One of Ville Platte's well-known "supper chefs" has armed himself with a delectable seafood dressing and is competing today in Paincourtville near Donaldville in search of the title as "Louisiana's Best Non-Professional Cajun Cook."

Before submitting his cooking skills to the scrutiny of some of the state's best professional chefs and restaurateurs, Gilbert Deshotel recently tested his seafood creation — which can be served as a dressing, bell pepper stuffing, seafood au gratin or jambalaya — on the demanding palates of fellow city hall workers at an impromptu supper in his outdoor kitchen.

This is the first time Deshotel has entered the "The Quest for the Best Cajun Cuisine Cookoff," judging from the rave reviews he won from his hungry co-workers' chances appear good at Louisiana's Cajun Fest. Charlie Johnson, city purchasing agent, offered his encouragement by remarking, "I've been waiting all my life for this meal."

Deshotel, outfitted in his cook's apron and cap, explained, although this is the first time he has entered the cookoff competition, he is still unaware of how the Paincourtville organizers learned about him and his culinary reputation. "I have been invited for several years."

Contestants are required to serve a minimum of 100 portions and must provide all necessary ingredients, equipment and utensils. That means Deshotel is expected to prepare about 20 pounds of dressing, along with other items he will be presenting for the judge's review. The cookoff committee provides a rice or spaghetti side dish if needed.

Deshotel has secured the backing of three local sponsors in his quest for the cooking title. Billy Lafleur and Bobby Dupre of B&S Grocery, along with Kary's Roux which is supplying adequate quantities of Pig Stand Barbecue Sauce, are backing the local cook.

Deshotel and his wife, Joy, have stocked their travel trailer with all the necessary culinary tools. That doesn't mean, however, that he has emptied his kitchen cabinets. The long-time cook reports he has a full set of cooking pots and utensils in his home kitchen, outdoor kitchen and travel home.

Interviewed during the test supper, Deshotel projects it will take him three hours to prepare his entries while cooking time will require about one hour. Ray Bernard served as his assistant cook and "master cleaner" during the contest practice session. Bernard is on the crew today, along with his wife, Velma, and Joy Deshotel.

Deshotel has given much thought to his strategy: "I'm going to attract people with the barbecue shrimp, crabs and catfish and then slip the dressing in there."

The 63-year-old chef relates, "I've been cooking ever since I could get up on a chair to watch Momma cook."

"I just learned. Started as a kid. I was always in the pot," he remembers. "It came automatic. I'm always trying recipes."

The ability to create a memorable supper, a well-respected skill in Evangeline Parish, keeps Deshotel on the go almost every week of the year. "I cook three nights a week on the average for other groups," he notes.

"I put everything I have in the kitchen in it," he joked about his spicy gumbos and sauces.

Many times, Gilbert has donated special supper meals for auctions and raffles conducted by local service groups. Several
"C'est Bon" was the declaration of Mayor Hollell Fontenot after he was invited to sample a special seafood dressing by Gilbert Deshotel, who is seeking the title as "Louisiana's Best Non-Professional Cajun Cook" today. (Gazette Photo by Paul Kedinger)

Chef Deshotel

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years ago, one of Deshotel's suppers brought a bid of $600 from a local bank during the Lions Club Auction. "The best way to raise money is to give suppers," he emphasizes.

The superintendent of the city water utility department truly enjoys his almost full-time hobby. "I cook about 90 percent of the time at home." He quickly adds that when he's not cooking, he devotes his time to two other diversions - umpiring for the Dixie Youth games and tossing horseshoes. In fact, while preparing his test meal on the barbecue grill, Deshotel was challenging his guests to horseshoe pitching contests on his backyard pit.

His wife adds, "I don't get to do much cooking ... but that's okay - I'm the clean-up lady."

She continues, "When we go camping, I do the biscuits." Gilbert smiles, "I use to do the pastries, but now she does."

After stirring his seafood dressing one last time and dishing it up for his co-workers, Deshotel comments, "I haven't tasted it yet. I don't sample while I'm cooking." That also applies to his seasoning of any dish. Though he never uses a measuring spoon or cup, Deshotel was depending on his friends to tell him if he succeeded or the dressing had to be altered.

"No changes needed" was the consensus of opinion he received.

So armed with knowledge he satisfied perhaps his toughest judges - the hometown crowd - Deshotel today awaits the decision of such professional chefs as Lee LeRuth of Gretna, Mike Roussel of Brennan's in New Orleans, Kenneth Veron of Cafe Vermilionville in Lafayette, Coffredo Fraccaro of Metairie's La Riviera, Christ Kerageorgiou of Lacombe's La Provence and John Folse of Lafitte's Landing of Donaldsonville.

Bon Apetite!