Chef Paul: Promoting the Cajun culture through cuisine

by Amanda L. Guidry

It was hot that day, a typical Louisiana summer day in 1940. The air was thick with humidity and dust.

But Eli and Hazel Prudhomme weren’t concerned with the weather. Their focus was on something entirely different. Hazel was about to give birth to their 13th child, a son, Paul Prudhomme. One who would someday become the *premier* chef of Cajun cooking.

Paul’s entrance into the world was routine, for the family had been through many births. And like most children growing up in the rural Acadiana area between Opelousas and Port Barre, the boy learned about farm life.

"There was Paul, Bob, Eli and me in the house," reminisced Paul’s elder sister Enola, a local chef and restaurateur. "I had to help mom because my older sisters were married. We had to go outside, kill the chicken—that took a little effort. My dad saw me one day, and he’d seen how I was having trouble catching the chicken to kill it. So, he took a stiff wire and put a U in it. He said, 'Feed the chicken, then pass the wire in the legs and catch the chicken.' Today, my kids say, 'That’s gross, Mama.' I say, 'Hey, when you’re hungry, you learn to kill the chicken.'"

By the time baby Paul was 7, however, Enola was married and no longer a fixture in the Prudhomme house, so Paul began to help his mother in the kitchen.

"My parents opened a grocery store, so my mother had a maid to come in and cook for them," added Enola. "Her name was Lucille. She was a good cook, and she had a lot to do with Paul’s learning to cook. He would go the store to get a hunk of meat to bring to Lucille. And if she wasn’t there, he would do the cooking."

Opelousas-born Chef Paul Prudhomme is credited with introducing Cajun cooking to the world. The chef’s restaurant, K-Paul’s, is a New Orleans favorite.

(Photo courtesy of www.diningaround.com)

At age five, Paul said, he began helping his mother in the kitchen by stirring the contents of the cooking pot.

"I would stir the pot, and she would say, 'Call me when it looks... this way or smells that way,' said Paul.

Between Hazel and Lucille’s tutelage, Paul began to understand the importance of fresh ingredients to cooking.

"We didn’t have electricity, so, of course, there was no refrigeration," explained Paul. "Therefore, we used only what was fresh and in season. I learned to appreciate herbs and vegetables right from the garden, freshly slaughtered chickens and fish and crawfish just caught in nearby streams and bayous. This bounty, plus my mother’s natural talent as a cook, our whole family’s love of cooking and eating, and the joy we shared at meals, all influenced me as a chef."

Growing up in Acadiana was Paul’s inspiration. His family was Catholic and attended mass at the St. Landry Parish Church in Opelousas. After church on Sundays, the entire family—all 13 children, their spouses and kids—returned to the Prudhomme homestead for dinner.

"The rule about food in our family: everybody ate together," said Paul. "The rule about everything else: Dad was the..."
boss. You didn't cross him."

In 1956, at age 16, Paul graduated from Opelousas High School, married his high school sweetheart and opened his first restaurant. Nine months later, he had nothing.

Divorced and broke, Paul went to New Orleans. He needed to earn money to pay back his restaurant loans, and he needed to decide what to do with his life.

Paul knew he loved cooking more than anything else. When he was at home, his brothers and sisters would arrive at the house with friends, and he prepared his specialties for the guests.

"They loved the food, and I knew I wanted to do that. No one knows when you decide to do something," admitted Paul. "I knew I was committed to cooking in my early 20s. I had four restaurants that failed in a row, but I wanted it."

After working in the Crescent City for a time, Paul began traveling around the country, finding odd jobs (always in restaurants) to help pay off those pesky loans.

While working, Paul watched the chefs to learn their different styles of cooking.

"Sometimes, when I thought the food was too bland, I'd sneak in a few dried herbs and spices," he said. "When customers complimented the dishes from my station, I'd try to remember exactly what I'd used. But that was hard, so I began keeping little notes on good mixes in my pockets."

Sometimes, I'd get caught, and this didn't make me popular with the head chefs."

He traveled for 12 years, traveling north and westward, living in California and Nevada before finally coming back to Louisiana in 1972.

"I came to New Orleans and started working here," said Paul. He worked in three different restaurants before his big break finally came.

"I always wanted to [cook] Louisiana food because after traveling around the country, it was the best food I ever tasted," said Paul. "The food part of the culture was not so good in flavor. Because of traveling, I learned that our food didn't really turn people on. When I cooked for others, they told me it was the best food they ever tasted. That's what I wanted to do in my own restaurant."

Paul met Kay Hinrichs at a restaurant in the late 1970s, and they had an immediate friendship. Their personalities clicked, and the duo decided to work together, opening K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen in the French Quarter in 1979. Kay ran the front of the restaurant, and Paul ran the back. One year later, the duo married.

And just as Paul and Kay's relationship blossomed, so did the restaurant, which began to grow rapidly in popularity. But throughout it all, Paul was adamant that there would be no shortcuts in his kitchen. Every dish must be approached for taste, nothing less. And fresh ingredients were a must.

"The restaurant doesn't have a freezer," Paul said. "Everything is fresh. It's a different method than most restaurants do. We wanted our customers to have a great experience, and we have great cooks."

Continued on page 6

At K-Paul's, locals and visitors began clamoring for two of the chef's creations: blackened redfish and blackened steak.

"I think the restaurant is successful because the food and service is good," said Paul.
When you sit down and order food, that’s when it’s cooked. It’s not precooked before. We do it all to order. The restaurant has two stories, and each has its own kitchen.

The talented chef soon became a regular on Channel 6 in New Orleans, and since then, his life has been a whirlwind of activity.

In 1986, the chef’s first cookbook, "Chef Paul Prudhomme’s Louisiana Kitchen," was on the New York Times’ Best Seller List for several weeks. That same year, Paul was named Culinarian of the Year by the American Culinary Federation. Pulling on his family’s influence, he and his siblings and their spouses wrote "The Prudhomme Family Cookbook," featuring not only their recipes, but tales of Louisiana culture, as well.

Today, Paul has eight cookbooks under his belt.

Just as in his traveling days, Paul experimented with spices and flavors at his restaurant. Soon, customers began asking for the secret of his unique seasonings, and he made batches of his seasoning to give away. The packets were so popular, however, that putting them together became time-consuming, and the Prudhommes decided to start a secondary company, Magic Seasoning Blends.

"The seasoning company just went into a new building, right after [Hurricane Katrina], and it’s four-times larger than before," described Paul. "We can extend out business quite rapidly. We want to continue to develop great seasoning blends to companies around the world."

Besides the restaurant and seasoning company, the Prudhommes also opened a third business in the early 1980s, the Magic Meat Plant in Melville. After acquiring the plant, the Prudhommes converted it into an andouille and tasso plant that distributes to commercial users throughout the United States.

And Paul hasn’t completely left the bright lights of television either, for the first American-born recipient of the coveted Merite Agricole of the French Republic often is seen on national shows like The Today Show, Good Morning America, 20/20, Late Night with David Letterman and Larry King Live.

Sadly, in 1992, Kay succumbed to lung cancer, and Paul had to continue his restaurant and other businesses without his best friend. However, he has the support of his children, all 300 of them, according to Shawn McBride, president and CEO of the seasoning company.

"All of his employees are like family," said McBride.

Today, Chef Paul isn’t in the restaurant’s kitchens every day—his wheelchair just doesn’t allow it. However, the culinary king doesn’t let that keep him
from his craft.

"Traveling around the world with the seasoning company, you realize something about intercultural food: you can't duplicate it, but you can use their seasoning to make your food different," said Paul. "My job is to do recipes for people all over the world."

And when he isn't in the kitchen or doing research and development, Paul said he enjoys a good game of *bouée* (pronounced boo-ray).

"When I lived in Opelousas, I was a card dealer at one of the clubs there," said Paul. "One of my cousins owned it, and I started playing *bouée* there. My hobby has been playing cards for half a century."

"He can block out everything around him in the kitchen," said McBride, "and he can block out everything else when he's playing cards."

And although the chef enjoys his card games, his first love is and always will remain cooking and sharing his creations with loved ones.