How to be a cookbook author

By MARY ALICE FONTENOT
Contributing Editor

You don't have to be a good cook to write a cookbook. You do have to have a long list of friends who are willing to share their favorite recipes.

So says Mercedes Vidrine of Eunice, who combined her talent for newspaper writing with multiple opportunities to collect Cajun recipes.

Mercedes was among the first Cajun recipe collectors in Acadiana. Now that Cajun cookbooks are a dime a dozen, hers continue to contribute to the culinary culture of south Louisiana. It was a quarter century ago that Mercedes first began her recipe collecting -- to use as column items in her regular newspaper column. All directions used in preparing dishes were first used in Mercedes' own kitchen before they got into print.

The recipes caught on -- not because recipes in newspapers were not readily available -- just about all daily papers used recipes or had a regular food page -- but because Mercedes used the name of each person who gave her the recipe, and also because the dishes were of Cajun origin, for the most part. And that was before Cajun food got hot.

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Readers began going by the newspaper office to pick up back issues that carried Mercedes' column. Maybe the maid had trashed the paper before the housewife could clip the recipe, or perhaps an extra copy was wanted to send to a family member in another state. Letters to the editor attested to the popularity of the recipe column.

In the beginning Mercedes used only dessert recipes -- cakes, pies, and the like. Of special interest was her own family recipe for Cajun sweet dough pies -- the first time this old Cajun favorite was known to have been in print.

Suggestions by readers who used the recipes were responsible for the first cookbook, which rapidly became a series of four cookbooks. After the idea was echoed by several friends Mercedes offered her collection to a publisher. Her presentation included Cajun-accented illustrations by an Ope Iousa artist, J. A. Allen.

Mercedes insisted on keeping the Cajun identity for her recipes. She was allowed to select the title for her cookbook of sweets:

"Quelque Chose de Doux Avec Une Demi-Tasse," which translates "Something Sweet with a Half Cup of Coffee." Few of her newspaper readers and friends knew what the title said until they read the English translation, because few Cajun descendants know how to read French.

Nonetheless, the Cajun cookbook was off and running, some of its success due to the fact that recipe donors' names were used in the book, and also because Mercedes wrote explicit directions for each dish, plus the addition of helpful hints on successful preparation.

Then came "Quelque Chose Pitие," a collection of Acadian meat and fish recipes, twice the size of the dessert book, and crammed with Cajun recipes for gumbo, dressing, jambalaya, gravies, grillades, wild game -- whatever was dished up in a Cajun kitchen.

Sales on this one multiplied in a hurry. The book was reviewed in the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and even the largest Japanese newspaper in Tokyo. The Washington Post story was headlined across eight columns: "First You Catch an Armadillo." The recipe for armadillo sauce picante, contributed by a male cook, was used in the story.

A summer three cookbook was "Quelque Chose Beaucoup Bon" followed by "Quelque Chose Pour un Joyeux Noël." Then the publisher decided to combine all four cookbook under one cover and title, "Louisiana Lagniappe." The individual books are still in print, even though this last, the giant Louisiana Lagniappe, has proven the most popular. Allen pen-and-ink drawings illustrate all of Vidrine's cookbooks.

One of the high points in Mercedes' recipe publishing experience happened when she used a recipe for strawberry preserves in her column. This perennial favorite makes use of a Louisiana fruit, the Celeste fig, grown extensively in Acadiana country. Figs ripen usually by the first week of July and last about two weeks -- so home canners have to get in the kitchen right away if the figs are to be saved.

Mercedes' recipe calls for strawberry flavored gelatin to be added to the figs. This changes the flavor of the preserves in a way that even non-figs eaters relish. Absolutely great with hot biscuits.

After this recipe came out in her column all the food stores in a three-parish area ran out of strawberry gelatin and wholesalers couldn't supply the demand. This brought a representative from the gelatine company to the area to learn what had happened. He soon found the problem -- Mercedes' column. The sales rep came to Eunice and brought Mercedes a whole case of his company's foods.

The publisher's introduction to "Louisiana Lagniappe" sums up Mercedes' recipe collecting efforts: "Many of the recipes may seem commonplace; a closer look will usually reveal that something new and different has been added. Cajun cooks are like that...the result is the true essence of the Cajun way of life, expressed through the expertise of cooking."