

French-American Foodways

by Marjorie Hunt

Traditional foodways play an integral role in French-American life, especially in the Cajun and Creole communities of French Louisiana and the Québécois and Acadian communities of New England. While other forms of French material culture have been lost or are only remembered, French-American cooking has proven to be a tenacious tradition, for it is closely tied to the French-Americans' most precious possessions – language, family, religion and community. Mrs. Adolis Montoucet, an expert Cajun cook from Lafayette, Louisiana, tells how she learned:

I've been cooking everyday for thirty years. I learned from my mother and she was pure French, she didn't even know how to speak English. I don't know all kinds of recipes. I just know the French way. The other new styles, I don't know anything about it, because my family doesn't like it and I don't like it, so I don't bother with it all. I just cook French style.

Like traditional music and song, French-American foodways have been greatly influenced by the cultural diversity and environmental realities of the various regions of the United States where the French settled. In French Louisiana, traditional "French style" foods, such as gumbo and jambalaya, are culinary symbols of the syncretic blend of cultural ingredients that characterize the region. Nick Spitzer, state folklorist of Louisiana, describes gumbo's components:

The name is a West African term for okra; the sassafras filé powder, used for a flavored thickener, comes from the local Indians; the rice is raised by Cajuns, who learned the skill on a large scale from the Germans; and in many cases, a Continental French or Spanish aesthetic determines how the final blend is cooked. It is this diversity within the overall French influenced culture of the region that makes gumbo such an appropriate metaphor for the people . . .

A community *boucherie* or hog butchering in rural Southwest Louisiana. Photo by Elemore Morgan.





Masked Mardi Gras "runners" go through the countryside begging for chickens and sausage for the traditional Mardi Gras gumbo.

In New England, the French-American settlers, many of them French-Canadian *petits habitants* (small farmers) from Quebec, were subject not only to Scots-Irish and English cultural influences, but to the cold, harsh winters of the northern woods as well. Their traditional foods, such as *tourtières* (beef and pork pies), *ragout de pattes de cochon* (pig's feet stew), *galette de sarrasin* or *ployes* (buckwheat pancakes) and Canadian pea soup, are the hearty country dishes of a people who have worked hard to harvest the land and the forest.

French-American traditional foodways are an important part, not only of everyday family life, but of community celebrations, festivals, religious feasts and musical events. In Louisiana, Cajuns gather for the *fais-do-do* or Cajun house parties and for *boucheries*, where, traditionally, groups of men gather to contribute cattle and pigs to be butchered. At these community gatherings dancing, music, cooking and singing blend together, just like the multiple ingredients of a gumbo. The Québécois communities of New England also have a *soirée* or house party tradition for which special foods, such as *tourtières* and *ragout de patte de cochon* are prepared. The *soirée* is also the arena for French-American fiddlers to play music for the dancing of quadrilles, jigs and reels.

So important is the connection between foodways and community life that in southwestern Louisiana many new religious traditions have emerged that are connected with various food harvests. Examples are the Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet and the Blessing of the Sugar Cane Fields. The Basile Swine Festival has become associated with All Saints Day and serves to celebrate the hog as an important staple in the French Louisiana diet. The Festival features a contest where participants eat *boudin* – a sausage made with pork and rice and stuffed inside a pig intestine.

For decades the traditional food of Mardi Gras has been chicken gumbo. Mrs. Montoucet describes the holiday as it is practised in Lafayette, Louisiana:

On Mardi Gras we dress differently from what we're used to. We have costumes. And then we put a small mask on our face over our eyes. Then we put make-up all over our face so we won't be recognized. We do this all day long in Lafayette. We have a float and a barbecue and my husband plays the music and we dance and have fun. A lot of people, they go into the country house to house, and then they ask if they can come in and if the people want you to go in, well, they say, "If you all take your masks off to see who you are, we'll give you a chicken." After we've finished our day and enjoyment, well, we sit at the table and have gumbo – chicken gumbo!

In the Black Creole tradition, Mardi Gras is celebrated in a similar way. Masked “runners” go house to house begging for *charité* while singing an old, traditional Mardi Gras chant:

On est bon des politessiens q’reviennent beaucoup de loin.

Mardi Gras est miserab.

Une poule par an c’est pas souvent.

Not’ gombo est réellement faible.

Nous t’invite à manger un bon gombo.

Mardi Gras t’a mandé po’ nous recevoir.

We are polite people who return from far away.

The Mardi Gras is poor.

One chicken a year is not much.

Our gumbo is really weak.

We invite you to eat a good gumbo.

The Mardi Gras has asked you to receive us.

(collected by Nick Spitzer)

The chicken and sausage reward that the runners receive for *charité* is taken home, a gumbo is made from the day’s collections, followed by a big evening dance to complete the Mardi Gras festivities.

Traditional Cajun Recipes

The following recipes are those of Mrs. Adolis Montoucet, a Cajun cook from Lafayette, Louisiana, and Mrs. Georgette Berthiaume, a Québécois cook from Woonsocket, Rhode Island.

Chicken Gumbo

For 6 people:

“To make a gumbo first you make a roux. . . I use about 5 lbs. of flour and make a gallon of roux at a time, because I use a lot of roux!

To make the roux, first you put a bit of oil in a pan and add about one cup of flour. Stir well and let the mixture brown, cooking it slowly over a low heat. It has to be brown enough to be good. If you don’t get the roux, you can sure mess up a gumbo!

Then add 4 quarts of hot stock. Season with salt, black pepper and one chopped onion, one cup minced green pepper, pureed red hot peppers (to taste) and filé powder [dried and ground sassafras leaves first used by the Choctaw Indians to make medicinal teas]. Use one fryer chicken, if you don’t have an old chicken or an old hen. An old hen or rooster is the best for gumbo. Add the chicken to the pot and simmer it all together for two hours or more – that’s what makes it good, you let it simmer.

Serve the gumbo in a soup bowl with a large bowl of boiled rice on the side.”

Variations:

Chicken and Sausage Gumbo – Follow the same recipe as above, but also add cut up sausage.

Seafood Gumbo – Make the gumbo with a mixture of shrimp, crabs and oysters.

Jambalaya

“You make a jambalaya with pork ribs. Cut the pork ribs about 2 inches wide (enough to fit in a big iron skillet). Put oil in your pan and fry the ribs. When the ribs are brown enough, remove most of the grease from the pan, leaving just a little bit. Then put a chopped bell pepper, one chopped onion, chopped celery and onion tops in there and let it fry a little bit. Then add 2 quarts of hot water. Bring the mixture to a boil and season with salt and red pepper. Then you let it simmer, good and long, ’til the pork is tender. I like to cook my rice on the side so it doesn’t get mushy. Boil the rice and then mix the cooked rice in with the pork and mix it all together. Don’t let it get too dry. A jambalaya is good real moist.”

Variation:

Sausage Jambalaya – substitute sausage for the pork ribs.



Blessing of the sugar cane, New Iberia, Louisiana.
Photo courtesy of the Louisiana Office of Tourism.

Traditional French-American foodways play an integral role in community gatherings such as the fais-do-do or Cajun house party.

Photo by Russell Lee, Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress



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Suggested reading

Spitzer, Nicholas R. "Cajuns and Creoles: The French Gulf Coast." *Southern Exposure*, 5 (1977): 140-155.

Yoder, Don. "Folk Cookery." In *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard Dorson, pp. 325-350. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Suggested film

Gumbo: The Mysteries of Cajun and Creole Cooking, by Stephen Duplantier and Marc Porter (1978). 28 min. color sound. Bayou Films.

Québécois Recipes

Ragout de Pattes de Cochon (Pig's Feet Stew)

This dish is traditionally served on New Year's Day and is a popular meal during the cold winter months.

For a family of 5 or 6:

"Take four *pattes de cochon* (pig's feet) and place them in a large pot with 4 quarts of water. Add a peeled, whole onion to the water for flavoring and boil until the pig's feet are tender. To 3 lbs. of hamburger add a little bit of cinnamon, nutmeg, parsley, and salt and pepper to taste. Make the hamburger into small balls and roll in some flour. Cut up 2 packages of celery and add the celery and seasoned hamburger to the boiling water. Let the hamburger and pig's feet mixture simmer slowly until the hamburger is cooked."

Serve the stew with boiled potatoes and beets.

Tourtières (beef and pork pies)

This popular Québécois dish is found in French-speaking communities throughout New England. In Mrs. Berthiaume's family, it was a Christmas custom to serve *tourtières* when the family returned from Midnight Mass. For three 9-inch pies:

In a large bowl mix 2 lbs. of ground round (lean beef) and 2 lbs. of chopped salt pork. Add one chopped onion, a little bit of sage, salt, pepper, poultry seasoning, cinnamon and one clove. Mix well and put the meat in a 4-quart pan and let it simmer slowly over medium heat. When mixture simmers enough to be liquidy, add 1 cup of bread crumbs to thicken. Let it simmer slowly until meat is cooked. Cool.

Pie Crust – Add a small amount of salt to 3 cups of flour and blend well. Blend in 1 cup of lard. Add 1 tbs. of water (add more if necessary). Roll the flour dough into 6 balls to make 3 pies. Line a 9-inch pan and let it brown in oven for 5 minutes. Then add cooled beef and pork mixture, cover with top crust and cook for 25 to 30 minutes. Serve hot.

Canadian Pea Soup

Soak 1 lb. of peas overnight. Drain in the morning. Place the soaked peas in a large pot with 4 quarts of water. Add 1 bay leaf, 1 chopped onion, 1 lb. of salt pork and cook very slowly, stirring frequently until it thickens. Season with salt and pepper.

Mrs. Berthiaume's husband remembered his mother serving the pea soup with boiled potatoes. When the family finished the soup, they would take out the salt pork and put it on the table with the potatoes for a second dish.