Justin Wilson
By DAVID MCCORMICK
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Justin Wilson had just swallowed two-dozen raw oysters, a platter of boiled crawfish and some stuffed shrimp and needed just a little dessert to complete his afternoon snack.

Grinning like a child, the popular Cajun cook crumbled a package of Saltines into his sweet red cocktail sauce, mashed it all together and spooned it past his mustache. "Oh that's good," he says as his guests gape. "You mean you never done that for dessert?"

Eating and entertaining go together for Wilson like red beans and rice. Seasoning his recipes with generous helpings of homespun humor, he has brought Cajun cuisine to millions with his PBS television show, "Louisiana Cookin','" which airs on 284 stations.

Often described as Louisiana's most famous citizen, Wilson's storytelling talent has filled 27 comedy record albums over the years, and he travels all over the country for speaking engagements. Through it all, he maintains the same easy country manner he projects on the show.

"I'm not a chef," he likes to say. "I'm a cook. I don't feel like a celebrity."

Wilson, whose fourth wife is a woman less than half his age, was born in 1914 in Tangipahoa Parish, in the rolling pine country across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans. His father was Welsh and his mother French, producing what he calls a "half-blood Cajun.

People outside Louisiana love to laugh at Wilson's thick accent and fractured grammar, but many real Cajuns find it offensive. The language barrier held back the state's French descendants for generations, and they don't like to see their native tongue made fun of.

Wilson insists he doesn't mean to ridicule. He says his only critics are "people who take themselves too seriously."

Wilson never takes himself seriously. After "granulating" from high school at 16, he says, he spent five years at LSU "majoring in girls" without advancing beyond the freshman year.

His father, Harry, was the state's agriculture commissioner and a powerful politician, but Justin was slow to settle down. After giving up on college, he "hoboed around the country," picking fruit, washing dishes, digging ditches and whatever other work the Depression afforded.

In 1934, former Gov. Huey Long hired him to police the state's grain warehouse industry, and Wilson began a career as a safety consultant and law enforcement officer.

Then, he was known as a man with a flair for food and words. "Justin has a natural way with people," says his fourth wife, Jeanine, 28, who met Wilson four years ago as a graduate student at LSU.

It wasn't this cooking that caused her to elope with him five months later. "I was just swept off my feet," she says. "Justin loves women, and they can sense that."

Jeanine serves as Wilson's receptionist, bookkeeping agent, accountant and publicist. Wilson works out of his home, has a listed telephone number and answers his own calls.

Their main residence is in nearby French Settlement, but they prefer to spend time here at their "camp," a double-wide mobile home parked on a wooded bluff along the Tickfaw River.

The camp served as the set for a new series of television shows to be released this summer, "Louisiana Cookin' — Outdoors."

Wilson has built an open-air kitchen in the back yard and keeps five refrigerators and three freezers stocked with his favorite ingredients like crawfish, turtle, alligator, wild turkey and venison.

His style of cooking is a holdover from the days — not so long ago in rural Louisiana — when what people ate was whatever they had hauled home from the woods or the bayou that day. A big catfish meant courtbouillon, a deer meant stew and sausage.

"Most of the time, I still just throw together whatever I've got in the kitchen," he says. "I'm inventing new recipes all the time."

Wilson prefers home cooking to restaurant fare and favors truck stops and diners over French Quarter bistros. He tries to duplicate that country flavor in his recipes. When he makes a roux, a mixture of flour and oil that forms the foundation of Cajun dishes like gumbo and etouffee, he's likely to add a little chicken fat or bacon drippings.

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Handfuls of onions are another staple. "I loooove onions," he drawls, eyes rolling heavenward. "One day I'm going to try an onion ice cream, I really am."

Inside his trailer, a few feet from the dining table, Wilson keeps a small trampoline he uses to keep his ample belly at bay. He's on a diet now, forsaking his beloved beer and taking wine only in recipes.

He cooks wine with almost everything, however. "I even make quiche with wine instead of milk. A lot of people can't drink milk."

Wilson claims not to be surprised by the recent nationwide interest in Cajun cooking, or by the success of other Louisiana celebrity chefs like John Folse and Paul Prudhomme. "Cajun food's been popular a long time," he says. "A lot of people are just

With wife, Jeannine

"He's never gotten rich," she says. "If he quit making speeches, the money would stop."

Depending on the client, Wilson makes after-dinner speeches, gives safety lectures, performs comedy routines and puts on cooking shows.

He's still a reserve sheriff's deputy and gives regular motivational lectures to police recruits in Baton Rouge and state police in Texas and Mississippi.

The New Orleans Symphony recently auctioned off a dinner catered by Wilson to three couples who flew from North Carolina and Wisconsin for a meal of chicken and sausage gumbo, crawfish etouffee and smoked pork roast.

Wilson sees himself as goodwill ambassador for Louisiana. "I love Louisiana," he says. "I've worked in all 64 parishes and I know it's better than any living human being. This is a wonderful place."

He retains an active interest in Louisiana's favorite sport, but has never sought office for himself. "My father served in office for 50 years; that's enough for one family," he says. "Besides, I know too much about it. I'm going to write a book on politics one day, but I have to wait for a few more people to die first."

Driving the back roads of Tangipahoa Parish in his truck, he waves at everybody he passes and talks to old friends over a police radio.

"We haven't seen you lately," one remarks.

"I've been gone too much," he replies. Always, his talk returns to food. Passing a bend of the Tickfaw studded with cypress stumps, he recalls catching a big catfish there years ago. Passing a roadside vegetable stand, he admires the ven-