For three days the citizens of Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, Joe Amy's grocery store is a few miles east of Breaux Bridge near the edge of Bayou Teche. Inside there's relief from the glaring sun and a perfume of coffee, spices, vanilla beans, sausage, and cheese — a delight to anyone old enough to remember how a country store is supposed to smell. From a shed in the rear comes another aroma that belongs especially to this deep Cajun country of southwestern Louisiana. At a long table, ladies in print dresses and aprons are peeling and packing the small rosy red crustaceans for which the region is famous. The rich smell of boiling crawfish fills the air.

Gourmets as far away as Stockholm and Paris maintain that crawfish is a delicacy rivaling lobster, its larger salt water cousin. No one in the Louisiana bayou country — where every man considers himself a gourmet — would disagree. Many visitors come to the region lured by the romantic legend of the French Acadians exiled from Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century. But they go home remembering the wonderful flavor of crawfish.

“A man who has not eaten crawfish has not lived,” says Andrew Thevenet, whose speech is spiced with the regional accent. Monsieur Thevenet is sixty-five and has eaten his share. In the crawfish eating contest of 1967 he consumed thirty-three pounds at a sitting, defeating many younger rivals.

In the bayous and swamps of the Atchafalaya River basin west of New Orleans, men in pirogues hollowed from cypress trunks have trapped and netted crawfish for many generations. Called crayfish in the King's English and écrevisses in French, these pincer-clawed shellfish come in many sizes and colors. The red swamp species of Louisiana are four or five inches long and a pinkish gray color until they meet their fate in boiling water, when they turn lobster red.

Older citizens of Breaux Bridge, whose main street parallels Bayou Teche, remember when a bucket full of crawfish cost ten cents. Today, fine restaurants feature crawfish on their menus, and they are cultivated to meet the growing demand. Thousands of acres of swampland and rice fields have been turned into crawfish farms. For rice farmers they are a rotational crop and proliferate in the flooded fields between rice harvests. Female crawfish lay their eggs in the fall, and the crawfish eating season begins
celebrate crawfish season with feasts, dances, and parades around Christmas and runs through the first six months of the year. In the 1964-65 season, when rain was plentiful and the weather mild, more than 10 million pounds of crawfish were harvested in Louisiana — the largest crop crawfishermen can remember.

Both the prosperity and the fame of Breaux Bridge rest in large part on crawfish. This peaceful town of 4,000, whose finest homes line the wooded banks of the bayou, has been proclaimed Crawfish Capital of the World — or La Capitale Mondiale de l'Ecrevisse — by the Louisiana Legislature. Its Acadian heritage is apparent in the names of its citizens and their businesses: Broussard Hardware, Hebert's Creamery, Frank J. Guidry, Humble dealer, Evangeline Auto Company, C'est la Vie Billiard Room.

During most of the year, the town is a quiet place resting in the shade of its live oaks. But when Crawfish Festival season arrives in late April or early May there is a sudden change in tempo. Birdsongs are drowned out by accordians playing old-time French songs. Main and Bridge streets are closed to traffic for three days while Cajun bands alternate with rock groups for the college students who come from Louisiana State University and the University of Southwestern Louisiana. The festivities begin with a Mass on Friday morning at the red brick Church of St. Bernard and continue non-stop until the Grand Crawfish Queen Parade on Sunday afternoon.

The fun and dancing are sustained entirely on a feast of crawfish. Nothing else is served at restaurants and cafes in Breaux Bridge during the festival, and crawfish is the staple of hospitality at every open house. Fortunately, there are many ways to cook the crustacean. The bisque is a savory, nourishing soup of crawfish, onions, and green pepper. Crawfish heads are stuffed to make a succulent hors d'oeuvre. Crawfish étouffée, a stew seasoned with onions, garlic, and red pepper and served over rice, is a main dish that has traveled to restaurants in the South and Southwest. For festival visitors there are crawfish dogs on rolls, crawfish pies, and the basic boiled crawfish, which provides one tasty bite apiece, stripped from the tail and dipped in sauce.

Today the crawfish is king of foods in the Cajun country; tomorrow it may conquer a larger world. Studies of crawfish farming methods and experiments in crawfish processing are being carried out by state agencies and universities in Louisiana, and production is increasing. Frozen crawfish are being shipped to distant parts of the country — often to customers who tasted the noble écrevisse for the first time on Main Street, Breaux Bridge, at festival time.

As Andrew Thevenet says, "They always come back for more."