

# Beignet Gris-Gris

At first glance they don't *look* controversial. To the contrary, it is precisely their gastronomic simplicity that has kept them so popular for so long. No delicate pastry here. No gourmet custard inside. No fancy fondant on top. Just hearty, unpretentious lumps of fried bread dough doused in sugar.

Served in orders of three.

And therein lies the first controversy.

Why three?

The numbers just don't add up. The natural pattern most people adopt while enjoying an order of café au lait and beignets is as follows: sip of coffee, bite of beignet, sip of coffee, bite of beignet, etc. This instinctive regimen requires one cup of coffee and *exactly two* beignets for everything to work out perfectly in the end. Two, not three. The person who follows the sip/bite pattern will have one sip of coffee remaining, just enough to wash down that last bite of the second beignet.

That leaves one beignet untouched on the plate and a customer who is sufficiently full. At this point, the patron must use incredible willpower to resist that third doughnut or—like 99 percent of the rest of us—give in and stuff it down. Even Jimmy Buffett lamented the problem:

*Coffee is strong at the Café Du Monde.  
Donuts are too hot to touch.  
Just like a fool, when those sweet goodies cool  
I eat 'til I eat way too much.*  
—from “The Wino and I Know”

The number game gets even worse when there are two people at the table, especially young lovers on an awkward first date. If they walked in looking for an agreeable way to end the evening, they're in for a big disappointment—or worse. Beignet gris-gris begins its mischief as soon as they sit down.

Not wanting to appear piggish, they each deny that they could possibly down three doughnuts on their own, so the couple agrees to split an order. But do the math. Three beignets are not evenly divisible by two people. So, after each person has had one doughnut, the trouble begins. With half a cup of coffee remaining, the couple makes polite conversation, all the while casting surreptitious glances at that third little gem lying buried in powdered sugar on the plate. He wants it, but being the chivalrous gentleman that he is, he insists she take it. She wants it, but being the demure young lady that she is, she resists and offers it to him.

Yes, they both covet it mightily, but neither is willing to indulge, knowing that while he or she is enjoying that last beignet, the other person can only watch and pretend to be satisfied with the now-cold, few sips of coffee left in the cup. Or worse yet, convinced that the other person really doesn't want it, they both reach for it at the same time. Uh-oh. Awwwk-ward!

As a result, many a third beignet—though fiercely desired—has gone uneaten, untouched, forsaken on the plate. The

discontented couple leaves the table unsatisfied, and what could have been a promising relationship is now in jeopardy.

So, if two beignets is the perfect number, why are there three beignets to an order? For the answer to this question, you'll have to go back in time about a century and half and look for the greedy, market-savvy vendor who came up with this slick selling tactic after concluding that, although two beignets provide the ideal accompaniment for a cup of coffee, he could charge more for three doughnuts and thus make more money. I hope he earns another day in purgatory for every relationship he has doomed over the years.

Unfortunately, the beignet curse doesn't end with the math dilemma. Consider physics. What engineering genius came up with the idea of putting powdered sugar in a metal shaker that has teeny, tiny little holes in the top? A metal shaker that sits in oppressively damp New Orleans humidity for days on end.

Okay, position this can directly over your beignets, turn the can upside down, and give it a gentle shake.

Do you *really* expect individual little grains of sugar—each hardly heavy enough to be subject to gravity at all—to find their way through those tiny little holes in the top of the can? The same tiny holes that are caked closed by the humidity? It doesn't take a Michoud scientist to know that it's just not going to happen.

Don't look now, but your beignets are still naked.

You could try hitting the can on the table to partially clear the holes, then turning the shaker upside down over the beignets and rapping with your knuckles on the bottom of the can with brute force. If you're not one to be embarrassed by the racket you're making, sugar will indeed fall, albeit reluctantly, to the top of the beignets.

Yet the noise could be the least of your worries. Leave it to beignet gris-gris to reveal the darker side of humanity. Due to a misplaced trust in human nature, I once turned the shaker upside down to start shaking and rapping—unaware that the immature jokester who previously sat at my table had unscrewed the lid of the metal can before leaving. Unfortunately, this is a common prank, especially among the teenage set, and unfortunately, I learned it the hard way—sitting there in a dark business suit and in the company of visiting business colleagues whom I was trying hard to impress. Yes, you could say I made an impression.

Patrons shouldn't even count on being able to breathe normally when around beignets. Inhale while taking a bite, and powdered sugar rushes into the lungs resulting in an embarrassing episode of "Confectioner's Cough." Exhale while taking a bite, and—like confetti in front of a fan—a shower of sugar fills the air.

Never, ever laugh when holding a beignet.

And leave it to beignets to bring out the worst in people's table manners. Ever shared a table with a dunker? While some are sufficiently well mannered, far too many make it a practice to plunge the entire beignet into the cup of coffee, let it soak, and then bring it to their mouths, dripping hot coffee and soggy dough along the way. This delightful show is often accompanied by loud slurping noises. Equally appetite suppressing is the slob who tears the beignet into little pieces, tosses them into the cup of coffee, and then fishes them out with his fingers. Also often accompanied by loud slurping noises.

So is there no bright side to beignets? Well, in the "good news" department, a friend once told me that beignets were not as fattening as one might think because of the large

pockets of air often found in the middle of the doughnuts. And indeed, I have used this fact to soothe my conscience when I'm finishing off that third, unnecessary beignet. What my friend's cheery rose-colored glasses fail to see, however, is the other side of the air-pocket story. The "air" in that air pocket is actually superheated steam waiting to sear the entire interior of your mouth, making every subsequent bite tasteless, not to mention excruciatingly painful. So much for the bright side.

Ah, beignets.

Three simple lumps of fried bread dough doused in sugar—and poised for peril.