Crawfish Tales

Cajuns didn’t always publicly profess their love of crawfish.

“BUDDIES, THAT’S WHAT THEY WERE,” SAYS RAÉ THIBODEAUX, CRIMACING AT THE DISPARAGING TERM. BORN IN 1935, THIBODEAUX SPENT HER CHILDHOOD ON THE HENDERSON LEVEE. DURING THE 1930s, HER GRANDPARENTS, HENRY AND OSCALIE GUIDRY, RAN A RESTAURANT AND HONKY TONK ALONG BAYOU AMIE CALLED GUIDRY’S PLACE. GUIDRY’S WAS RENOWNED FOR FRIED CATFISH AND COURTBOUILLON, FROG LEGS AND WILD GAME. JUST ABOUT ANYTHING THAT RAN, SWAM OR FLEW WOUND UP IN COOKING POTS, WITH ONE EXCEPTION. CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, LOUISIANA’S MOST FAMOUS CRUSTACEAN, CRAWFISH, WAS A LATE ARRIVAL ON LOCAL TABLES.
Cajuns didn’t eat crawfish publicly in those days. The oil boom had begun, and a flood of Texas and Oklahoma wildcatters arrived in French Louisiana. “Eating crawfish was a sure sign that you were poor,” says Café des Amis owner Dickie Breaux. “I’d eat boiled crawfish at my grandmother’s house, often. If there was a knock on the door, she’d gather up the crawfish and throw them away rather than being seen eating crawfish. French-speaking Cajuns were made fun of by the oilfield people.”

“When I was young we used to live in the flat, le bassiere, where the coulees would fill when it would rain,” adds Pat Huval, a contemporary of Thibodeaux’s and owner of Pat’s Fisherman’s Wharf. Huval’s family lived in Grand Anse, just up the levee from Henderson. “My mums would tell us, ‘Make sure you don’t tell anyone we eat crawfish.’

“Crawfish, back then, you’d go out on the levee and boil crawfish over an open fire for the kids to eat,” Thibodeaux notes. “There wasn’t any price. You didn’t buy crawfish. Someone would give you a sack.”

According to Breaux, the first establishment to serve crawfish commercially was the Hebert Hotel in Breaux Bridge in the 1920s. Mrs. Charles Hebert ran the hotel, and her daughters Marie and Yolie cooked for the salesmen guests who arrived by train or boat. Sunday dinner, a melange of everything Cajun, drew local diners. One dish on the Sunday lunch was made of butter, onions, pepper, crawfish fat and tails, which the sisters called crawfish courtbouillon.

Thibodeaux picks up the tale. “In about 1948, when I was 13, my mother, Aline Guidry Champagne, opened a restaurant in the Rendezvous, in Breaux Bridge. The Rendezvous was a large dance hall with a bar. Champagne started out serving seafood platters, fried chicken, fried oysters, fried shrimp — the same menu her father, Henry Guidry, had offered at Guidry’s Place. Champagne was friendly with Marie and Yolie Hebert and they exchanged recipes, including the one for crawfish courtbouillon. When Breaux opened Café des Amis in 1991 with the mission of serving traditional Cajun food, Champagne visited him and passed on the Hebert sisters’ recipe, along with a story.

“That particular Sunday,” Breaux recounts, “Aline was in the kitchen of her restaurant, The Rendezvous, cooking Marie and Yolie’s courtbouillon for her own dinner. Somebody brings her a sack of crawfish. She has to purge them, clean them, parboil them, pull the tail out, stick a finger in, grab a cup of the fat. She adds onions and bell peppers, sautéed in butter and the fat, adds the crawfish, cooks it until the tail completely curls, and it’s done in about 10 minutes. She’s in the kitchen, and the kitchen has these swinging doors. Martin Begnaud was a banker at Farmer’s Merchants Bank in Breaux Bridge. He sticks his head in the kitchen, he’s talking to Aline in French. He asks what she’s doing. ‘J’essouffler les crevettes,’ she says. (‘I’m smothering some crawfish.’) Aline gives him a taste. The next week Begnaud comes back with his employees and orders crawfish etouffee. That’s how she put crawfish etouffee on the menu.”

Par Huval turned 18 years old in 1948 and started his first business out of his brother’s garage in Henderson. “I put in a cement floor, made it a store. I made hamburgers, sold some gas, sold beer and pop. I was boiling crawfish in the back of the garage. I was catching crawfish in a net.”

In 1952 Huval bought Henry Guidry’s Henderson restaurant and dance hall on credit. He started serving boiled crawfish to the burgeoning ranks of out-of-state oilfield workers and Cajuns who fought in World War II and saw Europeans eating crawfish. What had been stigmatized in the 1930s was now acknowledged as a local specialty. “People from Lafayette, Baton Rouge, Cecilia, Amousville, Opelousas — from everywhere — started pouring in,” Huval says. “They drove highway 90, 190, on the levee. There was no I-10 back then.

“I knew all the governors,” he continues. “Earl Long, Jimmie Davis, John McKeithen, [Edwin] Edwards, and now Kathleen. Earl, he’d tell me ‘Hey boy,’ when

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— Dickie Breaux
rawfish etouffee was Huval's best seller. His recipe is still a secret. “The way my mama used to fix it was better than the rib-eye steak on the table. Them old people in the old day, they didn’t have no recipe. It was a taste of the tongue. We’d taste, add a little more seasoning, and it’s better than a recipe.”

Meanwhile, in Lafayette, the Landry family was putting their own family restaurant on the map. The year after Prohibition was repealed, in 1934, Don’s Beer Parlor opened on the corner of Vermilion and Polk. Along with newly legal alcohol, Don Landry served boiled shrimp, gumbo and stuffed crabs. Customers threw the shells onto the sawdust floor.

Don’s brother Ashby joined the business in 1939, and changed the name to Don’s Seafood Inn. In 1952, a third brother, Willie, combined his corner grocery with the restaurant, and the enlarged establishment was renamed Don’s Seafood and Steak House. “We started peeling boiled crawfish in the back of the kitchen. In about 1950 Don’s was one of the first restaurants to serve a bisque or etouffee,” says Ashby “Rocky” Landry jr., the present owner of Don’s. “It was slow at first,” daughter and co-owner Stephanie Landry says. “But with the etouffee, bisque and fried crawfish — within two years it just exploded. There were walls to walls people.”

Highway 90 back then, before the four-lane was built, ran right past the Yellow Bowl’s front door. The previous year, 1959, Governor Earl Long signed a legislative resolution designating Breaux Bridge the Crawfish Capitol of the World. That same year, Breaux Bridge celebrated its centennial by crowning a Crawfish Queen who reigned over dances, parades, art and hobby shows, a trail ride, motorcycle rally and cooking contest. “Who had the balls to invite the whole world to come watch them eat crawfish?” says Breaux. “You better believe that was gutsy.” The next year Breaux Bridge kicked off the Crawfish Festival.

Building the I-10 raised causeway across the Atchafalaya Basin in 1973 was not only an engineering feat, it opened up the crawfish restaurants to interstate travelers. Instead of an eight-hour drive from New Orleans or Houston, Pat’s in Henderson was suddenly only two to three hours away. Business doubled, according to Huval; But it’s not only access that makes Acadiana’s restaurants so popular. Crawfish may have arrived at the temples of haute cuisine in New York and Paris, but the best place to eat crawfish is overlooking the Henderson swamp. “All good things,” muses Huval, “come from the back roads.”

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