Mary Louise Comeaux Manuel

"You can't get more Cajun than that"

By SANDRA DAY
Special to Food

LAFAYETTE - Marie Louise Comeaux Manuel is not your ordinary interview on Cajun cooking. While most cooks eagerly grant interviews when so requested, Marie Louise is more likely to give you the third degree about your intentions and background in order to evaluate whether or not you'll be writing a credible story on "Acadian" cooking, as she refers to it. She feels too many food writers have come down for a quick sweep of the area, done their brief interviews, and gone home to write articles that were inaccurate and misleading. So she doesn't give many interviews anymore.

As a college professor and director of UL's School of Home Economics for 32 years (she retired in 1970), Marie Louise has had inquiries from all over the country for her expertise in Acadian cooking, particularly after a paper she wrote called "Acadian Cuisine" was distributed at the Lafayette Centennial in 1964 and was also used for the introduction of a local home economics program.

"I was always very interested in foods work," she recalls. "I was always around my mother when she was cooking. I would get on a chair and watch her cooking. . . I came from a family where you entertained with food a lot."

That lineage included Doncets and Gudry's on her mother's side, and Comeaux and Boudreaux on her father's side. You can't get more Cajun than that!

Education played a big role in Marie Louise's life early on. Since her childhood home was across the street from their school, teachers lived with her family nine months out of the year - most were from Tennessee, Georgia and New Jersey. "They brought in culture and a means of learning, because we associated with them," says Marie Louise. "For 22 years, they lived in our home."

As a result, though her parents were self-educated, all six of the Comeaux children earned degrees - quite an accomplishment in a rural area during the 1920's.

Marie Louise studied home economics education at the University of Southwestern Louisiana before going on to receive her master's degree in foods and nutrition at George Peabody College. She also did advanced study at Iowa State.

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University of Wisconsin, University of New York and Cornell University. She taught high school home economics in the Lafayette area for 11 years before becoming a professor at UL in 1938. Acadian dishes were not included in the foods courses offered at UL before Marie Louise arrived, but fortunately she had the foresight to change that. In her "Acadian Cuisine" paper she wrote:

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Acadian dishes were a part of the foods courses at UL during the years 1938-1970, the years she directed the School of Home Economics. This took time, because my faculty members came from Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, or Iowa. They had to learn how to prepare the Acadian dishes before they could instruct their students. Today the graduates of those years include, in a limited amount, some of the Acadian dishes in the high school teaching, but there is still some hesitancy because the textbooks do not include Acadian cookery.

So Marie Louise Comeaux Manuel has done her part to see the tradition of Acadian cooking preserved - and she continues to do so. Before granting this interview, she insisted on meeting with a select group of her friends - Alice Lassagne, Hazel Alpha, and Yvette Girouard - to discuss some of the old-time Acadian recipes that aren't commonly seen anymore. All of those on her "panel," she proudly pointed out, are descendants of Acadians, and the recipes they submitted are from people who would be over 100 years old if they were still living today.

The first three recipes were handed down to Marie Louise by her mother Mrs. Alcin T. Comeaux, who was born in 1878. The first one, Smothered Chicken, is different from other recipes of the same name in that it contains no onions and is very sticky when done.

See ACADIAN SP.
Acadian

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SMOTHERED CHICKEN
1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. In a large ovenproof skillet, melt 1/2 cup of butter over medium heat.
3. Add 2 lbs. boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1-inch pieces.
4. Cook for 5-7 minutes on each side, or until browned.
5. Remove from skillet and set aside.
6. In the same skillet, add 1 cup of all-purpose flour and cook for 2-3 minutes, stirring constantly.
7. Return chicken to skillet and add 2 cups of chicken broth.
8. Bring to a boil and reduce heat to low.
9. Simmer for 20-25 minutes, or until chicken is cooked through.
10. Serve with rice and your choice of vegetables.

SWEET SOUTHERN PIES
1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine 3 cups of sugar, 2 sticks of butter, and 2 eggs.
3. Mix until well combined.
4. Pour into a 9-inch pie plate.
5. Bake for 45-50 minutes, or until set.
6. Let cool before slicing and serving.

GRILLADES A MARINERES
1. Preheat grill to medium-high heat.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine 2 lbs. of steak, 1 cup of hot sauce, 1/2 cup of Worcestershire sauce, and 1/4 cup of honey.
3. Marinate for at least 1 hour.
4. Grill steak for 5-7 minutes on each side, or until desired doneness.
5. Serve with baked potatoes and your choice of vegetables.

LAMB SHANKS
1. Preheat oven to 325°F.
2. In a large ovenproof skillet, heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil over medium heat.
3. Add 4 lbs. of lamb shanks and cook for 5-7 minutes on each side, or until browned.
4. Remove from skillet and set aside.
5. In the same skillet, add 1 cup of red wine and 1/2 cup of chicken broth.
6. Bring to a boil and reduce heat to low.
7. Return lamb shanks to skillet and add 2 cups of tomato sauce.
8. Cover and cook for 2-3 hours, or until lamb is tender.
9. Serve with your choice of vegetables.

SOUR CREAM CHICKEN
1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine 2 lbs. of chicken, 1 cup of sour cream, 1/2 cup of mayonnaise, 1/4 cup of chopped onion, and 1/4 cup of chopped parsley.
3. Mix until well combined.
4. Pour into a 9x13 inch baking dish.
5. Bake for 40-45 minutes, or until chicken is cooked through.

BACON-WRAPPED CHICKEN
1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. Cut 4 lbs. of chicken breasts into 1-inch pieces.
3. In a bowl, mix 2 cups of flour, 1/2 cup of cornmeal, 1/2 cup of baking powder, 1/2 cup of salt, and 1/4 cup of paprika.
4. Dip chicken pieces in buttermilk and then in the flour mixture.
5. Place on a baking sheet and bake for 25-30 minutes, or until golden brown.
6. Serve with your choice of vegetables.

SAUCED BEETS
1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine 4 lbs. of beets, 1 cup of sugar, 1/2 cup of vinegar, 1/2 cup of water, and 1/4 cup of salt.
3. Mix until well combined.
4. Pour into a 9x13 inch baking dish.
5. Bake for 1-11/2 hours, or until beets are tender.

BAKED KALE
1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine 4 cups of kale, 1/2 cup of olive oil, 1/4 cup of lemon juice, 1/4 cup of parmesan cheese, and 1/4 cup of breadcrumbs.
3. Toss until well combined.
4. Place on a baking sheet and bake for 25-30 minutes, or until kale is tender.
5. Serve with your choice of vegetables.

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SQUASH OR EGGPLANT FrittERS

Enough squash or eggplant to make 1 cup cooked pulp
1 cup all-purpose flour
$\frac{1}{3}$ cup sugar
$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. baking powder
1 egg, beaten
Fat for deep-frying

1. Boil squash or eggplant until tender, then mash to make 1 cup pulp. Combine flour, sugar and baking powder.
2. Stir in egg and pulp, mixing well.
3. Drop batter by spoonfuls into hot fat and fry until browned.
4. Remove fritters and drain on paper towels.
Makes about 1 dozen.

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$\frac{1}{2}$ cup shredded Monterey Jack cheese (2 oz.)

1. In a medium saucepan heat butter until melted. Add onion and garlic; cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, about 5 minutes.
2. Blend in flour. Stir in milk, tomatoes, salmon, corn, dill, salt and black pepper. Bring to a boil, stirring occasionally; boil and stir 1 minute. Add Monterey Jack cheese, stirring until melted.
Serves 4; 5 1/4 cups
Per portion: 437 mg calcium; 323 calories