Celebrated chef serves up Creole

By CHERAMIE SONNIER

T

here she was — Leah Chase, one of America’s premier chefs — sifting the bottom of a pot in the kitchen at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center so the staff could prepare another batch of her fat-free Chicken Creole.

Each month, the hospital invites one of Louisiana’s top chefs, assisted by the food service department, to prepare the luncheon meal served in the cafeteria, to patients and in the physician’s lounge. Chase, chef and co-owner of Dooky Chase Restaurant in New Orleans, was the guest chef on Feb. 28 as part of the hospital’s celebration of Black History Month.

“She’s probably the greatest Creole cook alive,” OLOL’s executive chef Louis J. Kowalski remarked as he watched Chase make her rounds of the simmering pots. Chase also is one of the 78 American women featured in the photography exhibit “I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America,” now on exhibit at the New Orleans Museum of Art. The photographs by Brian Lanker also are in a book by the same title.

A visitor to the hospital’s kitchen expected to find Chase supervising the food service staff. Instead, Chase seemed to be everywhere, visiting with the staff and excited visitors, checking the taste of her Chicken Creole, stirring ingredients or scraping pots.

What was so remarkable was that Chase had undergone surgery for a hernia only 2½ weeks before. She said she was back in her restaurant six days later.

CHICKEN CREOLE

6 (5-oz.) boneless and skinless chicken breasts
1 tbl. salt
¼ tsp. white pepper
¼ cup vegetable oil
1 cup chopped onions
½ cup chopped green peppers
2 cups whole tomatoes with liquid
2 cups water
2 cloves garlic (mashed and chopped)
½ tsp. ground thyme (or 2 sprigs fresh)
½ tsp. cayenne pepper
12 small whole okra
1 lb. shrimp (peeled and deveined)
1 tbl. chopped parsley

1. Season chicken with 1 teaspoon salt and the white pepper. In large skillet or chicken fryer, heat the vegetable oil. Place seasoned chicken in hot oil, turning as it cooks (about 6 minutes). Lower heat. Remove chicken and set aside.

2. Saute onions in skillet until they are clear. Add the green peppers, garlic, and thyme, and cook for 3 to 4 minutes.

3. Add whole tomatoes, mashing them as you stir them into onion mixture.

4. Add water, garlic, thyme, cayenne pepper and remaining salt. Let sauce cook on high heat for 4 minutes.

5. Lower heat. Return chicken to sauce. Add okra and cook for 10 minutes until okra are just tender.

6. Add shrimp, let cook until shrimp turn pink (about 5 minutes). Add parsley.

Serve over buttered rice. Yields 6 servings.

— The Dooky Chase Cookbook

Book shares memories of black family cooking

By CHERAMIE SONNIER

Readers of The Black Family Reunion Cookbook (Tradey House, $12.95) are “painting of centuries of history, tradition and culture,” writes Hettie B. Wright in the cookbook’s introduction. “The sharing of good food among loved ones and good friends not only gives us sustenance but also strength to meet life’s challenges,” writes Hettie, president and chief executive officer of the National Council of Negro Women Inc. “I have seen more problems settled in a dining room than in a conference room. A good meal creates a special fellowship that can break down barriers. And, of course, some of my fondest memories of family and relationships revolve around the table or in the beckoning warmth and aroma of the kitchen.”

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CREOLE PORK CHOPS AND CORNBREAD CASSEROLE

4 tbsls. butter-flavored shortening, divided
8 pork chops, ½-inch thick
2 cups chopped onion
2 cups chopped celery
1 cup chopped green bell pepper
1 large clove garlic, minced
2 cups crumbled cornbread
1 egg, lightly beaten
1 can (14 ½ -ozs.) whole tomatoes, undrained, cut up
1 can (8 -ozs.) tomato sauce
1 tsp. brown sugar
½ tsp. chili powder
½ tsp. salt
½ tsp. black pepper
½ tsp. cayenne pepper
1 bay leaf


2. Combine cornbread, egg and half of onion mixture in medium bowl. Set aside.

3. Add tomatoes, tomato sauce, brown sugar, chili powder, salt, pepper, cayenne and bay leaf to remaining mixture in skillet. Simmer about 10 minutes. Remove from heat. Remove bay leaf.

4. Place 4 pork chops in 3-quart casserole. Spread cornbread mixture over chops. Arrange remaining chops on top. Pour sauce over chops. Cover.

5. Bake for 45 to 55 minutes, or until chops are tender.

Makes 8 servings.

— Leah Chase,
The Black Family Reunion Cookbook

Leah Chase visits with customers going through the cafeteria line at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center.
"A tough old bird makes a good soup," Chase joked in explaining her quick recovery.

For the hospital, Chase altered her Creole Chicken recipe to make it fat-free, using okra as the thickening agent.

Unlike most other great chefs of the New Orleans area, Chase didn’t have a formal culinary education that provided a chance to learn from the best in the field, Jesowshek said. Instead, her knowledge of cooking comes from her youth and from her own creativity.

"You must have formal training to advance, but I had to build it (Dooky Chase’s) up on my own," Chase said.

Her New Orleans restaurant is named for her father-in-law, who, along with his wife, began a sandwich shop in 1941 on Orleans Street at Miro Street. Today her husband, also nicknamed Dooky, handles the paperwork for the restaurant. She says they educated their four children out of their business, but she has hopes that a grandson, Chase Haydel, who is studying hotel-restaurant management, will join the restaurant staff.

"The only difference in people is in their skin," I said. I was naive. There are cultural differences. I put out Lobster Thermidor and cream sauces, and no one would touch them. You are what you eat. I had to back up and do what I was taught at home... The food I served was food a black person had in his house every day."

She said she grew up eating grits, jambalaya and stews, and that’s what she prepared for the restaurant.

She said she found that blacks also wouldn’t eat rare roast beef, and whites tend to eat earlier in the evening than blacks. That means that her restaurant sometimes looks segregated – mostly white early in the evening and then mostly black later at night. But, she said, she’s noticed in recent years that "blacks are beginning to eat earlier... it’s better for them."

As more African-Americans went into business or became professional people in the late 1940s and early 1950s, they began wanting to have a lunch break and the restaurant began serving lunches. After integration, blacks began she said.

To accommodate those visitors, she added pork chops, greens and sweet potatoes to the menu, but Chase insists: "I cook Creole. I can’t make a hush puppy. I try."

She also recalls trying to make chitterlings for an out-of-state man who was determined to try some. She had to call another chef for instructions, but hers came out smelly and mushy so she prepared "mock chitterlings" using chicken skin.

"They are always asking for soul food. I don’t know what to call it — Southern or black."

The process of cooking that type of food is different, Chase explained. "A Southerner would sauté the meats and seasonings and drop raw greens in it while Creoles would parboil the greens until tender and throw the water off."

Southern also means "fried chicken with a milk gravy that I can't make," she said. "I find it hard to cook flour without browning."

She believes that "Southern" or "soul food" cooking came about "because people were poor and they learned to do all sorts of things with
"A tough old bird makes a good soup," Chase joked in explaining her mother's cooking.

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Unlike most other great chefs of the New Orleans area, Chase didn't have the advantage of a good education that provided a chance to learn from the best in the field, Jessowshek said. Instead, her knowledge of Creole cooking came from her youth and from her own creativity.

"Now you must have formal training to advance, but I had to build it (Chase's) up on my own," Chase said.

Her New Orleans restaurant is named for her father-in-law, who, along with his wife, began a sandwich shop in 1941 on Orleans Street at Miro Street. Today her husband, also nicknamed Dooky, is a character of the restaurant. She says they educated their four chil-
dren out of their business, but she has hopes that they, and grandchil-
dren, will continue in the food business.

While she has opened their sandwich shop 51 years ago, "black people didn't go out to eat," Leah Chase said. "There were no restaur-
ants for them to go to. Black peo-
ple ate in . . ." In the early '40s, peo-
ple would mostly come out to drink and after a few drinks, they would want a sandwich.

But, by 1946 the Chases were able to open a dining room that mostly attracted white neighborhood clientele, but she said whites also ate there even though integration was illegal.

"If white politicians had to meet . . . blacks, they had to eat blacks and whites needed to get together for union meetings, there was no place to meet but Dooky Chase's," she explained.

Chase, a native of Madisonville, was 18 years old when she got her first job in a restaurant. It was run by Besse Sauvage, a white woman from the North.

"I had never been in a restaurant in my life," Chase said. "She taught me to wait tables, and I got to like it."

She taught me a lot.

Chase and her husband, who had a 16-piece band, were married three months after meeting in 1945. "He was 16, and I was 23. People said it would never work," she said.

The basic ingredients were the onion, pepper and celery but "you have to put a whole lot of love in that pot.

"You always put a little of your self in cooking, and you should do the same even when using cook-
books," Chase said. "That's how Afri-
can-Americans influenced the cooking in white homes, she said.

In their homes, and restaurants, and home in the country, a traditional Creole.

"New Orleans has no Southern culture" when it comes to food, Chase said. "It's a totally different culture" where collard greens didn't play a part. When African-Ameri-
cans from other areas of the coun-
ty attended a convention in New Orleans, they arrive at Dooky Chase's expecting to get pig's tails, mustard greens and chitterlings, she said. To accommodate those visitors, she added pork chops, greens and sweet potatoes to the menu, but Chase insists: "I cook Creole, I can't make a hush puppy. I try." She also recalls trying to make chitterlings for an out-of-state man who came to New Orleans to try them. She said to another chef for in-
structions, but hers came out smel-
lings and smoky as she prepared them. She now makes chitterlings using chicken skin.

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The process of cooking that type of food is different, Chase explained. "A Southern chef learned meats and seasonings and drop raw greens in it while Creoles would parboil the greens until ten-

Southern also means "fried chicken with a milk gravy that I can't make," she said. "I find it hard to cook flour without browning it.

She believes that "Southern" or "soul food" cooking came about "because people were poor and they learned to do all sorts of meats and what they had . . . Sharecroppers and other poor people got the leftover" such as pig's ears and tails.

A year ago she was featured on the "member my mother using type, but she never used chitterlings or pig's ears."

When she was a child, her family "maybe had beans without meat, but we had wine," she recalled. The wine was served in a glass of water with a tablespoon of homemade wine in it.

And, she remembers eating eggs in every meal and orange sauce over rice — on Fridays when Catholics were not allowed to have meat.

Most African-Americans who mi-
gied across the North were from other Southern states, and they took their food with them, Chase said. "I don't think we lost a lot of people from New Orleans until the 1940s, and they went to California . . ."

Chase is on the Junior Achievement

"I think the priority remains running a successful restaurant that keeps loyal customers returning. We fed the mothers and grandmothers. Now we're feeding the children and grandchildren."

"The restaurant business in New Orleans is hard," she said, "because in every home there is a good cook."