Cajun, Creole chefs preserve local cuisines’ history through unique dishes, traditions

Julissa Lopez
julissa.lopez@thevermilion.com

Louisiana natives are one of the most well-versed in one topic and that is, simply put, food.

As it was aptly put by an Upward Bound student in their 1973 folklore collections with Dr. Patricia Rickels, “The Cajuns love to eat; perhaps it is because they are some of the best cooks in the world.”

And certainly food in Louisiana is distinct, a final product of a mixture of cultures around the world, and we in Louisiana are most well-known for food in two cultures: the Cajun and the Creole. Lafayette is abundant with restaurants and local fooderies catering to the tastes of these unique areas of cuisine.

Poupart’s Bakery Inc., as just one example, has offered its French-based cuisine to Lafayette customers since its opening in 1970. Nestled into busy West Pinhook, Poupart’s offers an array of classic French pastries and breads as well as shelves of canned and frozen Cajun and Creole goodies.

“We do a lot of stuff with figs, which is — a lot of Cajuns do stuff with figs,” Poupart said. “We do figs mixed in with other things as preserves,” Patrick Poupart, owner and son of the founder, said. “Our soups, we do a white bean and tasso. Tasso is a smoked pork meat, which is Cajun. White bean soup, corn and crab bisque, which is also a local type of soup. Crawfish pies, crawfish pistolettes…”

Of course, Cajun and Creole cuisines are not quite the same. Though they have both flourished in the south, they not only have their own histories, but also their own ingredients.

Cajun cuisine is seen as “country food,” according to HuffingPost. The food was crafted by “Les Acadians,” the settling French, who took advantage of the ample fishing and wild game and created a cuisine known for its heavy use of cayenne pepper and mirepoix—a mix of vegetables crafted to create distinct flavors, in this case, onions, celery and green bell peppers.

Creole cuisine, while also crafted by French settlers, was influenced heavily by the upper-class Spanish, thus creating a somewhat fancier version of the Cajun cuisine. Creole food features far more exotic seasonings and ingredients, making their food rich and heavily-sauced.

Lori Johnson, owner of Johnson’s Boucaniere, has been taking part locally in the Cajun and Creole cuisine since her grandfather became the original owner of Johnson’s Groceries, the first grocery store to sell boudin commercially.

“Up until that point, boudin was always made at a neighborhood boucherie or a community boucherie, so my grandfather was, as we know, the first to sell it over the counter,” Johnson said.

The boudin, a Cajun classic dish of carefully-crafted sausage, Johnson’s sells is an old family recipe, crafted by Johnson’s grandfather after he saw the popularity of the dish. Johnson said her family had been hands-on when she was a child, leading to her opening Johnson’s Boucaniere in 2005 to “continue what they started.”

While Cajun and Creole cuisine are usually passed down from experienced family cooks, this is not the case for Jason Derouen, better-known as “The Cajun Ninja” by his 414 thousand Facebook followers.

After the self-taught Cajun chef posted a video of himself cooking gumbo, his page picked up thousands of followers and he decided to continue to take his gift and “run with it.”

“It’s an absolute blessing to do what I do,” Derouen said. “I just hope to do our culture justice, not necessarily through cooking, but through kindness and compassion.”

And Derouen isn’t the only one to voice this hope.

With Cajun and Creole culture seemingly dwindling, chefs in the area said they hope they can help keep their culture alive.

“I think (with food) we’re helping. I like to think so,” Poupart said. “With the Cajuns and us speaking French... we speak with a lot of Cajun people that come in here and you can tell when someone speaks French, and they want to speak French.”

“It’s a real important part of what we do,” Johnson said. “We want to stay true to the traditions that our family upheld also. We don’t want it to die out; we want it to continue. It’s a huge part of our traditions.”

A large part of conserving these traditions through the food, Johnson said, is the nature of what Cajun and Creole cooking are.

“I helped my Mom cook growing up, chopping onions or you know, helping season the round steak or whatever,” Johnson said. “I think the recipes tend to be not so much written down. It’s more of something you learn it by doing it with your relatives. You kind of stay connected that way. You connect with the past and you connect with your family. It’s part of what we do and part of our memories.”

Cut chicken into small pieces. Melt shortening in fry chicken until brown. Add sausage; which is cooked chicken, on top. Add 3 cups water. When water boils, boil, stir thoroughly and simmer 30 to 40 minutes and shallots, stir for 5 minutes long.