Abbeville 'Praline Lady' known across country for her goodies

By CATHERINE TRAHAN
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ABBEVILLE — Around her hometown of Abbeville she is known as the "Praline Lady" and just about every day she may be found "pouring" in her home.

Evelyn LeBlanc, 62, has been making her luscious pralines commercially for six years now and what began as a small-scale operation has grown into a mail order business which even The New York Times and People magazine have featured.

She calls her business "Evelyn's Pralines" and what makes her product so different from the New Orleans sugary style is that she uses whipping cream instead of the usual light cream or canned milk. She also roasts her own papershell pecans (halves not pieces) in real butter and uses pure Louisiana ribbon cane sugar.

The recipe is an old family one that I revised because I wanted a creamier praline," said LeBlanc, "but pralines are a temperamental kind of candy and the recipe is a tricky one.

The history of pralines is also worthy of note because it involves French nobility, sex, religion and American wealth — all ingredients of a good, juicy novel.

The praline's reputation for romance was instilled in New Orleans as they became a sweet staple in the famous quadrille ballrooms. The sons of Louisiana's wealthy Creole planters danced in the ballrooms with beautiful young women who were one-fourth black and three-quarter white, thus the name quadrille.

As richly gownned and bejeweled as their white counterparts, each was guarded fiercely by her jealous mama who protected her virginity until she was picked as a mistress by one of the white men.

Once picked, the quadroon woman remained one man's mistress for life and was set up in a house in a quiet part of New Orleans where she raised her children and awaited visits from her lover.

Regardless of the candy's rich history, this last-minute invention of a desperate lover's chef has become a part of Louisiana's Creole and Cajun cuisines.

It has also become very much a part of the life of the Praline Lady. After finishing a business course at what was then Southwestern Louisiana Institute (now USL), LeBlanc married and had four children.

Her husband died suddenly in 1969 and the young widow was left to rear her children alone.

"I worked in the Vermilion Parish marriage license office for several years, but, after retiring from that job, I fell into my candy-making profession," she said.

LeBlanc's new business venture began at Abbeville's renowned Black's Oyster Bar on the event of a cousin's birthday.

"I met my cousin Marie LaCasse at Black's for her birthday and I brought a basket of pralines as a gift," said LeBlanc. "We shared the pralines with the tourists at the next table and they immediately asked where they could buy more. The very next day I started delivering baskets of my pralines to the local restaurants for them to sell, and from then on I was in business."

The mail-order business, which keeps her very busy, came about after tourists

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began keeping the candy wrappers with LeBlanc's address.

"I started getting letters from all over the country, from people who had tasted my pralines and wanted me to mail some to them at home," she said. "I have even sent pralines to Singapore, Australia, France and Alaska."

LeBlanc says her busiest time of year is Christmas and with the help of her family, she manages to fill almost all of the orders she receives. "I had to unplug my phone for awhile because I just couldn't possibly fill all of the orders as it got closer to Christmas," she said.

LeBlanc "pours," as she calls her candy-making process, daily and she has been known to make 200 pralines a day.

"It takes a long time to make a batch (about 24 pralines) because I roast my own pecans and I measure everything out myself," she said. "I make small batches because that's the secret to good pralines."

LeBlanc has no set time which she sets aside for the candy-making, nor does she know from day-to-day how many she will make.

"I got a letter today from someone in Los Angeles who wants five dozen pralines for a party on Saturday night," said LeBlanc. "That's what I'll be doing tomorrow," she said with a laugh.

LeBlanc delivers the candy herself to a few local restaurants and some specialty shops, but her dream is to someday open a factory where she could make more of her confections.

"I would like very much to start a factory and produce on a considerably larger scale," she says. "The demand is there. I just need more help and space to meet all of those demands."

If one is still not convinced that these are "absolutely the world's finest" — which is the slogan LeBlanc uses — one has only to read the rave reviews written by well-known food critics throughout the United States.

Most have stumbled across her pralines by way of friends who have visited south Louisiana and brought some home.

Most food reviews describe her pralines as the "ultimate pralines" and one need only taste to agree.

She says she eats very little of her own candy because, "I was starting to gain weight."

She also says she looks forward to each day's pouring because she truly loves the work.

"I don't look at it as a job," she said. "I love to cook and so this is fun for me."

Despite the reviews and articles about how good her candy is, the Praline Lady says the greatest compliment anyone has ever given her is to reorder.

"They can tell me how delicious my pralines are, but if they want more, I feel they really mean it," she said with a smile.

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LeBlanc's pralines are first covered with paper lace doilies, lovingly packaged in bright red boxes and tied with gold cord.

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