Simple Cajun Sausage

Boudin, a fiery, pale-colored food specialty, is an important part of Louisiana's Acadian culture by Raymond Sokolov.

Dudley Hebert stirred the big pot with a short-handled canoe paddle, gently prodding thirty-five pounds of pork and pork innards, while they cooked almost to the point of disintegration. Standing in the improvised kitchen at Arceneaux Park in Broussard, Louisiana, some little children and adults watched as he ground that meat and mixed it with rice and lots of red pepper. Then he showed them how to stuff this "rice dressing" into sausage casings. Mr. Hebert and his collaborator, Elmer Girouard, used a hollow, open-ended cow horn to do the stuffing. The horn once belonged to Mr. Girouard's grandfather, who had always used it to stuff sausage on his farm in southwestern Louisiana, when he and his family slaughtered hogs in the preserving cold of a winter day and processed every shred of the animal, from head to hock. Being Cajuns, they spoke French, and called this gala pork butchering event a "boucherie". And the loose sausage they made—a fiery, pale-colored specialty with a strong taste of liver and kidney—they called "boudin blanc." Traditional Cajun "boudin blanc" can still be found in Cajun country. Indeed, last February in Broussard, it was impossible to avoid.

Broussard is somewhere in-between being a drab, post-Depression farm center and a suburb of bustling Lafayette, ten miles to the north. This year the Broussard Jaycees and Jaynes sponsored the second annual Louisiana Boudin Festival. Local "boudin" factories worked overtime to produce thousands of pounds of sausages. Hebert and Girouard did their demonstration. Several young men and women competed in the "boudin-eating" contest, slurping stupendous quantities of pork and rice stuffing out of long, drooping casings.

I myself consumed an immoderate number of "boudins," warding off the chill of an incessant winter drizzle with their warming spices. I ate boudins from all the booths, including a seafood "boudin," heterodox but delicious. Somewhat bloated with all this gorging, I began to see the justice of an opinion expressed by John Norbert, a professional "boudiniste" at one of the booths. "The secret of a good boudin," he averred, "is seasoning plus more meat than rice."

With these words fresh in mind, I joined forces with "boudin" aficionado, Barry Jean Ancelet, a young and impassioned Cajun folklorist at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, who introduced me to the higher arcana of boudin at a nearby supermarket called Dud Breaux's. The pork-rice ratio seemed just about ideal as Ancelet, his family, and I worked our way through a few pounds of sausage hot from the pot at Dud Breaux's. We threw the casings to the Ancelet dog and launched into the vexed question of Cajun culture.

The boudin is a spongy but natural platform from which to rise to the larger issue of Cajun identity and survival because boudin—ungainly, wildly spiced, and messy to eat—has become part of the stereotype of the Cajun in our time.

"Cajun" itself is an emblem of cultural misunderstanding, corrupted from the French Acadian, the name given to French settlers driven out of Nova Scotia (then called Acadia) in 1753. As they made their way south, an unfriendly Anglophone North America dubbed them Cajuns. Arriving in southwestern Louisiana's malaria-infested bayous and isolated lowlands about 1765, they found a refuge where they could carry on peacefully as an ignored, French-speaking majority. "They were the melting pot here," says Barry Ancelet. "They were the mainstream society. All through the nineteenth century, other groups came in and adopted French, people with names like Johnson, Segura, and Schneider. The original Cajuns were not immigrants to the United States. They were here before there was a United States. My grandmother objected when a nephew of hers married "une americaine.""

"As late as the turn of the century,
preparing boudin rouge, casing ends are twisted and knotted to form individual sausages.
Jacques Benjamin adds a scoopful of cayenne pepper to boudin stuffing.

The Larousse Gastronomique, with its usual certitude, declares that the boudin is a sausage consisting of hog's large intestine filled with hog's blood. In English, we would call this connection (which Larousse fancifully subscribes to the cuisine of ancient Assyria) a blood pudding. It takes no great leap of phonological imagination to see the bond between pudding and boudin. They sound somewhat alike, and they both originally referred to sausages that had to be cooked so that their stuffing would solidify and become edible. Our modern sense of pudding developed because dessert puddings were to be boiled in caseling bags. In England, the practice still continues.

The LeBouef family opened shop many years ago as a boudin and caseling store. The current Mrs. LeBouef's grandmother made the sausage at home. Today, the LeBouef's have their own abattoir a short drive from the market, where they slaughter all kinds of meat for their butcher department. And so they are in a position to collect fresh blood legally for boudin rouge. Pork blood is too hard to keep free from hair, so they use veal blood; this satisfies the meat inspector but isn't, in theory, as tasty.

On a typical day at the boudin factory behind LeBouef's supermarket, Jacques Benjamin, a French-speaking black, finished up his day's work of several hundred pounds of white boudin and turned his attention to the red. Wearing an orange apron, he poured two gallons of blood and cooked rice and seasonings, pork fat, and a scoopful of cayenne into his sausage-stuffing machine. The little room was filled with a haze of red pepper. Tripping the motor switch, he babied a casing as it filled and turned dark purple. He knotted and twisted it into a string of resilient sausages and then started another casing. Eventually, he completed the batch and put it in a pot of water to poach for a half hour, testing for doneness by poking through the skins with a toothpick. By the time he was done, a crowd of workmen and truck drivers were lined up outside at the meat counter to buy their lunch. Hot boudin blanc, hot boudin rouge. Hot enough to make a Frenchman cry. Hot enough to make a Cajun weep for joy. (See recipe on page 96.)

Raymond Sakolov is a free-lance writer whose special interest is the history and preparation of food.

Cajun Boudin Blanc

1. Cook pork, pork liver, and pork kidney in lightly salted boiling water to cover until meat falls apart, about 2 hours. Reserve the meats and the broth.
2. Meanwhile, combine rice, butter, 2 teaspoons salt, and 4 cups of water in a heavy saucepan. Bring to a boil, stir once, cover, reduce heat to low, and cook for 15 minutes. Empty rice into a bowl and reserve.
3. Grind the reserved meats, onion, scallions, and parsley together in a meat grinder, using the coarse blade, or grind coarsely in a processor, using the metal blade.
4. Mix ground meat mixture with the rice,, black pepper, salt, and the cayenne pepper. Add the cayenne grind as recommended may be impractically torrid for non-Cajuns, although it is ethnometrically correct.
5. Mix in enough of the reserved broth to make the stuffing moist but not soggy.
6. Rinse the casings to leach out the salt they are preserved in. Cut them into 20-inch lengths with scissors.
7. If you have a traditional meat sauce-stuffing "horn" or an attachment for a meat grinder, any one of these will work well for this recipe. Even a large household funnel will suffice. Work one end of the casing over the tube. Then push the stuffing through the tube into the casing, which with some assistance from you, will pull off the tube as it fills. When the casing is filled (with an inch of free space at either end), twist the ends and tie a knot. Continue until all stuffing is used up. Prick the casings here and there to release any trapped air. The filling is dense enough so that only minuscule amounts of filling, if any at all, will leak out during the final cooking.
8. Boudins blancs are usually served steamed. In other words, heat up a batch in barely simmering water and serve. Eat them by holding the casing in your hand and sucking the insides of the casing. Discard emptied casings.

Yield: About 8 servings

Note: For $10 postpaid, casings are available from Standard Casing, 121 Spruce St., New York, N.Y. 10012, in 100-yard hanks that keep almost indefinitely under refrigeration. Pappas Weiss, 1546 Second Ave., New York, N.Y. 10028, will mail syringe-like sausage horns for $35.00 postpaid.