Creole Food

In an article in the west coast newspaper, Bayou Talk, a California Creole stated that a Creole was a person who spoke French, was Roman Catholic, and ate Creole foods. Knowledge of Creole cuisine is the pride of the Isle Brevelle-Cane River Creoles.

One expert, Mrs. Lily Delphin, has divided Creole foodways into meats, breads, desserts, sweets, vegetables, and "extension" foods, such as *files, gumbo, and etouffe*. She likes to point out the frugal nature of Creole cookery by which people tried to use the whole animal - at least as much as was possible. The hog became meat: ribs, chops, loin, and ham. The head was conserved for meat for making tamales and/or "souse," and the brains were eaten. The intestines were saved for sausage casings, and the stomach was also cooked and eaten stuffed. The scalded and scraped skin was fried into *gratons* or cracklins. The fat was cut off and rendered into lard. The tails were used in soup, and the feet were pickled in vinegar. The blood was conserved for sausage/*boudin*. The famous rice and sausage stuffing of casings known as boudin was a popular pork food. Two kinds, red and white, were, and are, made on Isle Brevelle. Only the white *boudin*, which did not use the carefully conserved blood from the *boucherie*, can be sold commercially now. Some traditional cooks, like Mrs. Lair LaCour, can still show you the gourd funnels once used to stuff *boudin*. Other kinds of meat was packed in lard and

salted or smoked to preserve it.

Beef animals, likewise, were not wasted. Hides became leather; horns became blowing horns, and all the rest of the animal was considered as food. Even the hooves were powdered and taken as a tea to cure colds. Again, brains, tongue, heart, liver, "sweet meat," testicles, and even some other debris were kept as food. Steaks, chops, roasts, tail (ox-tail) and ribs were standard cuts. Even the testicles were roasted and eaten by some. Veal was made into *grillades* which were most often served with grits.

Almost all Creole foods were cooked and eaten with a gravy or *raux*. *Raux* was the base for *gumbo* and *file gumbo*, a redundancy recognized even by non-French speakers. *File*, pounded or ground sassafras leaves, was the "thickening" added to *raux* and soups. It was also used, sometimes, to flavor smoked meat. *Gumbo*, or okra, was, like *file*, cooked and added to thicken the *roux* base in a dish which bore its name.

Meats were eaten rapidly in the old days. Once a beef was slaughtered, the meat was either "put up" in strips which were smoked and dried as *tasso* or cooked immediately. A butcher in the 1930s would kill one beef a week, load the meat in his buggy, and take it to Montrose, then a thriving mill town. He would blow his horn, a conch shell, and people would buy up the beef Mid-week he would slaughter a hog, and the same process would result in the pork being preserved - "put up" in hot lard in buckets, smoked in smoke houses as bacon, ham or, again, *tasso*. Pork was also made into sausage - at least three kinds on Cane River: *Andouille*, *Zandouille*, and hot sausage.

Andouille was a favorite, smoked sausage for eating as is. *Zandouille*, in spite of the similarity of the name, is different. It was made primarily for seasoning and was cooked, sliced thin, into gumbo. Ground hot sausage was also made, but until refrigeration, smoked sausage was easier to preserve. Although these food preferences persist, home preservation of meat is very rare. Not a single smoke house was found on Isle Brevelle, and *tasso* making seems to have stopped by about 1940.

Electricity and refrigeration have changed this whole situation. Animals are slaughtered at Natchitoches now, and the meat refrigerated or frozen. Still, people bring French or Creole-style products back from south Louisiana. Ville Platte and Lafayette are the famous sources of Creole meats. Still, until recently, two Creole butchers worked in Natchitoches, and another's son became a famous local chef in New Orleans. Creole meat foods were highly valued in both places.

Meat pies - stuffed "pies" containing a mixture of ground sausage, ground beef and spices, - are a Creole hallmark (Figure 33). Since both beef and pork are in them, it seems appropriate to speak of them now. Tradition holds that the meat pies were first sold by ladies who carried baskets of them from door to door in Natchitoches in the 1930s and 1940s. Subsequent to the World War IT era, meat pies have been sold out of people's homes. Virtually everyone in Natchitoches has some individual whose meat pies are favorites. Recipes do vary a great deal, and some argue the pies must be fried, while others prefer baked ones. The annual St. Augustine Church

Fair, each October, draws crowds of local non-Creoles to the church hall. The St. Augustine ladies' and men's organizations work together to sell meat pies, *gumbo* (usually containing chicken and sausage), tamales, and turkey and dressing. Cakes are raffled or sold; sweet potato pies and pecan pies are sold, too. Pralines are sold. For outsiders, this is the most frequent first encounter site for Creole culture. It is, as has been stated earlier, now a popular stop on the annual tour of Cane River plantations. Natchitoches meat pies are now famous, but Creoles view them as a relatively recent addition to their whole range of cuisine. Their popularity seems tied directly to tourism, particularly the annual Natchitoches-Cane River Historic Tour.

Aside from roast and steak, the *boulet*, or meat balls, made of highly seasoned ground beef (sometimes offish) were another favorite meat food. Served in a rich row: or tomato gravy, they were common on Cane River.

In the old days, Creoles viewed gumbo as the traditional food for large, especially large public gatherings. The Mardi Gras and the annual Church fair produced gumbos cooked in large black iron pots outside in the yard. Most often these gumbos are, like those still served at the fair, made of chicken. As Mrs. Lily Delphin points out, these are "extension" foods. More water, more gumbo, but local Creoles are critical if it gets too thin.

Spices are integral to Creole cooking. Like the roux, which must be just the "right" color and which is easily burned, the exact amount of spice is important to virtually

every dish. Most important is cayenne, or red, pepper and black pepper. The red pepper is grown in Creole gardens, and local "experts" prepare it. The pepper is dried in hot, dry places, a room in the house or a shed. It may be "finished" by heating it on a stove. Strung whole, it is dried, seeds and all. Otherwise, the peppers are stripped away from the seeds by hand which yields a less hot product. The seeds are the really "hot" portion of the pepper pod. John Colson, whose mother and whose neighbor, Mrs. Clara Jones, were and are the best known "experts," describes it as a painful process (Figure 34). He reminisces that his father would leave the house when it was being done! It burns the eyes, and great care must be taken not to get the hands near the eyes. Young people helped strip, de-seed, and string or grind the pepper. Their hands would be stained red from the pepper, and it was a slow, delicate process. People sat on the gallery and did the "pepper." It was ground in a handmill and then packed into bottles with a small stick, sometimes a peach limb. The Happy Place furnished the bottles in the old days. Dark brown whiskey bottles were preferred containers for ground pepper. Traditionally, two or three ladies made enough pepper for the whole community and sold it to those who needed it. Some people on Cane River still grow large patches of cayenne. They hesitate to admit they sell it, fearful of taxes and In the old days, Creoles viewed gumbo as the traditional food for large, especially large public gatherings. The Mardi Gras and the annual Church fair produced gumbos cooked in large black iron pots outside in the yard. Most often these gumbos are,

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sold it to those who needed it. Some people on Cane River still grow large patches of cayenne. They hesitate to admit they sell it, fearful of taxes and controls on their work. Under a grant from the Louisiana Office of Folklife, the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, the St. Augustine Historical Society has begun documentation of "pepper-making" and also the preparation of the other favored spice, *file*. Joseph Moran is following the local "experts" through the process, photographing and recording preparation.

Native Americans used the sassafras leaves as flavoring, even smoking meats with them, and the dried leaves were pounded into a powder for a food additive. In Creole, 'and also Cajun, cuisine this Indian foodway has remained intact. Where Native Americans lived in close proximity to Creole communities, they sold file and other herbs along with cane basketry to the Creoles. It is a plant (sassafras *albium* sp.) that grows best in the uplands, usually in the "sand hills" or terraces. Creoles on Cane River traditionally gather their sassafras leaves at the headwaters of Bayou Derbanne in the hills. An expert, Aznore Sers, is traditionally consulted about the time and place, but the leaves are always gathered in August on the Feast of the Assumption, August 15. John Colson notes that a number of variables are right then and that color and the shapes of the leaves make significant differences.

At file gatherings, families would go to the hills, carrying cotton sacks, and literally fill them with the leaves. The leaves would then be brought home, put in a dry,

hot room-sometimes piled waist deep - and these would be stirred regularly until they were properly dried. Then they were pounded into powder after the stems had been removed carefully. The pile et *pilon* were employed for this task, but early on they were replaced by hand mills used to grind the leaves. Once ground, the *file*, like pepper, was stored in dark-colored bottles. Today beer bottles are popular for both products, but commercial spice bottles are recycled for *file* as well. As with pepper, today women are famous for their *file*; Mrs. Clara Jones and Mrs. Severine Kirkland are widely respected for their products. Older ladies control the market, but other people make their own primarily for family consumption. Mickey Moran and his sons now dry sassafras in their abandoned school bus and are making *file*. They are the only younger males involved at this point although Mrs. Clara Jones's son helps her. Both men and women gathered and prepared *file*, and the Moran boys, both pre- and high school age, are following that Creole tradition. Michael Moran's *file* won a blue ribbon at the 1995 Natchitoches Parish Fair for local foods.

Onions, shallots, and garlic are the other popular ingredients in Creole cuisine. Creoles often point out the popular statement by Chef John Folse, a Louisiana television personality, that Cajun food is cooked "with love." However, they object to this statement, adding that "Creole food is cooked with herbs and spices." Creoles are quick to point out that Cajun cuisine, now enjoying national popularity, is, in the main, Creole cookery. The Acadians, they point out, either

learned foodways like the use of okra, cayenne and file in Louisiana or during their stay in the West Indies. Certainly Creole cuisine was the earlier colonial precedent, a point Creole cooks hasten to make! So one finds tomatoes, okra, onions, and garlic in garden after garden on Isle Brevelle and elsewhere on Cane River. One or another of these plants is likely to grace most daily meals.

Other vegetable foods, les legumes, are also part of the Creole repertoire. Squashes –Crooked Neck, Merlitons, and others – are particularly popular. The late Mrs. Zeline Roque, famous for her conservatism, strung long ropes of pumpkin for drying, hanging them near her hearth. A local home economics teacher recalled seeing them hanging there in the 1920s. This practice, echoed in pepper and in *tasso*, of drying foods to preserve them clearly has Native American roots. Probably nowhere in Creole life is this influence as well preserved as in their food ways. Certainly these traditions were added early in the colonial period.

While fried pies – meat or fruit – echo the empanadas of their Hispanic roots and gumbo the famous mixture of Native American (file), African (okra) and French-Spanish (*cayenne and raux*), the Creoles see the combination as more important than the ingredients. Still, they are well aware of how their cultural roots connect them to their preferences for the table.

Desserts are also linked to a wide range of such influences. Cakes, "tea cakes," *galets*, and pies are connections to a wide range of possibilities, and show up at

every big meal. The pecan tree has long been grown at homes on Isle Brevelle. Long before commercial pecan groves or plantations were planted, families planted the trees. People gather pecans for their own use in cakes, pies, and the sugary pralines. Often sugar or cane syrup is another ingredient mixed with pecans one way or another - the colonial interface of West Indian-African sugar production and the native pecan.

Tea cakes, served with rich, thick coffee, are another old-time food. Again, numbers of people remember Zeline Roque baking them before her hearth and always having "tea cakes" for children who visited her home. Essentially a cake cookie, they are still popular in Creole homes. Similar to tea cakes are *galets*, a sweet cake as popular as tea cakes.

Coffee - with just about anything - is still traditional. Creole etiquette clearly calls for offering a guest food or drink. Coffee, parched from commercially available green beans, has always been the traditional drink. It was kept ready on the stove or hearth all day. People drank: early morning coffee, mid-morning coffee and, again, mid-afternoon coffee. It was dripped and strong. Children took it as *cafe au lait*, and adults usually added lots of sugar and, often, cream. It was, and is, offered regularly to anyone who visits. The coffee grinder was a regular part of the Creole household everywhere on Cane River, and coffee was ground fresh, sometimes daily.

Teas were popular, but most of the time, as in much of the South, iced tea was served with meals. Teas made of herbs - mint or sassafras root - were sometimes considered home

remedies and given medicinally. Still, they were also consumed as simple beverages as well. Mint was often added to iced tea. Lemonade, according to Mrs. Lily Delphin and others, was the popular cooling drink that Creoles were famous for. It is still popular in Creole homes. *Zis-Zis* fruit, or *jujubes*, is gathered in the Fall; it is eaten as a fruit or, Mrs. Rosalie Metoyer recalls, made into brandy. This tree, introduced from China, may echo the other Creole cultural ingredient on Cane River, the mixture of antebellum Chinese families into the community. Brandy, usually made from plums in late summer or fall, is still produced by some families for home consumption. Figs, eaten uncooked or made into preserves or jams, are classic Creole food. Virtually every older home has fig trees associated with it.

Still more exotic, but widespread, were pomegranates. This plant, likely dating to the Spanish colonial period, was a popular fruit on Cane River. A grove of these trees is found at the Marie Thérèze Coin-Coin House still. Arabic in origin, no other tree is so often connected with Spanish, or Islamic-influenced African culture, than the pomegranate.

Wild grapes, pecans, and other wild plant foods - including the *patate sauvage* - or Indian Potato - actually a fungus, recalled by Andy Bynog as a medicine or a dessert (sliced, flied, and sugared) - often rounded out the foodways. These wild foods, like *file*, are resoundingly Native American. They are part of a complex of hunting and gathering that once existed all across the region.

Today only recreational fishing for crappie, white perch

(*sac au lait*), and catfish remains popular year round (Figure 36). Harpooning garfish, once popular among Creoles, is now considered illegal and only rarely occurs. Gar provides a popular meat with African Americans, but is "creolized" into the *boulet* form for consumption. Ground gar meat is browned in a skillet and then smothered in a thick gravy and served over rice.

Frequencies of wild meats vary by season, but duck, quail, geese, and other bird hunting seem less popular with Creoles than with their neighbors, although dove hunting is still popular among some of the Creoles. Deer, rabbit, and squirrel hunting are less frequent than in the past, victims to widespread land clearing in the valley and the lack of access to lumber company or federal forest land in the hills. Still, deer hunting - without dogs - is common with Creoles on the river.

Various types of fowl, particularly chickens, geese, ducks, guineas, and pigeons, have always been popular foods on the island and along Cane River. Pigeons were raised, and people recall closing the exits of the pigeonniers so they could take the pigeons inside the building, on the nests. Chickens were raised and sometimes ranged about the yards freely, but often there was a chicken house in the backyard. Eggs were gathered daily, and chickens were cooked in gumbos, fried, smothered in gravy, baked with cornbread dressing, and stewed with flour dumplings. The gizzards and livers became part of a mixture of sausage and rice, called "dirty rice," which could be used as stuffing or eaten as a separate dish on

its own.

Ducks and geese were usually baked, often with a dressing, and duck gumbo, like chicken was another favorite. Guineas were eaten as gumbo, and some families ate guinea gumbo as a breakfast food. Some people raised geese and the guinea fowl as "watchdogs," noting they would make a noise when someone approached; however, everyone knew their food value.

Grains, rice and corn, are also part of the diet. Both were once pounded on the *pilon*, to husk the rice and make meal of the corn. Rice, of course, has an African or Arabic antecedent and is widespread in French- and African-Louisiana cuisine. It is most often eaten as part of another dish with a roux or gravy, or as the "dirty" rice discussed earlier. Jambalaya. a direct descendant of Spanish paella, is rice and tomato-pepper sauce with sausage (either and *ouille* or *zandouille* is used) sliced and added. Gumbo is almost always eaten over rice. Most Creole cooks prefer long-grained rice, today bought at any local grocery.

Corn is eaten fried, boiled, stewed or on the cob. Corn was once ground at local mills; one was at the Roger plantation and is remembered by lots of people. Corn was grown for animal feed, but "sweet corn" or "roasting ears" were Creole favorites. Cornbread was once baked on the open hearth - a cornbread pan was found still in the hearth at the Badin-Roque House. Long-handled iron skillets were used for open-hearth cooking. Blackened iron skillets antedated "Teflon" by generations. Small iron kettles with tall legs to sit above

the bed of coals were once preferred. Such "French" kettles were gradually replaced by round-bottomed "American" forms. Parched corn was used - some recall - as a coffee substitute during hard times.

Some of the corn was "lyed," soaked in water dripped through oak ashes, to remove the husks. This corn was then ground into the dough for tamales. Some families at Cloutierville and *Gorum* had ancient *metates*, brought from Mexico in colonial times, which they used to grind the corn. Corn shucks were carefully selected, washed and trimmed for use in tamale-making. The filling was hot seasoned pork or beef - often the "head meat" of a hog. The shuck was greased, the dough smeared on, the meat added, and it was then rolled and tied into a neat bundle. Tamales are a special occasion, almost holiday, food and like gumbo and meat pies, they are considered a Creole specialty.

Sweet potatoes are, with Creoles as other Louisianians, a favorite food. The late Mrs. Blanche Sers was famous for her sweet potato pies, sold at the Church fair. Her granddaughter-in- law, Mrs. Lita Jones, has the responsibility for the pie-making now. Sweet potatoes are made into bread, fried, and baked as well as made into pies.

All this rich diet was most often served with wine, beer or tea. Wine was popular for home consumption. Beer and whiskey are "party" drinks seen at dances, in the bars, stores and pool halls. Drinking was polite, and men gathered at the stores, sometimes after Sunday Mass, to visit and to have a few drinks. Beer is popular at such gatherings today and until

recently was sold at church functions, usually by members of the Knights of St. Peter Claver or the Holy Name Society. Drinking is not frowned upon, and people will often offer a visitor a beer or a glass of wine. Drunkenness is not, however, considered polite, and most gatherings are remarkably free of drunken behavior. Hard drinking seems to have been relegated to the various "halls" and outside during dances.

Creole traditions of sharing food and drink with family and friends are as strong today as it was two centuries ago. No Creole gathering would be complete without that. Gumbos, barbecues, picnics, homecomings, church functions, the annual Heritage Day - all celebrate food and drink.[1]

1. WE KNOW WHO WE ARE: . . by H. F. Gregory and Joseph Moran pp.133-148