and vermicelli, 100 cases of Swiss condensed milk," and dozens of cases of Swiss, Roquefort, Parmesan and pineapple cheese. Such ads circulated regularly, and Solari's grew in renown. Around this time, the company moved its operation to 4 St. Charles Avenue, but in 1877 returned to Royal at Customhouse (now Iberville), with a second location at 75 Camp Street near Poydras.

Later that year, Solari's became one of the first New Orleans businesses to adopt an exciting new technology. "In order to facilitate communication between his store...and the one at 75 Camp Street," reported the *Daily Picayune* in October 1877, Solari's "has established a line of wires between the stores, and a telephone in each." The experiment was a success, and orders of shipments were placed between the stores — perhaps New Orleans' first-ever food delivery by phone. The family celebrated with a feast: "In honor of the christening[,] an elegant collation was spread. With that congeniality characteristic of the host, [Joseph] Solari extended the hospitalities of his store with the "laissez aller" of a man of the world, and entertained his guests in handsome style."

By the early 1880s, the Solari brothers prospered at their flagship Royal Street store and a new wholesale business at 22 Magazine. In June 1884, a fire ravaged the Royal location, "destroy[ing] one of the largest and most varied [food stocks] in the United States," according to the *Daily Picayune*. Because the wholesale warehouse was separate, and possibly because of their father's prior experience in the insurance industry, Solari's promptly reopened in a rented space across the street, 102 Customhouse.

LEFT: Solari's on December 11, 1889, during the funeral march for Jefferson Davis. Courtesy Library of Congress
ABOVE: Solari's on Royal corner Iberville in 1956. Courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection, Acc. No. 1994.94.2.960.



The disaster opened an opportunity for expansion and improvement. In 1885, the family commissioned architect Thomas Sully to design a four-story corner storehouse. Sully's designs, now in the Southeastern Architectural Archives at Tulane University, show a high-ceiling retail space on the ground floor and office and residential space above, although evidence suggests the upper floors were mostly used for merchandise storage. A glass monitor on the roof let in natural light, which filtered to the floors below via centralized openings. The façade was distinctive for its ornate cornice and label-style lintels, but otherwise resembled many other commercial buildings built along American main streets in the late-Victorian era.

The new building opened in 1887, and despite a sequence of setbacks — the deaths of the founders during 1890 to 1893, a small fire in 1892, and a change of ownership in 1902 — Solari's became a cornerstone of New Orleans' famed epicurean culture.

The company expanded into the space of the old Fabacher Hotel on Iberville in 1911, while also operating a second branch on St. Charles Avenue at Louisiana for uptown clientele. The firm subsequently launched an ambitious marketing campaign: "There's an appetizing air about SOLARI'S that you don't find in every grocery house," read a 1912 newspaper ad; "The stock is appetizing. It's clean. Fresh. Full of variety. Goods from the Southland, the North, East and West, and all foreign lands." Sensing their sophisticated customers "would not feel entirely at home in a store whose fixtures and fittings were reminiscent of the time of the crinoline," the management massively updated Solari's circa-1887 interior in 1926-1927 to include, among other things, a marble lunch counter, soda fountain, and cooking facilities for hot ready-to-eat meals in addition to candies, liquors, coffees, cheeses, meats and other specialties.

In this regard, Solari's may be viewed as a predecessor of the "foodie" emporia in vogue today, such as Martin's Wine Cellar, St. Roch Market, Dryades Public Market and the renovated French Market, not to mention the "Eataly" marketplaces popping up worldwide. Such places offer a wide variety of specialty food and drink for both retail sale as well as on-premises consumption, all within a capacious and stylized space conducive to socializing and lingering. Solari's was by no means the city's first or only example of this concept; there were numerous food emporia with lunch counters. But Solari's was the biggest, best, longest-lived, and most famous; it was a hit in the 1800s and 1900s, and had it survived, it would have been a hit in the 2000s.

The shift of the French Quarter from a residential neighborhood to a tourist destination led to Solari's decline. Because of a 1946 change in the jurisdiction of the Vieux Carré Commission, 201 Royal lost its official protection and became prone to the whims of its ownership, which in 1960 shifted to a group of businessmen. With parking pressure ever increasing in the French Quarter, the new owners saw Solari's upper floors as a waste of valuable space. With no way to retrofit the 1887 structure, they decided instead to raze it in 1961 and replace in early 1962 with a building "reminiscent of a store of the 1860s," as the *Times-Picayune* generously reported.

What resulted was a rather ersatz garage with retail space on the ground floor, including a wine cellar and a "natural cave" for aging cheese, similar to

the ones in France." Solari's reopened therein, but because it no longer offered self-service, and because there were fewer French Quarter residents and ever more purchasing power in suburban supermarkets, the new operation never quite achieved profitability.

Solari's closed permanently after a Texas company named Diversa, Inc. bought the building in September 1965, putting the famed business at the top of a list of other beloved downtown enterprises that would die over the next generation, including D.H. Holmes, Kolb's, Krauss, and Maison Blanche.

Years later, epicureanism returned to 201 Royal. It came in the form of Mr. B's Bistro, launched by a family — the Brennan's — even more prominent in the city's food scene than was the Solari family a century ago. When Mr. B's Bistro first opened in 1979, it billed itself as "a European-style bistro in the French Quarter," a description that fairly well described Solari's from 1863 to 1965. It's done a thriving business ever since.



ABOVE: Solari's in the late 1940s. Courtesy Richard Campanella, NOPSI-Energy Collection **TOP:** Inside Solari's in the 1940s. Courtesy The Charles L. Franck Studio Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection, Acc. No. 1979.325.39.

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