Where Crawfish Is Caviar And Gumbo Is Gold

By Susan D. Bliss

Travelers agree that south Louisiana restaurants can serve up some of the tastiest regional food in the nation. And that's one reason for the restaurants to compete with everybody's mother.

No one sitting in Maude Ancelet's living room in Lafayette, La., following a dinner of crawfish etouffee and shrimp etouffee and fig cake could disagree with that comment from her son Barry. For the citizens of Lafayette, heartland of Cajun culture, flavorful food that south Louisiana haute cuisine is centered on "crawfish" means to cook soul food.

"You can make a roux in 10 minutes or one hour," Ricard says, depending on how dark you want it, and just as the roux gets to the right point, you throw your cooking in. That cool the rice and stop the cooking process. To her roux, Ricard adds two pounds of crawfish, a tiny crustacean that, along with Chef Prudhomme, has helped make Cajun food famous.

The cultural mixing of the Cajun and Caribbean cultures is well mixed in south Louisiana. Vegetable bins hold squashlike mirlitons, small green tomatillos and plantains. The fish counter is chocka-block with jumbo Gulf shrimp, local crawfish and whiskey-10-pound catfish.

Serious are regional culinary customs, and so creatively have south Louisiana's managed to maintain them in contemporary life, that cooks from New Orleans and south Louisiana are among the nearly 100 folk artists demonstrating their skills, through July 7, during the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folk Life in Washington, D.C.

The cultural mixing process, or "creolization," percolated strongest in New Orleans, where "creole" cuisine is centered. Glenn Conrad, director of the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, traces the origin of "creole" back to a person born in the colony. Hence, creole is a synonym for "born here."

But to the New Orleans restaurant community, creole means Louisiana haute cuisine derived from classic French cooking. Often, to "cook creole" means to combine French and Afro-American cooking, compare the city folk who do so can trace their New Orleans ancestry back to 18th-century French or Spanish colonists and African or Caribbean blacks. Outside New Orleans, in Cajun country, to "cook creole" means to cook soul food.

Mathe Allain, president of the Louisiana Historical Association, was born in France but makes her home in Lafayette. An enthusiastic cook herself, Allain has devoted many of her studies to Louisiana transformation of classic French recipes with walnuts dipped in sugar. Allain says, "Here, pralines are made with syrup—not sugar, naturally—and pecans, which are grown nearby.

Carmen Ricard's crawfish etouffee is another Louisiana interpretation of a French classic. To thicken the sauce, Ricard begins her preparation with a roux. In France, this handy thickener is made with butter and flour, but in south Louisiana, where land was given over to sugar and rice cultivation, dairy products are not prevalent in cooking. Instead, a roux made with vegetable oil is the base for many a gumbo, creole and stew. You can make a roux in 10 minutes or one hour, Ricard says, depending on how dark you want it, and just as the roux gets to the right point, you throw your cooking in. That cools it down and stops the cooking process. To her roux, Ricard adds two pounds of crawfish, lobsterlike crustaceans that, along with Chef Prudhomme, have helped make Cajun food famous.

Over in Henderson, La., you can visit Seafood Inc., one of the region's biggest crawfish processing plants. "Henderson is just a Cajun town where everybody lives on catching crawfish," plant manager Lundy Gudry says.

Each man looking for crawfish sets some 800 traps every morning, and May catch up to 1,000 pounds a day. The crawfish are taken to a processing plant and parboiled. At Seafood Inc., some 60 workers, immigrants from Vietnam, then pick the white meat from each creature's meaty tail. For every 75 pounds of crawfish, they pick up 60 pounds of meat. "One of the reasons that crawfish are popular is that they become available commercially," Maude Allain says, "Cajuns used to eat them not as a treat, as something they could catch."

Many Cajun food traditions are still closely tied to the agricultural year, even though fresh ingredients are now available through the seasons. Lucy Sedatal came to the Folklife Festival from Pierre Part, La., a tiny Cajun town you to have to get to, according to local wisdom, because it's so far off major roads. Until a few years ago, Sedatal's husband, Raymon, "made a boucherie," or butchered a hog, every fall. "We'd make our own cracklins, salt meat and 'andouille' (smoked sausage)," Lucy says. "Then we'd put salt meat and the leftover pieces you didn't know what to do with in a 5-gallon crock. The pig's tail went at the bottom. The scraps were preserved and used in cooking. Cracklins were eaten as snacks. "When you got down to the tail, you knew it was time to boucherie some more," she recalls.

Carmen Ricard, a Creole, was born in New Orleans' Fresh Quarter, but she learned to cook Cajun style from her late husband, who was raised in the country. He makes hogsheads cheese at Christmas, a tradition based on the autumn butchering Sedatal describes. You don't have to go to a delicatessen to find "boudin," another product of the boucherie, based on French "poudin blanc," or white sausage, that the Cajuns brought from Canada. Just about any small grocery sells this delectable rice-and-pork sausage, most likely made down the road in someone's kitchen. Or, "Grocery stores with Continued on Page 12
Gumbo Is Gold
Continued from Page 10

butcher shops make advantage of their good fortune. When Sylvia Conrad was in high school, shrimp was so cheap that "our high school parties were shrimp boils," Conrad was in high school, shrimp was so cheap that "our high school parties were shrimp boils," Conrad, who is descended from early French settlers, uses Cajun recipes and also follows the food traditions of the Creole region's crawfish picking force (above). Cajun fishermen may bring in up to 1,000 pounds of crawfish daily from local inland waters. At left, Carmen Ricard uses some of the tiny crustaceans in a south Louisiana specialty, crawfish etouffee.

Sharing food is the neighborhood way in Louisiana. The shrimp in Maude Ancelet's etouffee was fished out of the Gulf of Mexico and donated for a family dinner the next night by her son-in-law, Willett Menard. "I don't buy very many groceries," Maude says.

What we don't use we give away," Elmo Ancelet, Maude's husband, adds. He is giving a visitor a tour of the vegetable garden behind the house. Over the long growing season, it will yield enough Irish potatoes, carrots, little purple hull beans, okra, lima beans, four kinds of tomatoes, mirlitons, green eggplants, strawberies and cucumbers to feed family and friends most of the year. The taste for fresh foods expertly prepared dies hard, apparently. Carmen Ricard tells the story of her brother Arthur who moved to California after World War II. On a recent visit to New Orleans, he stocked up on fish, shrimp, crawfish and oysters. Lacking a container to transport his treasure, he packed his suitcase with ice and seafood and left his clothes in Louisiana.

A TASTE OF SOUTH LOUISIANA
Maude Ancelet's Shrimp Etouffee
2 pounds okra; 1 pound medium shrimp, shelled and deveined; 1 medium onion, chopped fine; 1 stalk celery, chopped; ½ cup table cream; ½ tablespoon cornstarch; salt to taste; black pepper to taste; cayenne pepper to taste; 4 pounds crabmeat; 1 quart raw oysters; 3 slices bacon.

Wipe okra with a damp towel. Do not wash it, or it will make the okra too moist. Cut off the stems and discard. Slice the okra into thin rounds. Meanwhile, cook three slices of bacon in a large pot to render the fat. Remove the bacon and reserve for another use. Add the okra rounds to the fat and cover. Cook on a low fire for about 1½ hours, stirring frequently. Add crab and oysters and cook, just until the okra has lost its slime. Add stock and bring to a boil. Cover and simmer about two hours. Add salt, pepper and cayenne. Add shrimp and crawfish daily from local inland waters. At left, Carmen Ricard uses some of the tiny crustaceans in a south Louisiana specialty, crawfish etouffee.

Maude Ancelet's Seafood Gumbo
1½ quarts chicken stock or water; 2 large tomatoes, peeled and chopped; 3 medium onions, chopped fine; ½ bell pepper, chopped fine; 1 clove garlic, chopped fine; ¼ teaspoon cayenne; 1 teaspoon salt; ¾ teaspoon black pepper.

Serve in soups over steamed rice.