Louisiana pride:

Cajun and Creole cooking reflects passion, love of family in region, journalists told

BY JAN MCDONALD
Food writer

NEW ORLEANS — U.S. and Canadian food journalists will leave the state this weekend with one fact firmly fixed in their minds: South Louisianians are passionately proud of their food.

The pride is justifiable not only because food from the region is good, but it reflects the love of culture, heritage, family and good times that Creole and Acadian descendants cherish.

More than 100 members of the Newspaper Food Editors and Writers Association, meeting at the Royal Orleans, were treated to a concentrated dose of regional cooking this week at their annual conference. The group was expected to travel to Baton Rouge today and tour the Bayou Country Pride and Saturday. The visitors probably will get a taste of more good food. New Orleanians, anything above the airport was an introduction to "N'Awlins" included the fact that to two states, he continued, Cajun and Creole. His bellows in greeting to the writers. This a country of a home is laughter. He theorized that families are breaking apart now because they never eat together

Cahn began the presentation by liberally sprinkling cayenne pepper into a glass of water. "This is not Cajun food," he said. "Cooks are taking cayenne pepper, throwing it on food and calling the dish Louisiana, but in New Orleans it is "North."" He continued joking with the audience about the rich foods of the area. "In heaviness there is credibility," he said, and offered another theory why Louisianians eat so much. "We eat because of hurricanes. Skinny people blow away."

No Puritans or Quakers founded Louisiana, he said. Areas that have the Puritan work ethic, he said, also have much blander food. Food was looked on simply as clothes, he suggested.

Residents of South Louisiana, he continued, "are fiercely proud of our food." The good news is that the regional food can be taken out of the city, but the bad news, he said, is that sometimes it is prepared "so incredibly bad."

Cahnsaid that New York, Chicago and San Francisco are the three best eating cities in the country, but none of them has its own foods. "While the word creole can be traced back to the original Portugese, it claims 23 different definitions," Cahn said. While the barbaric Americans took over in 1803, Creole became the "in" word to set the New Orleans people of culture apart from the riffraff from up the river. To be Creole became a badge of honor, and in the city, a remarkable marketing tool. Anything Creole sold.

Almost 50 years before, in 1765, the Spanish king offered land in Louisiana to the French Acadians, exiled from their homes in Nova Scotia. These were farming people, and they moved outside of the New Orleans area. The Acadians who were referred to as Cajuns as they became assimilated in the area, also began using products native to the region.

The food of the region is found in every home, rich or poor, black or white, he said. An education in Louisiana food continues through a lifetime. Each cook prepares a dish differently. "The only way to learn everything is to eat at least once at everyone's house."

Monday morning the group gathered for a discussion of Cajun and Creole cuisine, the differences, history, contemporary versions and adaptations of the foods around which so much of Louisiana life revolves. Joe Cahn, owner of the New Orleans School of Cooking, headed the presentation. He needed no microphone to broadcast his passion for the regional foods.

"Welcome to the country of South Louisiana," he bellowed in greeting to the writers. This a country of two states, he continued, Cajun and Creole. His introduction to "N'Awlins" included the fact that to New Orleanians, anything above the airport was "North."

Cahn began the presentation by liberally sprinkling cayenne pepper into a glass of water. "This is not Cajun water," he said. "Cooks are taking cayenne pepper, throwing it on food and calling the dish Louisiana, but he stressed that food from the region, while it is always spicy, is not always hot.

The people of South Louisiana eat for the fun of it. They eat for entertainment. "New Orleans is the heaviest city in America," he quipped. "That's why we're below sea level." And, he told the audience, if any of them were on a diet, "Shame, shame." Wear elastic clothes, he suggested.

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Bernard Guste, known as Randy to the other chefs on the agenda, is proprietor of Antoine's restaurant owned by his family for 148 years. Louisianians, he told the audience, are always thinking about food. While they're eating breakfast they're thinking about what to have for lunch. The passion for the state's food is a love story.
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He explained the difference between Cajun and Creole foods by saying Creole is the “urban sophisticate cuisine” and Cajun is its “country cousin.”

The foods have a balance of spices which, if prepared properly, never leave a lingering sensation in the mouth. Positive of his audience’s reaction, he said once the food is tasted, “you’re gonna fall in love with it.”

Expressing pride, Guste told of his experience planning and serving the meals for Pope John Paul II during the pontiff’s visit to New Orleans four weeks ago.”

Leah Chase, chef and owner of Dooky Chase in New Orleans, said while other chefs in the area had a chance to learn from the best in the field, her knowledge came from her youth.

Creole cuisine shows a combination of peoples in the city which “was integrated in a way before there was integration.” Exchanging gentle jibes with Guste, Chase said her black grandfather probably taught his how to cook as they came to this country on the same boat.

To black Creoles of the area, cooking was a ritual. Basic ingredients were the onions, bell pepper and celery, but “you have to put a whole lot of love in that pot,” she stressed.

The restaurant business in New Orleans is hard, “because in every home there is a good cook.”

Then the audience was treated to their own version of the Bob and Ray show as Chris Kerageorgiou, chef/owner of Le Restaurant La Providence of Lacombe, and Goffredo Fraccaro, chef/owner of La Riviera in Metairie, teamed up to explain how classical European fare has been influenced locally to give birth to a new cuisine entirely.

Kerageorgiou, from southern France, and Fraccaro, of Italy, both retain heavy accents, even after living in Louisiana for more than 30 years. About two-thirds of what they said were lost on the audience as they kidded and joked with each other, lapsing into their native tongues occasionally.

Both told of how they fell in love with South Louisiana, but Fraccaro admitted that he had trouble communicating with the cooks in the restaurant, especially about the seasoning they insisted on using. He went “back to school” with other local chefs to learn more about the regions cuisine.

Kerageorgiou, who returned earlier this month from a tour to his native country, expressed disappointment in the French restaurants. He said all of them are doing the same thing. The French people are losing the culture of food, he lamented.

But in New Orleans, he said, something new is always happening to food. Everywhere else is a copy. Louisiana has originality. “What we have here, no one else has.”

Marcelle Bienvenu, food columnist and chef at Oak Alley, gave the food writers a first hand view of Cajun food. A native of St. Martinville, the heart of Acadiana, she went home to visit briefly, and within 24 hours had been invited to try three different pots of gumbo prepared by neighbors.

Bienvenu prepared the section on Cajun/Creole cuisine in the Time-Life Books series on food. At first, she said, the editors had planned for the region to be included as a small segment on Southern cooking. She invited them down to the area to see, smell, taste and hear people talk about the food. Bienvenu said the editors ended up giving an entire book to South Louisiana cooking.

The food culture of Nova Scotia stopped here, said Bienvenu. Here was an abundance of salt and fresh water fish and vegetables. The settlers became divided into land Cajuns, who used poultry and pork extensively, and sea Cajuns, who found shrimp and crab and other water animals as a basis for their meals.

“Food is not separate from our life,” she said. It has style, grace and wit in cooking as well as in enjoying and sharing it.

Both Cajun and Creole cuisines, she continued, use what is at hand. They developed together but separately. Cajun cooking usually means everything is put into one pot. “You never knew how many cousins would be there for dinner,” Bienvenu explained, saying that everyone who showed up for a meal