Long before Cajun was cool, Tony Chachere was busy preparing one of the first commercially-available Cajun seasoning blends in his small insurance office in Opelousas. Originally he took the seasoning blend with him to his hunting camp on weekends, but its popularity quickly grew among his cooking buddies. Soon he began handing out samples in small glass jars.

This was back in 1972 when the pharmacist-turned-insurance salesman decided to start his third career at age 65 and publish his Cajun Country Cookbook. That was more than a decade before people outside of Louisiana could say jambalaya or even appreciate Cajun food.

But in the early 1980s when Cajun and Creole foods became popular across the nation, Tony Chachere's Creole Foods, Inc., was perfectly positioned to catch the craze, said company spokesperson and marketing researcher Janice LeBlanc.

"Once Cajun food became popular around the country, we didn't have to go door to door selling the seasoning anymore," LeBlanc said. "They now come to us."

When Chachere wrote his first cookbook in 1972, he had no idea that 24 years later it would spawn an $10 million-a-year company, 15 different food products and four cookbooks. Last month the company had their first $1 million month.

Acadiana means good food to the rest of the world. Visitors come here from other continents just to eat. After all, this is the land of Tabasco Sauce, boiled crawfish, boudin and jambalaya. But as food is as much a part of life here, it's a living for many.

And Acadiana food producers, which make everything from gumbo mixes to spicy peanuts, are as much a part of the local economy as the regional lifestyle. Chachere is one of hundreds of similar stories across south Louisiana. Once considered an exotic delicacy by most Louisiana Cajun and Creole cooking critics, this spice is now popular on dining tables around the country and the world, many Louisiana companies were posed to profit from the craze.

More than a decade after initial Cajun and Creole media frenzy started, Louisiana foods can still be found in restaurants and on grocery store shelves across the country.

"A real key part of the state food industry is located in Acadiana."

— John Johnson

Storage tanks at C. S. Steen's Syrup Mill in Abbeville are painted to resemble the company's syrup cans. They make and sell the only commercially produced open-kettle cane syrup in Louisiana using sugar cane grown in the fields surrounding the syrup mill.

Photo by Terri H. Fensel