By TIM TALLEY

“'We’re the food capital of the Americas,' said Bob LeBlanc, assistant secretary of the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. ‘We can boast being the only state with food and cuisine that is so appealing that it’s a stimulus for people to visit. We don’t want to just capitalize on it, we want to exploit it’,” LeBlanc said.

The popularity of Cajun and Creole foods in the U.S. and in other countries is not just a fad that will disappear when people’s taste buds get burned out, said Ed Brown, executive director of the 17,000-member American Culinary Federation. ‘I think it’s in its infancy,’ Brown said. ‘It brings a whole new dimension to American cuisine. We’re developing whole new markets.’

John Folse, owner of Lafitte’s Landing Restaurant near Donaldsonville and one of the nation’s premier Cajun and Creole celebrity chefs, went a step further and labeled Louisiana food the only true American cuisine. ‘You cannot find this anywhere else,’ he said.

Japanese raised on raw fish and sukiyaki are eating shrimp creole in Tokyo. Chinese accustomed to egg rolls and wontons are learning about gumbo and jambalaya.

Restaurants in London and Paris are preparing spicy Cajun and Creole specialties as dozens of Louisiana restaurants open their doors in cities throughout the United States.

And tens of thousands of visitors are arriving in Louisiana each year to experience firsthand the flavor and variety of cooking that south Louisiana natives have been preparing for their friends and families for 250 years.

The world is sitting at Louisiana’s dinner table. And the widening notoriety of indigenous cuisine is being celebrated at long-established Mississippi River restaurants where many of the state’s most beloved regional dishes were discovered.

‘We understand cooking better than anyone else in the world. We understand cooking because we’ve had to do things that no one else in the world has done. It’s a grand American cooking style. And the chefs are dying to do it,’ he said.

The growing importance of Louisiana restaurants to the state’s travel industry is illustrated in statistics provided by the state Office of Tourism.

In 1986, spending on food service exceeded $1 billion and accounted for more than 27 percent of the tourist dollars spent by Louisiana’s estimated 3 million visitors.

Food service generates Louisiana’s largest travel-related payroll, totalling $252.7 million in 1986 — 35 percent of the state total. More than 37,000 Louisianaans were employed by restaurants.
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Al Robert: "You've got to try new things."