Leroy Broussard drains a batch of fresh cracklins.

Broussard uses a meat saw to cut the skins, fat and meat into 2-inch cubes. Meanwhile, 10 gallons of oil heats to 350 degrees in each of two iron pots rigged to stand over gas burners. Half the cubes go in each pot.

Broussard said he's seen big batches of cracklins keep three men busy, either stirring or trying to regulate the heat from an open fire. Even with the adjustable gas burners, Broussard keeps a timer that beeps at 20-minute intervals so he knows when to check the pots, even when he's busy in the store's kitchen or at the counter. Either way, the object is the same - to keep the skins from sticking to the pot and to keep the skins from getting done before the meat.

When the skins cook too quickly, they pop. Broussard reduces the heat or turns the flame off. But if the cracklins stay too long in the cooler oil, some will absorb oil and sink. "Then they're just trash," he said.

Another reason to be careful: Somebody cooked tomatoes in one of the cracklin' pots. Broussard says the acid in the tomatoes takes away some of the oil that helps cure a pot. And food sticks to the uncured iron. When that happens, the skins burn.

So Broussard keeps a close watch on the pots for the 2-2 1/2 hours needed to turn the cracklins golden brown. While they drain in trays lined with newspaper, Broussard increases the heat until the oil reaches 400 degrees. It's time to blister the cracklins.

Blistering means dipping the cooked cracklins in hot oil for a minute or so. During that minute, they turn a lighter brown, develop a porous texture and become crisp. Broussard drains the cracklins and lets them cool. A little salt, and they're ready for packaging.

Comeaux's doesn't add much in the way of seasoning. Broussard said the cured ham skins come with a salty flavor anyway, and it's easier for customers to add Creole spices, hot sauce or other flavorings to fit their own tastes.

Broussard said the ability to satisfy these tastes is one advantage of his job. When he made cabinets, he never saw them in the homes they were built for. "But I see new people all the time here," Broussard said. "And when they come back, you know you must be doing something right."

"One man's necessity can be another man's delicacy. Take cracklins. Cracklins are small, salty monuments to the proposition that, when a hog is slaughtered, only the squeal should escape the butcher's knife. The little chunks of deep-fried fat, meat and skin have been prepared and eaten by Louisiana Cajuns and Creoles, Alabamians of Scotch-Irish descent, and German immigrants living in Missouri's Ozark foothills.

Wherever people butchered hogs and couldn't afford to throw away fat, they ate cracklins. Acadiana people still have a taste for cracklins - a taste that brings people into neighborhood groceries like Comeaux's Grocery & Market at 1000 Lamar. At Comeaux's, the cracklins are the business of processing manager Leroy Broussard.

Broussard says he makes about 400 pounds a week even in summer, when hot weather lowers the demand a little. But sometimes customers are waiting at the counter for the fresh cracklins when Broussard completes the first batch at about 11 a.m. on a summer weekday.

If they arrive early enough, they take home the cracklins in paper bags instead of the store-label plastic wrappers that are usually displayed atop the meat counter.

Beware, though: Cracklins may be soul food, but they're not exactly health food. "Once in a while someone comes in and buys a bag, eats a couple and hands the bag back," Broussard says. "They say, 'I'm not supposed to eat these, and if I keep this bag I'll eat them all.'"