

Louisiana's Traditional Foodways

by Charlotte Paige Gutierrez

Louisiana is the home of three regional culinary traditions: the Cajun foodways of rural south Louisiana, the Creole foodways of urban New Orleans and its environs, and the Anglo-Southern foodways of rural north Louisiana.

New Orleans food — commonly called “Creole” — is a mirror of the city’s cultural complexity. Originally part of France’s colonial empire, New Orleans is now a multi-ethnic city in which ethnic identity is often overridden by a pan-city identity, a distinctively New Orleans sense of place. Harnett Kane, a local author, describes the city’s cuisine and its social heritage:

Like a language or an art, a living cuisine borrows, assimilates, expands. With a population so multilingual, Creole cooking has been modified with the years. A Frenchman has married an Italian girl; some Jugoslavs move into the French section; a German cousin comes to live with the Creole family — and each adds something.

Take my family as an example. Though it is of Irish descent, the present generation grew up on gumbo and *café au lait*. We like jambalaya as thoroughly as any Creoles do, but we also enjoy Italian stuffed artichokes, as well as an emphatic crab mixture suggested by a Dalmatian friend from the lower Delta. Since one family branch is German, we have long appreciated pot roast and noodles; yet in the main, no matter what goes onto the family stove, it emerges with a strong French-Spanish seasoning. (1949:317)

Black and Creole cooks, Choctaw Indian herb merchants, European-trained gourmet chefs, and exotic food importers have all had their impact on “The Crescent City’s” foodways. Complex culinary blending and borrowing have been common in New Orleans since colonial times, when Spanish, African and Indian influences combined with environmental necessity to transform Old World French *bouillabaisse* into Creole gumbo (Fiebleman, 1971:15). Some ethnic foods have become so widespread that they have become as much the property of the city as a whole as of the original groups: Italian *muffulettas* are one example; red beans and rice — probably a legacy of New Orleans’ Caribbean connection — another; and “Creole” mustard of German heritage yet another.

To an outsider, the urban Creole cuisine of New Orleans and the rural Cajun cuisine of the Acadiana parishes of south Louisiana are difficult to distinguish from one another. Both draw heavily on the products of local fields, forests, swamps and coastal waters (seafood, crawfish, game); both use rice as a staple and are highly seasoned; and both offer certain well-known dishes, such as gumbo, jambalaya

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Le boucherie is a tradition maintained by French-speaking Cajuns. Neighbors share in the labors of the boucherie: boiling water, killing and cleaning the hog, preparation of *le grese* (lard) and *les gratons* (cracklings). At the end of the boucherie, those who participated take home shares of *boudin* (spicy sausage made from pork and rice) and various cuts of the slaughtered animal. Photo courtesy Louisiana Office of Tourism

and beans-and-rice. However, because of stylistic differences, a native Louisianian can tell the difference between, for example, a spicy-hot, dark-brown Cajun prairie gumbo and a more delicate New Orleans variety.

In general, rural Cajun cooking reflects a preference for hot peppers; heavily seasoned foods; long cooked, one-pot dishes served with rice; smothered, seasoned vegetables; and dark roast coffee, which is different from the coffee-and-chicory of New Orleans. However, within Cajun country, the variety of dishes is great, and each item bears a regional identity: *grillades* (smothered beef in seasoned gravy) on the prairies, *tasso* (smoked meat used as seasoning) in the Opelousas area, barbecued shrimp in Terrebonne Parish, *andouille* (a sausage) on the old "German Coast" of the Mississippi River above New Orleans, and crawfish — even more popular in Cajun Louisiana than in New Orleans.

In Cajun Louisiana there is a tendency to turn any event into a food-oriented affair. Festivals feature food, many being centered around a particular local specialty, such as rice, crawfish, *boudin* sausage, oysters, jambalaya, gumbo, or *cochon de lait* (roast suckling pig). Weddings, business meetings, fundraisers and club meetings provide occasions for community meals, and in south Louisiana their preparation is a status job often held by males, many of them locally famous for their culinary skills.

North Louisiana foodways have not received the attention given to Cajun and Creole cooking, as journalists and scholars have been



Alvia Houck of Hico builds fire with hickory and sassafrass wood to smoke homemade sausage and hams. Photo by Susan Roach-Lankford

Mary Lou Gunn of Ruston shells peas on her back porch. Photo by Susan Roach-Lankford



Mary Gray packs basket with huckleberry cobbler, butter beans and fried chicken for a community gathering. Photo by Susan Roach-Lankford



more intrigued with the “exotic” south Louisiana cuisine. North Louisiana foodways in general reflect their common bond with the American South (Roach-Lankford, 1984), and the emphasis on pork and corn products, greens, yams, peas, game, freshwater fish (especially catfish) and prize-winning pies and cakes is true to its southern heritage. Roach-Lankford points out that summer vegetables are today a mainstay of north Louisiana cooking, with many varieties grown locally. The area is also noted for its fine barbecue, church suppers, family reunions and food preparation contests at local fairs.

Specific traditional foodways often serve as an ethnic or regional boundary marker. For example, a south Louisianian is likely to know how to catch, cook and eat crawfish, while people from outside the region are often mystified or even repulsed by these activities. In the past, outsiders associated the eating of crawfish with the poor, illiterate, swamp-dwelling Cajun, who was ridiculed for eating the inexpensive and supposedly inedible, unsanitary “mudbug.” But in recent years, as south Louisiana has experienced an economic boom, Cajuns have a renewed ethnic pride, and the lowly crawfish has become an accepted and even expensive, fashionable food as well as a symbol of Cajuns. Now it is the newcomer to the region who is embarrassed by his inability to do something as “simple” as peeling and eating his share at a backyard crawfish boil (Gutierrez, 1983).

As in other areas of folklife, modern influences have affected Louisiana’s traditional foodways. The advent of electricity and refrigeration has removed the need for quickly distributing and consuming freshly killed meat; consequently, community hog-killings (*boucheries* in south Louisiana) have become relatively rare. Store-bought bread has replaced homemade bread for all but the most traditional, gourmet, or natural-foods-oriented cooks. Modern markets and roads, as well as larger incomes, have made the purchase of fresh or packaged produce more convenient and economical for the working family, so the skills necessary for raising and preserving one’s own produce are often more a hobby than a necessity. Few are the Louisianians who still grind their own corn, milk their own cows, or live exclusively on what they can hunt, catch, gather and grow. Increasing literacy and the offerings of radio and television have expanded the food horizons of the curious: a Winnfield or Abbeville housewife may now serve her family Chinese stir-fried vegetables or East Indian curry. Meanwhile, in favor of healthier practices, modern nutritionists attempt to persuade Louisianians to forego certain traditional foodways, such as the heavy use of fats or over-cooking nutritionally fragile vegetables.

Although modern technology and communication have led to the demise of many traditional foodways, they have also been enlisted as aids in the continuation of tradition. Instead of using the old-fashioned method of piercing meat and stuffing the holes with chopped garlic, onions and pepper to season it, some Cajun cooks now inject its veins with liquefied pepper and other ingredients delivered through a veterinarian’s hypodermic needle. Which way is better is a matter of opinion; both result in the same regionally-defined dish. Appliance stores throughout the state offer lessons in preparing regional foods in microwave ovens, while freezers and other modern preservation conveniences have practically ended the old seasonal cycle of food availability. Crawfish farming promises to make the spring crawfish boil a year-round event, and even if an angler has no luck at the fishing hole, catfish farming has made his catch readily available at the grocery store.



Contest consumption of crawfish and other foods is a common event at south Louisiana festivals like the Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival. Photo courtesy Louisiana Office of Tourism

Suggested reading

Fiebleman, Peter S. *American Cooking: Creole and Acadian*. New York: Time-Life Books, 1971.

Gutierrez, C. Paige. "Foodways and Cajun Identity." Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1983.

Kane, Harnett T. *Queen New Orleans: City by the River*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1949.

The Picayune's Creole Cook Book. New York: Dover Publications, 1971.

Roach-Lankford, Susan, ed. *Gifts from the Hills: North Central Louisiana Folk Traditions*. Ruston: North Louisiana Tech Art Gallery, Louisiana Tech University, 1984.

Suggested films

Gumbo: The Mysteries of Creole and Cajun Cuisine, by Steve Duplantier. 28 min. color sound. Center for Gulf South History and Culture, Abita Springs, Louisiana.

Vivre Pour Manger, by Steve Duplantier. 28 min. color sound. Center for Gulf South History and Culture, Abita Springs, Louisiana.

Ironically, it is the awareness of the outside world and interaction with it that has spurred many Louisianians to preserve some of their folk traditions, including their foodways. The revived interest in folk and ethnic heritage which swept the nation in the 1960s and 1970s has been felt in Louisiana, and its citizens are increasingly aware of the value of their traditional culture. The interest shown by sympathetic outsiders — scholars, journalists, tourists — is a further source of pride in local heritage. Restaurants feature traditional foods, and the number of regional cookbooks and festivals continues to grow. The cooks participating in the Smithsonian Institution's folklife festival are but one example of Louisianians' pleasure in sharing their food traditions with the rest of the world.