Chef Paul has been riding the big wave of success for more than a decade now, so it seemed like a good time to drop in and see what's cookin' these days with the world's most famous Cajun chef. Like anyone's life, however successful they become, the road for Prudhomme has made some prosperous forks, but also taken some bad turns. Most notable in this regard was the death of his wife after a happy, 10-year marriage.

The decision to chat with Chef Paul is not a casual one. Busier than ever these days is an understatement. Prudhomme's present agenda (and he couldn't think of anything he is doing now) includes promoting his latest cookbook and his new line of Magic Seasoning Blends spices (sold in 50 states and 20 foreign countries), overseeing his national mail-order catalog, tending to his andouille and tasso plant in Melville, supervising his restaurant in the French Quarter, keeping up with his nationwide catering service, serving as the inspiration for the annual St. Landry Parish Heritage Festival, and producing cooking videos that have been Billboard chart-busters. His latest project is a regular half-hour cooking class on national TV that airs beginning next January.

Where? It's catch-the-chef-when-you-can, even for his manager. The point?

Prudhomme may be a big, big man. But he is a big, big, gracious, jolly, fun-loving, life-loving man who, in his motorized chair, runs circles around the rest of us. He loves to eat. He loves it with a passion. But more than that, Chef Paul loves to feed people, and his mission in life is to try to reach everyone in the world and introduce them to Cajun cooking. He knows he'll run out of life before he has time to finish this mission, but the vision isn't stopping him. So off Prudhomme is to one country this week, and another one the next.

Two hours of Prudhomme's precious and fast-paced time were spared recently at his suburban New Orleans office, which also houses his Magic Seasoning Blends plant. During those two hours, the soft-spoken culinary master, ever the gentleman, sat calmly behind his office desk and answered questions about the latest forks in the road as though he had all the time in the world.

The Times: A Fork in the Road is a 180-degree turn from the rich, high-fat recipes you became famous for with your first hardback cookbook, Louisiana Kitchen. Why do you write it? Was it a commercial move, or a creative endeavor? Or was it because you're more weight-conscious now?

Prudhomme: Well, I've been overweight all my life. I've been overweight since I was 8 years old. So, I don't think writing a book about low-fat [cooking] is going to make me lose weight. That wasn't my objective. What's going to make me lose weight is me wanting to lose weight, and I haven't reached that point yet.

The book was written because I felt I had discovered a new way to make low-fat food taste good. And I thought it was very important to document that.

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ON HIS LIFE

The Times: How do you create cookbooks?

Prudhomme: To have a successful book, it has to have a theme. It has to have a thread that takes you all the way through it. It can't be scattered. It can't be one kind of taste here and another kind of taste there. I don't mean the tastes have got to be the same. But I mean the idea of the taste, or the emotion of the taste, has to be the same.

The Times: What's the emotion of the taste in A Fork in the Road?

Prudhomme: I think the emotion of this book is surprise. Because people don't expect food without fat to taste good. I think after the surprise there's real pleasure in it. It's not the same kind of pleasure that

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On Fame

The Times: What happened to K-Paul's New York? Why did you close the restaurant only three years after opening it in the summer of 1989?

Prudhomme: When I really got fed up with it was when K got sick. I would have to leave her here because she was too sick to come with me to New York. I guess the truth is, it's been very hard for me to do more than one restaurant and I don't know if I'll ever be able to do it again. I'll probably try, because I'm always getting offers to do restaurants. And I think that one day I'll find the formula for more than one restaurant. I don't think I've figured it out yet!

Even though the restaurant did millions of dollars in sales, it never reached its potential in my head. It was always too much of a worry. When I'm here in New Orleans, what am I going to do if they serve a bad meal in New York except apologize later? Whereas if you're in New Orleans, you know you can do something about it. It's that you're really out of touch. It's very hard to do that.

The Times: Can't you taste food better without so much oil?

Prudhomme: You can. It's an amazing process, but oil stops taste. It gives richness. It gives an enormous amount of richness. But that richness absorbs a huge amount of taste. The way I found that out was in doing this book. I had to use much lighter blends of seasonings.

The Times: When you're at K-Paul's, do you do the actual cooking?

Prudhomme: I haven't done the actual cooking in a lot of years, because when you're in charge of something the worse thing you can do is take a station. You can work all the stations, but to take one on a regular basis you lose track of what's going everywhere else.

I think my job has been for probably the last 25 years to make sure everything's organized and everything's set and everything's ready to go. A conductor can't hear the music if he becomes a musician.

The Times: How have you handled going from a sharecropper's son to becoming such a famous person?

Prudhomme: Well, I think there's two ways to look at it, and I try to balance it as much as I can. I know that I'm a celebrity and I know I'm a star. I know that I have a lot of influence on people. And yet, I try never to worry about that, never to be in that state of mind.

I benefit from the fact that I was raised on a farm without electricity and got a tremendous amount of knowledge about food from that time. And understand, really, the most important thing is other people. Money's not important and all the other stuff. Being from a close and huge family, I learned very early in life the most important thing in my life was my family.

And other human beings are really important. That's what you get satisfaction from. And if you behave improperly, or you behave like a movie star or like a big wheel, you're going to miss that closeness with people. Everything's already very hard to be on a normal basis with any human being because of the fact that I'm on television and that I am successful. So I feel I have to work even harder to be more simple, to be more down to earth.

The Times: Do you still ever have time to have friends over and cook?

Prudhomme: Actually, I've never done that. I work a lot. I'd invite people to the restaurant where I was working, but I would invite people to my restaurant. I'd have them over when the shift was over at 10 o'clock at night, and we'd sit in the corner. It was never, "Come into my home," because I'm always working.

And since all this stuff has happened to me, people won't invite me to their house. They'll invite me out for dinner to a restaurant, but no, nobody...

The Times: Why?

Prudhomme: Well, they're afraid to cook for me.

The Times: When was the last time a friend cooked for you?

Prudhomme: I can't remember. My family is the only people that will do that.

The Times: It seems like your life has become even more hectic these days.

Prudhomme: Every year we say it can't get any more hectic. I look at it as exciting, because we're doing new things all the time. We can only probably respond to 10 percent of what people want us to do. Because of that we get to pick and choose ideal things for us to do. And it's just a great deal of fun.

The Times: You mentioned that you're already at work on your next cookbook. Can you talk a little about it?

Prudhomme: We have to understand each other's foods and customs. The cookbook will be fiery foods of the world that I love. They will be emotional foods from around the world without distinguishing where they're from. I want to start making my own effort to make people come closer together through food.

The Times: People from all over the world rave about Cajun and Creole cuisine, but why do you think that so many places, especially northern cities in the United States, continue to have such bland, non-spicy food?

Prudhomme: People from other areas often tell me, "I love your cookbook! I love it so much!" But they use it maybe five or six times a year. Even though they may enjoy another culture, if they ate food that had so much emotion in it they just couldn't take it! It's the people in South Louisiana. There are very few places where food is so concentrated in the people. We're very wrapped up in our food. We live and breathe it all the time. If we made shoes as well as we do our food, we'd have the best shoes in the world!