Omelette shapes heritage

Abbeville has been cooking up giant dish for 19 years.

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ABBEVILLE — Nineteen years ago, only one thing stood in the way of this small city nestled on the Vermilion River from breaking eggs together: a skillet large enough to hold 5,000 eggs.

"Everyone said, 'No, we couldn't do it. There's no skillet,'" said Emery Toups on Sunday, while standing in front of the giant, 12-foot round, cast-iron pan. The town had one made at the local vocational school, and it was silver-stoned in Houston. It's now housed in a garage Toups built behind his business and gets pulled out each year for the Giant Omelette Celebration.

The inspiration for the lively event came from a trip Toups and other members of the Abbeville Chamber of Commerce made to Besieres, France, for the Easter Omelette Celebration. There the community celebrated a Napoleonic legend. According to local lore, Napoleon and his army camped near Besieres, where Napoleon feasted on an omelette. His palate was so pleased that he ordered all the eggs in the town to be sacrificed for an omelette. His palate was so pleased that he ordered all the eggs in the town to be sacrificed for an omelette.

Omelette for his army

Since 1984, the community has made it a tradition to make a giant omelette, with artists and musicians filling Magnolia Square downtown. About 60 people make the event happen each year, as members of the Francophone fraternity. The fraternity includes other omelette-celebrating cities such as Besieres and Frejus, France; Malmedy, Belgium; Granby, Quebec; and Dumfries, New Caledonia.

Toups wore his chef's hat embroidered with the word, "Abbeville." Around his neck, a copper skillet gleamed with his name engraved upon it. The skillet signifies the organization's chevaliers or knights. Once one is dubbed chevalier, they're cloaked in a white chef's jacket, hat and skillet, said Elroy Schexnader, who was knighted in 1988.

As Schexnader explained the organization's history, a petite, gray-haired woman scraping eggs from the skillet turned around.

"And I'm the Queen Mother," said Olga Toups, wife of grand maitre or master, Emery Toups. A chef's hat suited her as a crown. Her small skillet hung from a red, white and blue sash lined with pins from Frejus, Granby and even Virginia — all places where she has helped prepare community omelettes.

Bowl of the eggs were passed to the crowd with a slice of French bread. Over the years, it's become a tradition to have a bite of the super-sized order of eggs, said Tracy Broussard of Abbeville. He said that the recipe doesn't vary, but an egg is added each year: The number is now up to 5,019 eggs.

The annual festival brings the usual side dish of catching up with old friends and meeting strangers who don' stay that way for long.

The festival brought friends from New Caledonia, France and Belgium. And the fun isn't over, Olga Toups said.

"We have the farewell party," she said. "We have a good time."