Crawfish craze
Cajun cooks going west with recipe for festival

Text by Paul Hilbun, Photos by P.C. Piazza

BREAUX BRIDGE — The residents of a tiny California town, and visitors to its annual festival, literally are being bitten by a form of mudbug madness.

Rene Prejean, a Lafayette restaurateur, is helping spread the fever by serving up authentic Cajun-style crawfish.

"We put in all the spices, just like we use for serving here," he said. "We don't cut any slack on the seasoning and the people seem to like it.

"If anyone can't take the heat, they can eat something else," Prejean said, "because the idea is to give them the true taste of boiled crawfish."

The shipment of crawfish is part of an exchange program, or twinning, between Breaux Bridge and its adopted sister city of Isleton.

Central to the exchange is crawfish, a feature attraction at festivals in both locations.

The Isleton Crawdad Festival, set for June 15-17, is in its fourth year while the annual crawfish fest in Breaux Bridge, on the first weekend in May, dates back 30 years.

"This all started last year," according to Beverly Brignac, twice coordinator of the Breaux Bridge festival.

"The Hands (Ralph and Charli) who are involved in the Isleton festival, found out about the one in Louisiana," Brignac said. "They called the Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce and eventually were directed to us.

"We talked on the phone a lot and wanted to twin the two festivals," Brignac said. "So, that was the beginning of a wonderful exchange."

The twinning was done on two stages last year, first in Breaux Bridge when a California delegation visited the crawfish festival during May and then a month later when a group of Cajuns traveled to the West Coast for the crawdad festival.

Now, the exchange continues. The Californians were here last month for the Breaux Bridge festival and the Cajuns are ready for a western trip.

Aimye Theriot, the 1990 Breaux Bridge Crawfish Queen, is planning to attend the Isleton event along with several members of the Crawfish Festival Association board.

"The ultimate aim of our festival is to promote crawfish," Brignac said. "So, this twinning is another way to get out the message, encouraging the use of our products.

"The exchange is unique because they serve Louisiana crawfish. But, they also must use our spices and products for seasoning, which really makes the difference in taste."

— Beverly Brignac

The exchange is unique because they serve Louisiana crawfish. But, they also must use our spices and products for seasoning, which really makes the difference in taste.

Experience is another key ingredient, particularly if those cooking have the right equipment.

Prejean has all the tools, pre-cooking thousands of pounds of crawfish in a large boiler right outside The Old Ice House Restaurant, which he and wife Cindy operate.

The crawfish, about 8,000 pounds total, are boiled and blast frozen for shipment via truck to Isleton.

Prejean, along with cooking

(See Craze, page B-2)
Companions Johnny Jackson, Dale Smith and Dan Stelly, are leaving this morning for Isleton — where they will serve their crawfish to Californians and a few transplanted Cajuns.

“We met a few people with familiar names (Richard, Dartez and Trahan) last year and expect to see them again,” Prejean said. “There are quite a few people from our area who moved to California for jobs and, for them, the festival is a special treat.”

But the natives also showed a keen appreciation for crawfish, cooked the Cajun way, Prejean said. “We really drew a crowd, with lines of people 60 and 70 deep at our counter.”

The cooking is different in both style and substance, he said. “They were cooking in 50-pound lots while we can boil 1,800 pounds at a time in our big double boiler.

“But the main difference is in the seasoning,” Prejean said. “We showed them how to cook with a lot of spices — throwing in cayenne pepper, hot sauces and a few other things to bring out the flavor.”

The Sacramento delta does produce two species of crawfish but the season starts in September, too late for the Isleton festival. So, the Californians looked to Acadiana for their supply and found expert cooks in the process.

Ralph Hand, who is a co-chairman of the Isleton fest and has twice visited Breaux Bridge’s celebration, said the exchange is working well.

“Our festival features constant music from zydeco to rock, arts and crafts, and all kinds of food,” he said. “We started our festival and then went to Breaux Bridge.

“Now, our festival is patterned after theirs,” Hand said. “The big thing is the boiled crawfish, which really is popular.”

The festival in Isleton, 45 miles west of Sacramento, started as the Asparagus Festival and later was named the Summer crawdad festival,” Hand said, “and it has really taken with our twinning.”

In addition to boiled crawfish, the festival offers other authentic Cajun food.

John Folse, an award-winning Cajun chef, prepared some specialties last year and Prejean is planning a little lagniappe of his own this year — fried crawfish, boudin and etouffe.

“Originally, we were going to do this on a business basis,” Prejean said, “and it has opened some doors for catering on the West Coast.

“But, more than that, it has turned into a very enjoyable experience,” he said. “We are making a lot of new friends and getting to visit a beautiful area of the country.”