By TOMMY C. SIMMONS

Suckling pig is roasted over an outdoor open pit

It was jambalaya, crawfish pie and file gumbo that prompted syndicated columnist Merle Ellis, better known as The Butcher, to say initially that his visit to Louisiana and guest appearance at the Food Focus show was going to be a 10-pound trip.

On the last day of his visit, he revised his estimate upward. "My mistake. It's going to be a 20-lb. trip," he told columnist Corinne Cook, after also sampling crawfish bisque, charbroiled striped, shrimp cocktail, roasted pork loin, alligator sausage, smoked rabbit and baked duck.

Since Ellis seemed to have no trouble fitting into South Louisiana's "that tastes like more" lifestyle, the food staff dubbed him the "California Cajun."

Pat Toney, artist in promotions at the Morning-Advocate and State-Times, designed a California Cajun logo and stationery for him and suggested he change the name of his popular syndicated column. And, Morning-Advocate artist Greg Kiger also depicted Ellis's "Cajunization" in the headline for today's Food cover.

In addition to thoroughly entertaining the hundreds of Food readers who attended the Food Focus shows with his "cutting up in the kitchen" demonstrations, Ellis also earned the gratitude of the Food staff and colleagues of the late Pat Baldridge, food editor of the Morning Advocate and State-Times from 1975-1989.

Last December when the decision was made to continue the Food Focus shows and to present the format that Baldridge and Corinne Cook had been working on, "Recipes to Bank On," Cook felt it would be important to make this show special. She envisioned it as a tribute to Baldridge. She asked if it would be possible to invite one of Baldridge's national columnists/friends to be in the show as well. The staff decided to see if Merle Ellis could come, because his column, The Butcher, had appeared in the Morning Advocate food sections longer than any other, plus, Ellis and Baldridge had judged several national contests together.

The holidays were busy, and no one was able to reach Ellis until the first or second week in January.

As soon as he heard about what had happened (Baldridge was killed in a car accident on Nov. 28, 1989), he immediately agreed to arrange his schedule so he could be part of this special show in Baldridge's memory. The staff agreed with the Food Focus audience: the kitchen cut-up, Merle Ellis, was just what was needed.

Whenever a reporter interviews a personality, everyone wants to know what was he "really" like. Merle Ellis seems to be one of those lucky few individuals who has found his calling. Sure, Merle Ellis is a card-carrying butcher, but he's also a talented on-camera or stage personality, a writer and author, a film producer and director and cultural geographer.
Most people know about his television career. He was the great butcher on the Dinah Shore show for eight years. He had a syndicated television show called "The Butcher," and was a regular on Good Morning America. In addition, he has taught several programs and has been a guest on The Joan Rivers Show and Everyday with Martha Stewart.

Ellis is a member of the Cultural Diversity Learning Coalition, which is dedicated to preserving the "uniqueness" of this country's heritage. He is a member of the SNAP, the Southern Association of Performing Arts, and is a member of the cultural community across the country. Ellis has also written a book called "Cutting Up the Roots," which has been featured in the Chronicle Books and still is in print.

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Few may know about Ellis' love of the Cajun and Creole heritage and dedication to preserving the "uniqueness" of this country's heritage. He is a member of the SNAP, the Southern Association of Performing Arts, and is a member of the cultural community across the country. Ellis has also written a book called "Cutting Up the Roots," which has been featured in the Chronicle Books and still is in print.

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Ellis was in Baton Rouge last week to participate in the Morning Advocate and States-Times Food Focus show. While there, he spent a few days free time by learning as much about the Cajun and Creole foods and cuisine development as he could.

He started off with a multi-course luncheon hosted by Ralph Kacoy of the Gulf Specialties as well as the aquaculture products that have been developed in the last few years. He toured the Crawfish Farm in Prudhomme from Ralph & Kacoy's and Ken Roberts from LSU Cooperative Extension's Sea Grant Office was able to answer most of Ellis' questions on the species and traditional recipes for crawfish bisque, seafood gumbo, shrimp cocktail, etc., as he was able to get some insight into the commercial potential for some of the newer aquacultured species: softshell crawfish, deformed oysters, farm-raised redfish and trout, etc., that which Ellis was able to sample.

On the next day, Ellis toured crawfish ponds, a crawfish processing plant, softshell crawfish farms, an alligator processor, Royal Johnson of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, conducted tours which ended quite naturally with a neighboring seafood restaurant, the Louisiana Specialties Specialist Beth Silverman's home.

The following day was a little more hectic, however. Ellis joined a group of people in a multi-course lunch prepared by John Folse at White Oak Place Restaurant and was explained by the background of the chef. John Folse explained how the dish came about, what it looked like, what it was made of, and how he prepared the crawfish. Ellis was introduced to a number of foods that were unique to Louisiana, and that were particularly interesting, Ellis said, were crawfish.

Eats a plenty
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Louisiana's "indigenous cuisine," Ellis was introduced to a number of seasonings that are unique to Louisiana. Two that were particularly interesting, Ellis said, were cane syrup and cane vinegar.

Was Ellis getting tired of this continuous feasting? Not in the least. The next day he visited with Louis Prejean at Pirogue's and found out more about Cajun andouille and tasso.

By Wednesday, the last day of the show, Ellis had been well satiated with South Louisiana's food specialties. Yet, he still hadn't tasted duck or rabbit, prepared for a Creole palate, nor had he been served sweet potatoes or eggplant. Kim Kringle of Juban's, Baton Rouge American Culinary Federation (ACF) Chef of the Year, fixed all those and several more, including a crawfish stuffed softshell crab for Ellis to taste at a late lunch.

Besides taking back dozens of Louisiana's Cajun/Creole recipes, ideas for newspaper columns and a television show and cookbook he's doing for cable television, he also picked up several cans of cane syrup and promises to get his grocer in Tiburon, Calif. (a suburb of San Francisco) to stock this "Cajun secret."

was the more he talked the more excited I got. By the time he had left, I had paid $350 for a broadcaster's correspondence course," Ellis said.

Over the next few months, he diligently filled out all his lessons and sent them in to be graded. The last lesson was prefaced with a paragraph stating that each correspondent should ask himself what special qualifications he possessed that would be of benefit to the broadcast industry. Further, each student should have necessary skills to demonstrate their worth before they should seek employment within broadcasting.

Ellis said he read that, realized he had no broadcast skill to offer, tossed out the final lesson and went that day and enrolled in the broadcasting curriculum at San Francisco State College.

"I knew right away that I had found my love," Ellis said. Actually, in more ways than one, because he also met his wife-to-be in the theatre department. Ellis got a double major — television production and technical theatre.

When he finished, Ellis went back into the meat business for a short period before he got a job as a go-fer on a special Ed Sullivan show filmed in California. From there on, opportunities in San Francisco-area television continued to open up.

When beef prices skyrocketed, Ellis formed a film production company and produced a pilot program with him showing how to save money by cutting up large cuts of meats and chickens.

One of the local stations picked it
up and he did a series. The Dinah Shore show came along, and about that same time, Ellis started writing a Butcher's column for the San Francisco Chronicle. The column was syndicated and is now published in more than 200 newspapers.

Ellis's options continued to expand. He was on the Phil Donahue Show. He had his own syndicated television series.

Ellis admits television is glamorous. "But, I've been behind the cameras, too," he points out. "It can be so ethereal. Print and newspapers are not so fickle."

Ellis says he's now been doing his column for 16 years. It's changed over the years and he's satisfied with its evolution. "It's richer and more regional. I like that," he adds.

Still, Ellis has places he wants to take both print and video. When, he's described as a consummate television personality, it's meant as a compliment. The staff watched Ellis backstage at Food Focus. His enthusiasm is infectious. He loves the crowd, the applause, shared communication and the requests for autographs. The staff watched him on stage. He knows just how to work for the camera while looking at the audience. Every gesture, every stance presents his best to both the camera and audience. Ellis is a master entertainer.

But, as mentioned earlier, he's also an entertainer with a message. He is also described as a cultural geographer.

Ellis appreciates this country's culinary roots. He appreciates the heritage, customs, family celebrations, ethnic contributions, abundance of foodstocks, and he's determined that those traditions are not going to be lost. If he does nothing more than write about them and film them, then he will have at least preserved record of those roots.

Roy Johnson, left, and Mike Windham, far right, of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture showed Merle Ellis how to boil a pot of pond-raised Louisiana crawfish.
But, Ellis’ vision is grander. If those traditions are showcased, then the people who still cling to the memories will be held in esteem. Their knowledge and experience will be sought out and shared. Their descendents will take pride in those contributions and seek to protect their authenticity.

The traditions are still preserved in America’s regional cuisines, Ellis said. “My dream, and it will be a labor of love, is to find out as much as I can about those cuisines and to share that information with others.”

Ellis’ dad would have been proud that his son did get a real career... a career whose fruition might one day enable all Americans to be proud of their melting pot families and recipes.