Where international guests get a taste of Cajun hospitality

By Mary Swann
Food Editor

CANKTON - Guests from Italy to Opelousas enjoyed marinated, roasted goat and soup garnished with edible chive blossoms barely recently in honor of the St. Landry Parish Heritage Festival.

In an international group of about 60, despite last week's rain, under a tent on Henry and Carolyn Miller's property,"it was good to be home. Paul Prudhomme of K-Paul's in New Orleans was also on hand to kick-off the festival weekend.

Hostess Carolyn Miller, a former teacher and tap dancer, says she had no idea when she began farming herbs 10 years ago that someday it would allow her to host such a diverse group. What began as backyard gardening in Lafayette has turned the Vermillion River into a full-time job. "I liked gardening so much I thought, 'Oh, I'll raise herbs at the farm,'" where she and her husband also raised cattle.

Many chefs in the Acadiana area need unusual herbs, and she continues to supply them from her crop, which includes herbs, edible flowers, vegetables and baby vegetables. At the luncheon last week, chefs were picking herbs right from the garden to take with them for cooking at festival activities later that night.

The edible flowers have many uses, Miller explains. Chive blossoms are good in salads, for example, and the petals can be pulled off to make butter.

Chef Mike Richard from Cafe Vermillionville "really does a job" frying her squash blossoms, she says, and they also may be stuffed with a delicate cheese. "Our blossoms are Paul (Prudhomme's) favorite," Miller says, and she frequently ships them to him. "Between the chefs here and Paul, that's about all (the business) I can handle," she says.

Marigolds, especially the "Lemon Gem" variety, are a tasty garnish, and an "Egyptian onion" is one of Miller's crops that is native to Louisiana as far as she knows. "You can eat its blossom, and at the bottom is an onion (suitable) for pickling. The Egyptian onion has also been used as the "swizzle stick" in martinis or bloodymarys, in place of olives, celery, beans or other edible garnish, she says.

Chef James, she calls him her "right hand man," says he uses the onions, which if grown wind on Miller's property, for pickling green eggs. "The goat, he explained, is cooked over white oak staves from the barrels used to age Tabasco pepper mash that is responsible for producing Tabasco pepper sauce.

James explains that no seasoning is necessary when cooking over the oak — it adds its own aged, smoky flavor to the meat. Tabasco is aged in the barrels for three years, and some barrels may be up to 46 years old, he said.

James said he chose the menu to reflect animals native to the land in St. Landry Parish, in honor of the Heritage Festival.

Photos by Peter Piazza

St. Landry yam herb sausage.

Carolyn Miller takes a bite of an edible pansy grown on her farm in Cankton.
The entire menu included: grilled quail, shrimp and egg-plant soup with “Floating Isles of Allium” or edible flowers; orange smoked duck and a medley of greens with chilled cucumber and crabmeat dressing; marinated roasted spring goat wrapped with leek and garlic leaves; veal rabbit and St. Landry yam herb sausage in fresh fig remoulade sauce; and sweet potato and banana nut bread pudding with praline cream sauce.

Guest chefs attending the luncheon were Prudhomme, Jimmy Schmidt of Detroit, Mich., Nancy Longo of Baltimore, Md., Jamie McFadden of Apopka, Fla., Jan Birnbaum of San Francisco, Enola Prudhomme of Prudhomme’s Cajun Cafe, and Truex.

Others guests included Mrs. Seppi Renggli of Italy, who represented her husband, Chef Seppi Renggli; Miller’s friends and family from throughout the country; organizers of last weekend’s Heritage Festival and Brandi Smith, Heritage Festival queen.