

The Evolution of Tabasco Sauce: A Generational Journey

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Many of you know that I love to cook. I'm not ashamed to admit this. In fact, I have been cooking as long as I can remember. One of the things I like about cooking is experimenting with different spices and herbs and how they enhance the taste of food. Condiments can alter way foods taste as well. One of my favorite condiments, one that I ALWAYS have in my kitchen and a spare in my pantry, is Tabasco sauce. Gentlemen, tonight's paper is "The Evolution of Tabasco Sauce: A Generational Journey."

Time was one could tell the length of a marriage by the level of Tabasco sauce in the bottle! Not anymore--the distinctive flavor of Tabasco sauce has firmly established it as a staple ingredient in contemporary cooking. But most people do not realize that there are almost 160 years of history in every little red bottle, going back to the Civil War.

The story begins with Edmund McIlhenny, a native of Maryland and of Irish and Scottish descent. He migrated to Louisiana in 1840 and entered into the banking profession in New Orleans and became quite successful. Two decades later came the Civil War and he and his family fled from New Orleans to his wife's family plantation on Avery Island, and later fled to Texas after Union troops invaded.

After the war, Edmund McIlhenny returned to the island. He and his wife, Mary Eliza Avery McIlhenny, became the patriarch and matriarch to generations of McIlhenny descendants who still own and operate the closely held Tabasco Company.

It all began on Avery Island, one of five islands rising in mystical fashion above the flat Louisiana Gulf Coast. The island literally sits atop a mountain of solid salt, once supplying quantities of this valuable commodity to the Confederate states, but when Union forces invaded the island, the salt works were total destroyed.

Prior to the war, McIlhenny, an avid gardener, had been carefully nurturing a special variety of red capsicum from Mexico. He delighted in the spicy flavor of these special peppers which had, surprisingly, survived the general devastation of the island.

Allow me to digress a moment. Tabasco sauce is made from a variety of pepper called *Capsicum frutescens* known for centuries in Latin America. The first written reference to a capsicum pepper was made in 1493 by Dr. Chauca, the physician on Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the New World. Dr. Chauca reported that the Indians used a spice made from these peppers. Although Columbus's search for black pepper was fruitless, it was Columbus who introduced capsicum peppers to the Old World.

McIlhenny experimented with making a pepper sauce by crushing the ripest, reddest peppers adding half coffee cup of Avery Island salt per gallon and letting the concoction age in crock jars. When thirty days had passed, he added the best French wine vinegar and, occasionally stirring each batch by hand, let the mixture age for another thirty days so the flavors could intermingle.

After straining the sauce, he filled small cologne-type bottles with a sprinkler fitting. The bottles were then corked and dipped in green sealing wax, pre-dating Maker's Mark red wax bottling by almost 85 years!!

"That Famous Sauce Mr. McIlhenny Makes" lent welcome excitement to the monotonous diet of the Reconstruction South and before long it was in such demand that he decided to market it commercially. McIlhenny, in 1868, sent 350 bottles of his pepper sauce under the trademark Tabasco to a carefully selected group of food wholesalers and to his delight, the orders poured in.

Tabasco sauce is still made much as it was first made by Edmund McIlhenny. Ripe peppers are crushed immediately after harvest. Trained pickers select only the reddest, ripest peppers, aided by “la petite baton rouge” (little red stick) that is painted the precise red color desired. The peppers are mixed with Avery Island salt and aged in white oak barrels for up to three years, many of which are Kentucky bourbon barrels that have been repurposed, as bourbon barrels can only by law be used once. The peppers are then drained, blended with high-quality, all-natural vinegar and stirred for several weeks. Finally, the sauce is strained, and sent out to America and the world.

In 1890, Edmund McIlhenny died and John Avery McIlhenny took the reins of the then modest pepper sauce business. John was the eldest son of Edmund and Mary and was a master of marketing and promotion. He toured the country meeting with storeowners and promoting Tabasco with a barrage of billboards, demonstrations, giveaways, and even a burlesque opera, first staged by Harvard’s Hasty Pudding Club. He bought the rights to and later staged it on Broadway in New York. A veteran of the Rough Riders’ siege of San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, John left the company in 1906 to accept an appointment to the Civil Service Commission at the behest of his good friend, President Teddy Roosevelt.

At the turn of the Century, Edward Avery McIlhenny, Edmund’s second son and a naturalist, returned from an expedition to the Arctic and realized that the snowy egret had almost disappeared from the Louisiana swamps, being victims of plumes on women’s hats. After searching for weeks, he found eight young egrets, which he took back to Avery Island and raised in a large cage. He released them in the fall to migrate across the Gulf of Mexico. Six returned the following spring forming the nucleus of a bird colony that now numbers in the tens of

thousands. Over his life, Ned, as he was known, banded nearly 200,000 birds, crucial in mapping migratory routes of birds along the Mississippi flyway.

After John Avery McIlhenny's appointment to the Civil Service Board, Ned succeeded his brother as President of the McIlhenny Company. He was a visionary conservationist who persuaded the Rockefeller Foundation to give Louisiana 166,664 acres of marshland as wintering grounds for the millions for the millions of migrating waterfowl following the Mississippi Flyway. He also created the Jungle Gardens on Avery Island and when oil was discovered in 1942, he insisted that the integrity of the island's appearance and its role as wildlife refuge be preserved.

Walter McIlhenny was the next in succession of family members to head the company. He was an active member of the exclusive Chevaliers du Tastevin, a fraternity of Burgundy wine connoisseurs and carrying on the tradition of Edmund McIlhenny who loved to entertain and dine well. He assembled a formidable collection of cookbooks and counted among his many friends culinary greats such as Clementine Paddleford, James Beard and Craig Claiborne. His kitchen was a huge square room with a large six by nine-foot butcher block table in the center with a huge assortment of gleaming copper pots hanging overhead. At his own choosing, his dining table seated only eight people so that all could participate in the dinner conversation. He personally selected the menu and the wines.

Although he built a new pepper sauce plant and introduced modern management and marketing and sales to over one hundred countries, Walter resisted pressure to sell the company or change method of making the sauce. He retained the lengthy quality-minded process from the old family recipe including aging the pepper mash for three years. He always went into the pepper fields to personally weigh the day's harvest, checked each barrel of aged pepper mash for

aroma and color and sampled every batch of finished sauce. That tradition is still carried on at the McIlhenny Company today.

Although it might seem simple, the process of growing peppers and making Tabasco sauce is as much an art as a science. The company continues the family tradition of personal involvement in every aspect of producing Tabasco sauce. Each fall they select the very best pepper seeds by walking the fields row by row and flipping a piece of twine on each plant selected. They look for color, shape, growth pattern, tagging about twelve hundred bushes in the process. From these plants are harvested about seventy pounds of seeds. Twenty pounds of seeds are stored in a New Iberia Bank vault as insurance against possible future crop losses and fifty are stored in a vault at company headquarters on Avery Island.

Until the late 1960's, ALL of the peppers were produced on Avery Island. Today more than 90 percent of the pepper crop is grown and harvested, under the company's direct control and supervision in Honduras, Colombia, and other Central and South American countries. The pepper mash is then shipped to Avery Island, where it aged and then processed into sauce.

From the beginning, the British have appreciated Tabasco sauce. In 1868, American wholesalers first shipped Tabasco to England and by 1872, Edmund McIlhenny opened an office in London to handle the orders pouring in from Europe. England's love affair with Tabasco sauce nearly came to an end in 1932. Members of Parliament, fond of French wines and Cuban cigars, were also partial to Tabasco sauce which was served in the House of Commons dining rooms.

When the British Government embarked on an isolationist "Buy British" campaign, Parliament, banned the purchase of Tabasco sauce. The ensuing cries of protest from the MP's

were dubbed “The Tabasco Tempest” by bemused observers, but ignored by the Government. Inevitably, “Buy British” gave way to “Buy Tabasco” and the little red bottle appeared back on Parliament dining room tables, to the delight of Members of Parliament.

From at least as early as John Avery McIlhenny’s association with President Theodore Roosevelt, Tabasco sauce has often been a favorite of heads of state and other notables. In the 1960’s after one of President Kennedy’s weekly White House breakfasts for congressional leaders, House Majority Whip Hale Boggs lamented, “*We had serious problems...at breakfast there were no grits, no chicory in the coffee and no Tabasco sauce!*”

When George H. W. Bush campaigned in 1988, it was predicted that Tabasco sauce would replace jelly beans as the presidential favorite. A campaign spokesperson characterized Mr. Bush as “*a devotee of Tabasco sauce. He uses it on his tuna sandwiches and on his eggs.*” Aides reported that Mr. Bush ordered bottles sent to his hotel room in advance of each campaign stop. His favorite snack was reported to be fried pork rinds sprinkled with Tabasco sauce. After he received the GOP nomination in New Orleans, he passed out personalized bottles of Tabasco sauce to family members who dined with him at Arnaud’s Restaurant.

From 1898 when Lord Kitchener took the sauce with him on his relief mission to Khartoum in the Sudan, Tabasco sauce has been appreciated by the military. Walter S. McIlhenny, who was head of the company during the Vietnam War era and affectionately nicknamed Tabasco Mac, penned the Charley Ration Cookbook or No Food is Too Good for the Man Up Front to help troops to make their rations taste better. The recipes showed soldiers how to spice up their C-rations with Tabasco sauce to create dishes like “battlefield fufu” and “combat zone burgoo,” injecting a little humor into otherwise grim eating conditions.

Thousands of copies went to soldiers, wrapped around two-ounce bottles of Tabasco sauce in special waterproof canisters. When field rations changed, he updated the cookbook for “meals ready to eat” or MRE rations. During Desert Shield and Desert Storm, miniature bottles of Tabasco sauce were included in every third MRE packet sent to troops in the Gulf. Many soldiers wrote to the company to express their thanks. In a letter dated July 31, 1991, General Norman Schwarzkopf, wrote *“Your product has always been in demand by troops in the field. I have enjoyed spicing up my own rations for many years with Tabasco sauce. During Desert Shield and Desert Storm the young service men and women appreciated any touch of home and your product was certainly the most sought after.”* Responding to enthusiasm like this the military now packs Tabasco sauce in every MRE pack.

Tabasco sauce has captured taste buds of the world. It is now labeled in over thirty languages and dialects for shipment to over one hundred countries. After the United States, Japan consumes more Tabasco sauce than any other country. In Belgium it is always included in “filet americain” the name for steak tartare. It was introduced in Israel soon after that country was established by sailors and diplomats and is often used on falafel. It was introduced in the United Arab Emirates by oil workers and in Italy, it is mixed with olive oil and used as an alternative to expensive Eastern spices.

In France it is very trendy, especially in urban centers, and used it tomato juice and steak tartare. Canadians use it to favor Bloody Caesars, a tomato and clam juice drink. Australians put it in potent drinks with names like Rocky, Rambo and Dirty Harry. Tabasco is riding the tide of change in Sweden and the Netherlands where basic mellower seasonings are giving way to hotter and spicier tastes. In areas where hot spicy foods are the norm such as the Far East, Latin America and the tropics, Tabasco sauce is well accepted.



It my hope that you have enjoyed this little journey about the evolution and continued popularity of Tabasco sauce and trust that when you give that little red bottle a shake, you will have a greater appreciation of it and how it will spice up your dining experiences.

Thank you, gentlemen!! I look forward to your comments.