Lake Martin, UL officials offers a glimpse into what being a Cajun is all about

Aaron Gonsoulin
aaron.gonsoulin@thevermilion.com

As algae covers the 800 acres of Lake Martin in Breaux Bridge, Champagne’s Cajun Swamp Tour gives both locals and visitors a glimpse into the past of Cajun culture, a history as rich as the century-old cypress trees that cover its swamps.

“What I consider a Cajun is someone who has the same attitudes with others—people who all enjoy music, fun and family,” said Alan Bourque, a tour guide for Champagne’s Cajun Swamp Tour. “You don’t have to be born here to be a Cajun.”

Bourque said what he loves about Cajun culture is its willingness to accept others into their own families.

“I love meeting people from around the world and showing them how we party down here,” Bourque said.

Michael Nagler, a German native, said he visited Champagne’s Cajun Swamp Tour to get a taste of what Cajun culture is all about.

“I love it,” Nagler said, but joked about the heat. “I’ve never sweated this much in my life.”

Bourque said he identifies as a Cajun, adding it’s important for any culture to celebrate their culture, whatever it is, citing how he celebrates it to honor his family and future generations.

“It’s a lifestyle,” Bourque said.

Lake Martin was used when the Cajuns first arrived in South Louisiana in the middle 1700s, according to Bourque.

“They used the swamps to harvest logs, get their food, their fish, their alligators,” Bourque said. “Parents would even use the swamps to take their children to school.”

Before traversing through the swamps of Lake Martin, the original Cajun settlers traveled a much further distance, according to Michael Martin, Ph.D., and a professor of history at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

“Acadian” refers to people who originally migrated from France to a place that was later known as Acadia in what is now the modern-day Nova Scotia, Martin said.

Martin said today “Cajun” is a term that kind of become a blanket term in its meaning.

“A certain groups of people who live in southwest Louisiana and others itself but we cannot initially say where the word ‘Cajun’ is derived from,” Martin said.

Martin said keeping the Cajun culture is vital for future generations.

“Practicing the values of Cajuns and its history is important—for both education and its culture and in some ways, it attracts people to Louisiana, especially south Louisiana,” Martin said.

Martin added in other cultures these elements are needed in the U.S.

“So if we lose that and we all become the same, it would bring fundamental changes to everyone who identifies as a ‘Cajun,’ both here and around the country,” Martin said.

Kaitlyn Guidry, a junior accounting major at UL Lafayette who said herself she identifies as a Cajun, noted the uniqueness that comes with the culture.

“I love the accents especially,” Guidry said. “I even have one myself.”

Guidry added another aspect for Cajun culture to her is family, citing how they always come first.

“I go to my granny’s every Sunday to eat lunch,” Guidry said. “You know, good Cajun food is always popular around here.”

Guidry said it’s important to practice those Cajun values because family is big to her.

“I feel like being a Cajun, you hold your traditions and values very high,” Guidry said.

Want even more coverage of your campus? Head to thevermilion.com for photos and online exclusive content.

Heidi Thevis
Special to the Vermilion

Crawfish: a piece of Cajun culture

According to C. Paige Gutierrez in “Cajun Foodways,” crawfish are the dominant food-related ethnic symbol in Acadiana that is acceptable to a wide variety of Cajuns.

“The power of the crawfish as an ethnic symbol is enhanced by its dual role as a food (a part of the culture) and an animal (part of nature),” said Gutierrez.

Zachary Fuselier, a senior majoring in biology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette said he thinks crawfish boils play an important part in bringing people together.

“Crawfish boils are a staple because they create community and a sense of tightly knit families,” Fuselier said.

Vickie LeBlanc, along with her husband Flap LeBlanc, harvest crawfish in Rayne.

According to Flap LeBlanc, they have been fishing six crawfish seasons in a row. When they first started, they would walk through the pond with small wash tubs pulled behind them by a rope attached to their waists.

As they walked, they would dump the crawfish they caught into the tubs. Now they have a crawfish boat, they are able to drive through the pond to check each cage.

“When Flap is with me, the boat never stops,” Vickie LeBlanc said. “He picks up the cage and shakes it, and I’ll put the new bait in the cage after I empty it and then sort through the crawfish.”

LeBlanc explained one of the setbacks they experience in a season is the cost of bait. The two types of bait they use are a type of hard fish called “shad” and “artificial bait.”

The shads, according to her, lasts longer in the winter and the artificial bait lasts longer in the summer. Another setback Vickie LeBlanc said they deal with is when their truck driving business
keeps them from fishing the pond every day because, after three or four days of not fishing, crawfish start to eat each other.

Vickie LeBlanc said her favorite part of crawfishing is being able to show how they crawfish. They've been able to take a girl from France and friends from Vermont out on the boat to see how it's done.

According to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, there are 39 species of crawfish in Louisiana, two of which are targeted to fish: red swamp crawfish and southern white river crawfish.

Vickie LeBlanc said she and her husband don't tend to keep these white crawfish because they tend to be more aggressive than the red ones.

Crawfish season can start as early as December, but most farmers start in January or February. The highest demand in the season is in March or April because of Lent and Easter, and LeBlanc said Holy Week is when they get the most orders.

According to the "Louisiana Crawfish" pamphlet from the Louisiana State University Agriculture Center, a commercial fishery for wild crawfish developed in the 1940s in the Atchafalaya Basin.

Farmers didn't start fishing crawfish in man-made ponds until the 1960s when LSU started doing research on how it affected controlled water levels.

According to Gutierrez, before crawfish were considered a part of Cajun culture, they were poor people's food provided freely by the swamps and streams.

"Cajuns who lived on the edge of the Atchafalaya Basin in the 1930s said that crawfish were just another variety of fish and they became tired of eating them so often," said Gutierrez.

Although she doesn't eat crawfish, Tamara Lindner, Ph.D., and a French professor at UL Lafayette said she thinks crawfish are unique and interesting.

"I was under the impression that it was only something you ate, but it's a symbol, and it's become the Louisiana thing," Lindner said.