Teaching Yankees how to eat

(Editors Note: The following is a reprint of an article that appeared in an Indiana newspaper about a local resident Ernest Ayo.)

Variety may be the spice of life for some, but for Ernest Ayo, Cajun Cooking is the spice he craves.

A native of Louisiana, Ayo grew up on Cajun cuisine, a style developed by French Canadians who settled in the Louisiana bayous in the 1700s. Spicy dishes were created from the abundant seafood and local produce, liberally seasoned with a variety of peppers and simmered to bring out the natural sweetness of the food.

But Ayo, who has worked at Pulaski Memorial Hospital since 1979, had an old Cajun craving in his blood and had to do something about it.

“We were so used to foods begin seasoned, and it’s very difficult to eat food without seasoning,” he said, admitting that he missed the tangy zest and sweet-hot taste of Cajun cooking.

Ayo began “importing” a variety of seasonings from New Orleans and preparing Cajun meals for family and friends. “They were so amazed by the taste, they asked for the recipes.”

But the Cajun recipes were useless without the proper spices — that’s when Ayo got serious.

He began ordering bulk supplies of spice, with plans of blending it himself and marketing it in 5-ounce containers to the public.

Ayo did his homework of marketing research, memorizing the federal regulations for food product distribution, studying the Indiana tax system and ordering containers, and Cajun Country Seasonings came to life in Winamac.

“We’re trying to teach the Yankees how to eat,” he laughed as he filled another shaker at his one-man factory on the 100 block of Logan Street.

He blends his own combination of three different peppers, garlic, salts and other secret ingredients to make the seasoning, which is distributed at 70 retail food stores throughout northwest Indiana.

The unique container labels bear a photograph of the Ayo family, nearly unrecognizable in their 18th century clothing. Also on the label are suggestions for using the spices.

“It adds a zip to chicken,” he said. Other suggestions include a sprinkle on beef, seafood, stews, soups, cottage cheese or popcorn. Ayo especially enjoys the spice on Pulaski County pork.

“Add like you would salt — shake on raw meat and bake, broil or fry,” he added.

Ayo also markets a Louisiana Hot Sauce, a combination of distilled vinegar, hot peppers, tobasco and cayenne pepper which is fermented six months for full flavor.

“This is not for the hot,” he said, “it’s for the zest.” The six-ounce bottle of sauce, bearing the photo of Ayo, is also available on area shelves.

Ayo plans to release a barbecue sauce this fall and distribute a gumbo starter in January. Eventually, he would like to open a little shop, built in traditional Cajun architectural style, and offer a whole line of products.

“We’ll try to come out with one product a year,” he said.

“Cajun food is a minority in America that always been here, but people are just discovering it. We just have the pleasure of bringing it to people,” he said.