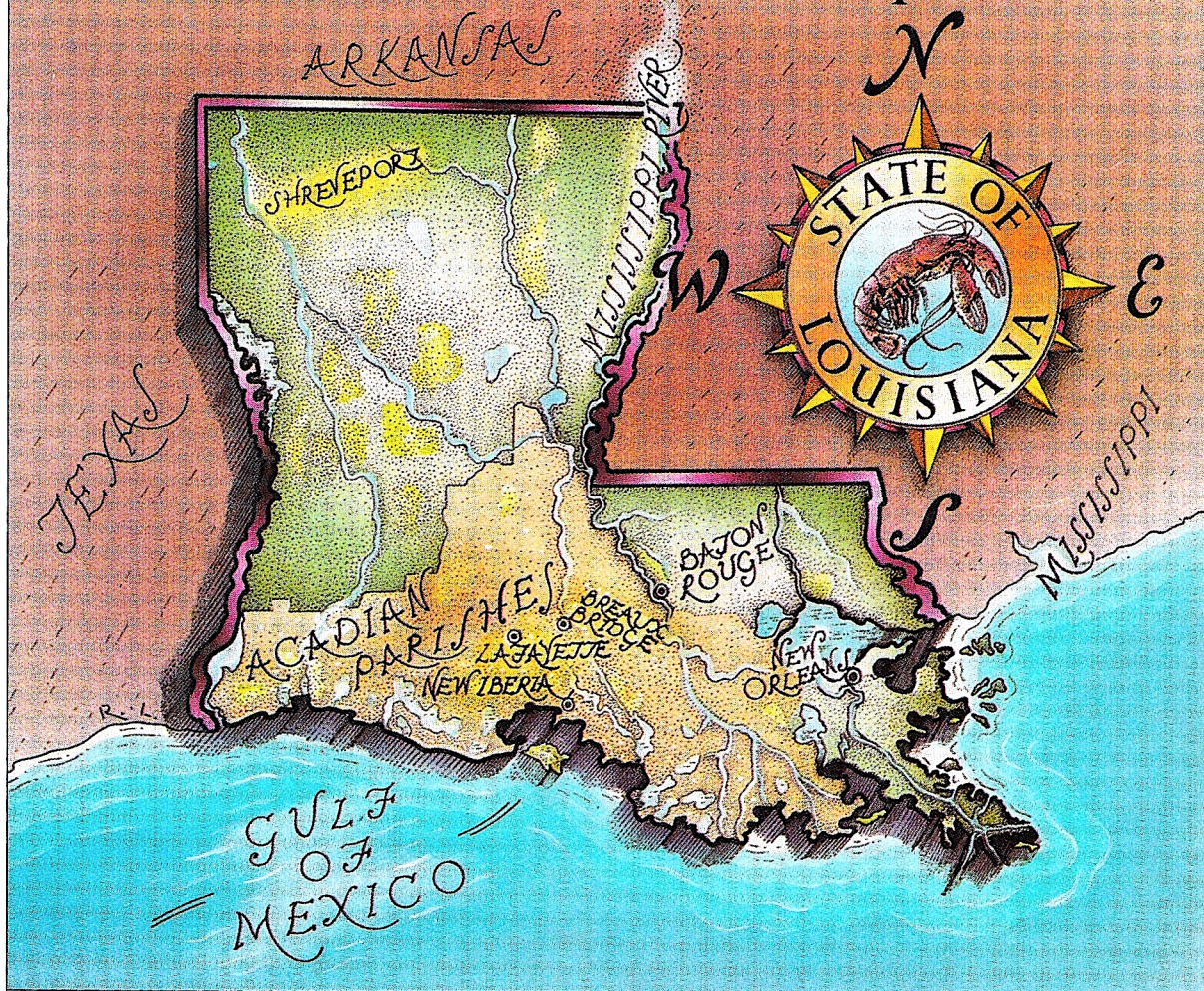


LOUISIANA POTLUCK

From Creole to Cajun,
each cook knows her own pot best



By Molly Culbertson

From crawfish pie to blackened redfish and chicken jambalaya, Cajun and Creole cuisines are the sustenance of southern Louisiana. The hot and spicy cooking is unique to

that small part of the world that created it, the result of a tumultuous history and the mingling of diverse nationalities.

Today in every Cajun and Creole pot boils a

mélange that reflects more than 200 years of interaction among Native Americans, French and Spanish colonists, Africans, and Acadians (French Nova Scotians).

Photographs: Rick Taylor. Research assistance: Robert Smith and Sandra Day

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Separating Cajun from Creole is difficult, and in most restaurants the distinction is no longer made. But in private kitchens all along the bayous, Cajun cooking means simple one-pot meals simmered slowly and served over rice, while Creole cooking is more refined, with separate courses and rich sauces.

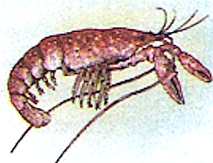
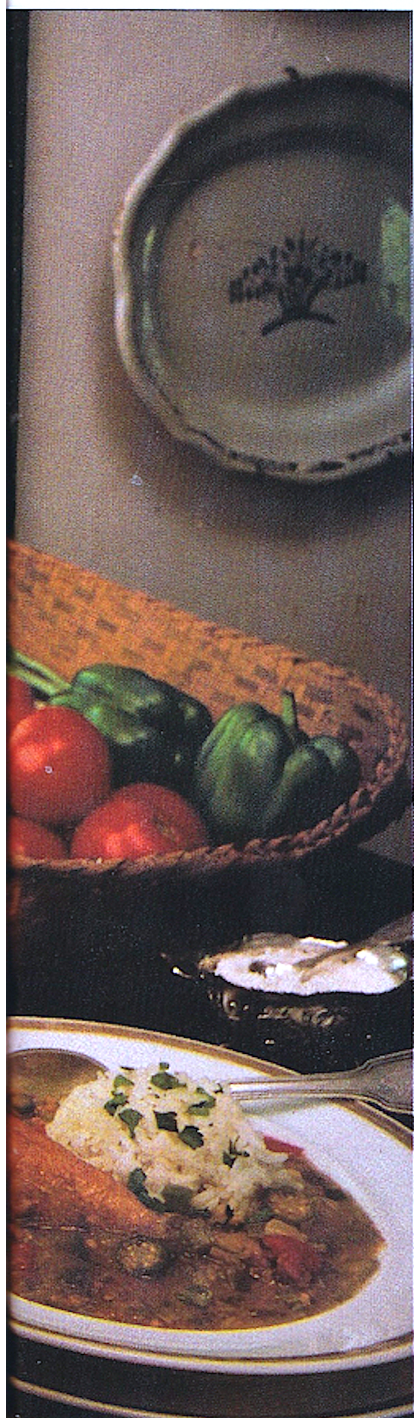
Whether the meal is Cajun, Creole, or something in between, it's bound to be robust and hearty. When southern Louisiana cooks finish preparing a meal, their dining tables surely must groan under the weight of the food.

The entrée for a typical feast might be jambalaya (a strongly flavored rice dish with meat, poultry, or fish) or a roast beef or chicken well seasoned with garlic and pepper. To round out the meal, there might be dirty rice (a grayish-brown dressing made of rice, green pepper, and chicken giblets), potato salad, black-eyed peas and bacon, *maque choux* (a gruelli-like corn stew), deep-fried sweet potatoes, and long loaves of crusty French bread. Lest anyone go unsated, large helpings of a rich dessert, such as pecan pie or meringue-topped bread pudding, complete the menu.

Ingredients and methods for any Cajun or Creole dish vary from region to



region and cook to cook. Foods are prepared according to recipes passed down through many generations. Seldom are these family secrets found in written form—parents teach their children the finer points of cooking with little need for a written recipe. The old Louisiana saying still holds true: Each cook knows her own pot best.



Refining Native American fare: The French influence

The early Creoles were French and Spanish colonists who settled in southern Louisiana. (The name was derived from the

Spanish word *criollo*, a name given to settlers of European descent.) The French were the first to arrive, claiming Louisiana in the late 1600s. They expected the territory to become a thriving colony, but the mosquito-infested swamps, humid weather, and diseases claimed crops and many lives. The dreams of prosperity came to nothing.

In the late 1700s, France decided the territory was more trouble than it was worth and gave it to Spain. Under Spanish rule, Louisiana began to prosper because the Spanish welcomed all who would come. France conquered Louisiana once again, just before selling it to the United States in 1803.

Meanwhile, a curious cuisine was developing. Many of the Creoles were well educated and wealthy and had sophisticated tastes in food. When they first came to Louisiana, they were unable to grow or buy familiar foods. Instead, they had to rely on strange, exotic native foods, among them buffalo, squirrel, alligator, raccoon, opossum, turtle, crawfish, and wild fruits.

Though they longed for familiar flavors from home, they eventually learned from the Native Americans. They prepared traditional European dishes with native ingredients. By the middle



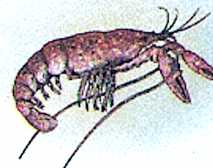
Opposite top: Okra acts as a thickener in *Chicken and Okra Gumbo*. Like many Creole and Cajun dishes, this stew is served with rice. Opposite bottom: Barbara Darden, a Native American from Charenton, is preparing *Maque Choux* over an open fire. *Couche-Couche* stands, ready to eat, in front of the fire. Above: Lucille Shields of Breaux Bridge prepares okra for gumbo. (Recipes on page 108.)

of the 18th century, the Creoles were importing foods from home and combining them with foods from this new land.

The Native Americans taught the Creoles to preserve meats by salting, drying, and smoking. They also shared the secrets of making *tasso*, a highly seasoned smoked ham, a standard item on Cajun and Creole menus.

French Creoles introduced the versatile roux, a flour and lard paste used to thicken, color, and flavor gumbos,

soups, stews, and sauces. Roux is slow-cooked to varying shades of brown. The longer it's cooked, the darker the color and the stronger the flavor.



Peppers in the pot: The Spanish legacy

Cajun and Creole cooking would not be what they are today without the spicy influence of the Spanish. These settlers stirred in

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unusual, flavorful ingredients imported from Latin America—ingredients such as hot peppers, olive oil, cheeses, almonds, preserved fruits, vinegar, anchovies, and even pasta.

The Spanish have a heritage of strong, spicy foods seasoned with a heavy hand. They liked to combine different meats and fish or seafood in the same dish. They called these zesty concoctions jambalayas.

Beans, especially red beans, were an important part of their diet, too. Today it's difficult to find a restaurant in southern Louisiana that doesn't serve red beans and rice.

The Spanish also introduced the area to *chaurice*, a peppery, garlic-studded pork sausage. Chaurice is served for breakfast and added to jambalayas, gumbos, and bean dishes.



A rougher course: The first Cajuns

The Acadians, residents of Nova Scotia who were deported by the British because of religious differences, were welcomed in Louisiana, where settlers were wanted to help populate the territory. They stayed away from the

cities and the sophisticated Europeans. Instead, they moved out into bayou country, where they shared the land with Native Americans. There, the Acadians became known as Cajuns.

These were rugged country people, farmers and fishermen. Their cuisine was rougher and simpler than Creole cooking. They created

court bouillon (a tomato-based fish soup) and dirty rice. They stretched their meat supply by making sausages from nearly every part of the pig.

And Cajuns delighted in hearty meals of crawfish—or mud bugs, as the locals sometimes call them. They ate these freshwater crustaceans, as they still do, boiled or fried, in bisques, gumbos, and meat

pies. Although crawfish are considered a delicacy in the southern regions of Louisiana (Breaux Bridge is the crawfish capital of the world), they've never caught on outside the area.





Exotic seasonings:
Africa's contributions
 Wealthy Louisiana landowners brought in African slaves as early as the 1700s. The Africans carried with them seeds of some of their favorite foods. Okra, now an essential ingredient in Cajun and Creole cookery, was among them. They called it *quingombo*, and dishes prepared with it

were known as gumbos. The term now refers to texture and flavor as much as to the okra. Among the many dishes that can be called gumbos are stewed okra; okra mixed with shrimp, crab, or chicken; and even thick, spicy stews that have no okra at all.

The African cooking tradition includes fried and highly seasoned foods. Louisiana slaves and their descendants are credited with perfecting the methods used today for frying fritters, catfish, oysters, and chicken.



The potluck

Perhaps more than any other cuisine, Cajun and Creole cooking truly make potluck. The settlers used whatever ingredients they found when they arrived in Louisiana, trying to create foods similar to those they longed for from home. The recipes they invented caught on, and remain to help tell the history of southern Louisiana: always hearty, usually spicy, often exotic, and anything but ordinary.

All photographs were taken at the home of Robert Smith in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana.

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Left: *Chicken Jambalaya* is a spicy medley of rice, hot peppers, and chicken. Above: Beth Landry of Lafayette serves *Daube Glacé*—beef and vegetables in aspic—and *Shrimp Remoulade*, both of French origin. Below: Sausages made from nearly every part of the pig are essential to Creole and Cajun cuisine. The rendered lard is saved for preparing *Fried Sweet Potatoes*. (See recipes, page 108.)



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Fried Sweet Potatoes

Cajuns typically use lard to fry foods, such as these sweet potato chips—

- Cooking oil for deep-frying**
2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled
and sliced $\frac{1}{8}$ inch thick
Sugar

Heat cooking oil in a deep saucepan or deep fryer to 375°. Fry potatoes, a few at a time, in deep hot fat for 6 to 7 minutes or till crisp and golden brown, turning once. Carefully remove potatoes with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels. Repeat with remaining potatoes. Sprinkle with sugar; serve at once. Makes 4 servings.

Chicken Jambalaya

The first jambalayas probably were created by Spanish colonists—

- 1 2- to 2½-pound broiler-fryer
chicken, cut up
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive or cooking oil
1½ cups chopped celery
2 medium onions, chopped
1 medium green pepper, chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
4 medium tomatoes, peeled,
seeded, and chopped
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup snipped parsley
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sliced green onions
1½ teaspoons salt
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon bottled hot pepper
sauce
2 bay leaves
2½ cups water
1½ cups rice
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup white wine

In a 12-inch skillet cook chicken pieces slowly in hot oil till browned, turning once. Remove chicken, reserving oil in skillet. In same pan cook celery, onions, green pepper, and garlic till tender. Add tomatoes, parsley, green onion, salt, pepper, hot pepper sauce, and bay leaves. Cook, covered, 6 to 7 minutes. Add water, rice, wine, and chicken pieces. Bring to boiling; reduce heat. Cook, covered, over low heat about 20 minutes or till chicken is tender. Makes 6 servings.

Couche-Couche

This fried cornmeal mush was introduced to southern Louisiana by Africans. Serve it for a hot breakfast—

- 2 cups yellow cornmeal
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1½ cups water
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup lard or shortening
Milk
Sugar

In a medium mixing bowl stir together the cornmeal, baking powder, and salt. Stir in the water. In a 10-inch skillet heat the lard over medium-high heat till hot. Pour in the cornmeal mixture. Cook over medium-high heat for 3 to 4 minutes or till a crust has formed on the bottom. Using a metal spatula, cut the mixture; carefully turn one section at a time. Reduce heat; cover and cook over low heat for 15 minutes more, stirring once or twice. Spoon into cereal bowls; serve with milk and sugar. Makes 6 servings.

Maque Choux

Personal preference dictates how much liquid remains in this gruelliike dish at the end of cooking time—

- 10 medium ears fresh sweet corn
1 medium onion, chopped
1 medium tomato, chopped
 $\frac{1}{2}$ of a large green pepper,
chopped
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cooking oil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chicken broth
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper
 $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon red pepper

With a sharp knife cut corn from the cob at two-thirds depth. Scrape cobs with the dull edge of the knife. (You should have about 4 cups corn.) In a large skillet cook the corn, onion, tomato, and green pepper in hot oil about 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the chicken broth, salt, pepper, and red pepper. Cover; cook 10 to 12 minutes or till tender. Cook, uncovered, about 10 minutes more. Serve in soup bowls. Makes 6 servings.

Chicken and Okra Gumbo

African slaves were the first to prepare gumbo in Cajun-Creole country—

- 5 cups sliced fresh okra
2 large onions, chopped
2 medium green peppers,
chopped
2 tomatoes, chopped
3 tablespoons cooking oil
1 2- to 2½-pound broiler-fryer
chicken, cut up
2 tablespoons cooking oil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon ground red pepper
Hot cooked rice
Snipped parsley
Sliced green onion

In a large skillet cook okra, onions, green peppers, tomatoes, and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt in 3 tablespoons hot oil about 30 minutes or till vegetables are tender. Meanwhile, in a Dutch oven brown chicken in 2 tablespoons hot oil about 15 minutes, turning once. Drain off fat. Add pepper, red pepper, 4 cups water, and 1 teaspoon salt. Bring to boiling; reduce heat. Cover and simmer 30 to 40 minutes or till chicken is very tender. Add okra mixture; simmer 30 minutes. Serve in soup bowls with rice; sprinkle with parsley and green onion. Makes 6 servings.

Shrimp Remoulade

This chilled appetizer is named for its savory marinade—

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup catsup
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup creole mustard
3 tablespoons olive or cooking oil
2 tablespoons white vinegar or
lemon juice
1 teaspoon paprika
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup finely chopped onion
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup snipped parsley
1 stalk celery, finely chopped
1 pound shrimp in shell, cooked,
peeled, and deveined
Lettuce leaves
Lemon wedges

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In a medium bowl combine catsup, mustard, oil, vinegar, paprika, salt, and pepper. Add onion, parsley, and celery. Add shrimp; toss gently to coat. Cover and chill overnight. To serve, arrange on lettuce-lined plate. Garnish with lemon wedges. Makes 4 servings.

Daube Glacé

- 1 2½-pound beef chuck pot roast
- 3 large onions, sliced
- 2 medium carrots, halved crosswise
- 2 stalks celery, cut up
- Bouquet Garni
- 2 cloves garlic, quartered
- 1 dried red chili pepper, seeded
- ¾ cup dry red wine
- 1 egg
- 4 envelopes unflavored gelatin
- ½ cup sliced green onions
- ¼ cup snipped parsley

In a Dutch oven combine beef, onions, carrots, celery, Bouquet Garni, garlic, chili pepper, and 2 teaspoons salt. Add wine and 6 cups water. Simmer, covered, 3 to 4 hours or till meat is very tender. Remove carrots; set aside. Remove meat; cool and dice. Discard remaining solids, reserving the stock. Strain the stock through a cheese-cloth-lined strainer.

To clarify stock: Separate egg. Crush shell. In Dutch oven stir together ¼ cup cold water, egg white, and egg-shell. Add stock; bring to boiling. Remove from heat; let stand 5 minutes. Strain again. Cool.

In a saucepan soften gelatin in 1 cup of the stock. Add 4 cups more stock. Cook and stir over low heat till gelatin is dissolved. Cool to room temperature. Into a 9x5x3-inch loaf pan pour enough gelatin mixture to make a ¼-inch layer; chill. Slice carrots lengthwise; arrange atop gelatin layer. Pour a ¼-inch layer of the gelatin mixture atop. Add half the meat, then a ¼-inch layer of gelatin mixture. Combine parsley and green onions; layer in pan. Add remaining meat; top with gelatin mixture. Chill several hours or till set. Unmold onto a lettuce-lined platter; slice. Makes 12 servings.

Bouquet Garni: In a 6-inch square of cheesecloth tie 6 sprigs parsley, 2 bay leaves, and 2 teaspoons thyme leaves. □

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