

100 YEARS of KONPARET 1915-2015

History of Konparet in Jeremie, Grand Anse, Haiti

Bette Gebrian Magloire PhD



Jeremie to Jamaica

Konparet— which tastes like a ginger biscotti, is one of Haiti’s most beloved confections. It has an interesting story beginning in the early years of the 20th century, when Jeremie was an active port of call in the trade between the Caribbean, North America and Europe. At that time, as many as 5 steamships were anchored in Jeremie Bay. They included the Royal Dutch West India Mail steamer and French and German lines, loading up goods for Europe: hides, coffee, cacao, hardwoods, cotton and other products of the Grand Anse. Agricultural goods were shipped to Cuba including yams, rice, sugar cane and manioc¹. The United Fruit Company steamer *Calamares* (pictured below in NY harbor) made the 13 day trip from New York to Jeremie via stops at Cap Haitien, Gonaives, Port-au-Prince, then Jeremie, Aux Cayes, Jacmel Kingston, Puerto Colombia and Cartagena.² During that time, Jeremie had a population of 8,000³.



Josephine Charmant, a Jeremie native, brought “konparet” into the Jeremie baking tradition according to stories related by Rosevelt Magloire to Pierre Charmant, her grandson. She learned of it on a business trip to Kingston, Jamaica around 1914. Perhaps she made the trip on a steamship like the one pictured above.

Josephine “discovered” a type of bun eaten by ordinary working people. It was called gingerbread in English. She brought the recipe back with her to Jeremie. Ginger was grown in the Grand Anse, sugar cane was processed locally and coconuts were plentiful so making a similar bun seemed a good idea. The name of the

¹Filsinger, Ernst, B. Commercial Travelers’ Guide to Latin America 1920. Department of Commerce Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. Miscellaneous Series No. 89. Washington DC. p. 188.

² New York Tribune. Shipping and Travel Guide. NY February 21, 1921. P. 14.

³ “La Ville de Jeremie”. The Blue Book of Haiti. University of Florida Library.1919.pp.187-196

concoction was adapted to Haiti and became “gingerbret” at first. It was said that once people smelled the bread they could not wait to eat it and crowded around the seller. The moniker “konparet” (roughly translated as “when you smell it you appear at the bakery”) was born and can even be found in the online Vedrine Kreyol language lexicon⁴.

The Bakers

During these early years, three women made konparet.

- Josephine Charmant (*konparet Fifine*) in a bakery near the town square and Cathedral;
- Brunette Charmant (*konparet Madam Phiteas*) in her bakery on Main Street by the ocean (Rue Stenio Vincent);
- Rosmela Auguste (*konparet Rosmela or Tante Rose*) in her bakery on Jubilee Hill; (Rosemela started out working for Josephine, but moved to her own operation over time)

Josephine Charmant (1871 - 1961) is pictured here in 1923.



Each had a distinctive flavor, and customers chose their favorite confectioner.

The Recipe and Baking

The proportions of the recipe are a closely held secret! But we do know that no water or eggs were used in the mix, according to Jeremie elders. The original ingredients included:

- Grand Anse organic ginger
- Grand Anse Bergamot extract or zest⁵
- Vanilla extract
- Almond extract from Pharmacy Sejourne (a bitter almond and ethyl alcohol product)
- Imported cinnamon, star anise and cloves
- Grand Anse organic grated coconut and cane syrup from local farmers
- Flour, baking soda, locally produced butter, animal fat and a pinch of salt

The spices were ground in a mortar and sprinkled into the dough.



⁴ **KONPARÈT** kon-pa-rèt .n. Pâtisserie faite de farine, de noix de coco râpée, etc. (spécialité de Jérémie). Dans les années 1930-1940, le meilleur konparèt Jérémie était celui de Fifine Charmant, propriétaire d'une boulangerie. *Kèk moun afime ke yo vin rele patisri sa a konsa paske depi machann nan te fèk parèt ak yo, moun kouvri l.* <http://www.potomitan.info/vedrine/lexique1.php>

⁵ see the video about this special citrus fruit: <http://www.bergamotoconsorzio.it/aprvideoENG.html>

All was kneaded by hand. Uncooked dough was placed on an 18" X 26" metal platter and shaped in rounded form as seen in the photo above.

Wood was put in the brick oven before daybreak. After a few hours, some of the burning wood was pushed aside to use for lighting the inside of the oven. The rest of the ashes and hot embers were scraped out using a long wooden paddle called 'eskofyon'. The bricks would remain hot enough to cook a number of platters of various size konparets until the afternoon. The smell was intoxicating and warm konparets a real treat.

Baked treats and bread around Jeremie midcentury

There were a number of bakeries in Jeremie town by the 1940's. Sales of bread and other boutique confections continued and thrived. Louis Douin had a bakery and employed Leanne Juste. Joseph Bontemps, Madam Decius and Sonson Descroches were renowned for their own style of bread.

While konparet grew in popularity, it was not the only baked, boiled or grilled sweet in the region. Some of these are still made and others have virtually disappeared:

- "kokonut" made of coconut, spices and flour, lightly kneaded and baked
- "bonbon sywo" a molasses and flour cookie
- "kaka bef" ("cow poo"), a lighter round molasses roll was brought into popularity in the 1940s by Sonson Caiidor
- "tablet wowoli" (sesame brittle) locally grown sesame seeds were added to sugar cane syrup to create a brittle
- "tablet pistach" (peanut brittle) locally grown peanuts and cane syrup made a fine confection
- "Cham, cham", a snack made of corn, sugar and cinnamon pounded into a powder and eaten as a sweet snack
- "dukunu" a snack made of grated cornmeal, sugar, honey, cane syrup, ginger and cinnamon, cloves cooked into a labouyi (porridge) and then wrapped in a banana leaf and tied with the filaments of the banana plant (called vantrez) and cooked in boiling water
- "Bwa Bourik" (mule stick) A sweet snack cooked on a metal plate over an open fire—a mixture of manioc and cane syrup rolled in a banana leaf
- "Bonbon amidon (manioc starch rounds)
- "Tablet fey" was made from slices of fresh coconut meat heated into a patty with cane syrup and left to cool and harden
- "Bobowi" a flat cassava round topped with sugar and coconut and cooked on an iron plate over an open fire

There are surely more examples but one gets the idea of fondly remembered treats.

Quality Control

The health inspectors (service d'hygiene), organized during the American occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) assured that a level of cleanliness and protocols were adhered to in all bakeries, boutiques and sales points. Surprise visits were made by these men in their uniforms. They had the authority to close down an establishment or throw out inferior or bug-infested items. Health inspectors were dissolved in the 1980s.

The Tradition Continues

When Pierre Charmant, grandson of Josephine Charmant went to study in Kingston (1953-55), he noticed that the ginger bun was still being sold in shops and consumed as part of breakfast throughout the town.

New generations of bakers watched, modified and opened bakeries for themselves. The dough was still kneaded by hand and baked in brick ovens on square metal pans in a large oval shape. Once cut, customers would buy a small end or center piece for 5 kob (a penny) or 10 or 20 kob.

The recipe evolved from sugar cane syrup and no water to the 1960's recipe using boiled brown sugar (sik rouj). Bergamot citrus steeped in cane alcohol was harder to find in pharmacies and baking powder replaced baking soda in the new recipes. As the recipe continues to evolve, an innovative chef created a dessert of konparet with a delicious hard sauce.

The late Claudette Samedi Magloire (her husband, Lucky Magloire, was the grandson of Josephine Charmant) expanded her bakery, originally known for her Pate Claudette in the 1950's, to include konparet. She engaged hundreds of rural women sellers to carry and sell them in regional markets and villages. One woman, named Francine, explained her sales. "I would walk to Jeremie town, buy different sizes of freshly made konparet and sell them in the Roseaux market and to people along the route". Many women knew the name of Claudette in the rural mountain villages of Jeremie, Roseaux and Moron well into the 1990s. Local sellers also walked the streets of Jeremie selling them from a wooden display case carried on her head (called a "bak") covered with a wire mesh. Claudette's bakery closed after her death in 2008.

The konparet tradition continues today. For example, Olivia Clervil, (born in 1935) began making konparet as a single woman in 1954 after hurricane Hazel. She lived downtown (anba lavil) in the house of Deshlau Baguidy and was taught the recipe by Mrs. Tomas Colas. The brick oven used at that time was nearby in the house of Jacob Samedi. She married in 1964, bought the house and built the bakery and brick oven in her current location. Konparet Madam Senec, as the store is now called, has been popular for the past 51 years even though the shop has no sign!



Who knows if this bakery will continue onto the next generation?



Another example is Madame Manes Vincent. Her shop is located on Jubilee Hill before the cemetery on the way to St. Antoine Hospital.



There are many of these shops which vary in size and price throughout town. Generally, the smallest, a tennis-ball size sweet, is 5 gourdes, the next size is 50 gourdes and is wrapped in paper and the largest, "family-size" is 150 gourdes (47 gourdes for \$1.00).

All hope komparet remains an important part of the heritage of the region. It is cherished by visitors to Jeremie from other parts of the country and the world. The lovingly made konparet is a gift Jeremians offer one and all. Try one the next time you are in Jeremie, and savor a piece of history!

