Collaboration among local chefs used to be taboo—but now it's a fast-growing trend

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It's tasted in the complexity of dishes, smelled in the duck fat gravy used to tempura okra.

It's visualized as three people's hands work simultaneously to perfect a plate before it makes it to a table.

It's felt as a bottle of Crown Royal is passed from person to person in the kitchen as the final course is served.

And it's heard in the rock-star-style applause they receive when introduced following a dinner.

This is Acadiana's new chef community.

During Runaway Dish dinners and Local Pantry Pop-up restaurants, it's become so natural to see chefs collaborating that it's sometimes difficult to remember that Acadiana hasn't always been this way.

"This is becoming one of those situations in which all the elements line up at the right time with the right people in the right place," said Toby Rodriguez. "And normally when that combination lines up, it's the birth of a renaissance. And I think that's what's happening right now in Lafayette. I think it's the right time, the right people and the right place.

"Lafayette is on the cusp of a food revolution."

Rodriguez never expected to be a featured chef at a Runaway Dish dinner. He has never considered himself a chef, and he's never worked in a restaurant.

He became involved in the culinary world through butchering meat in front of people, or performing boucheries, eventually creating Lache Pas Boucherie et Cuisine to keep up with the demand.

This year's first Runaway Dish dinner on March 9 featured Rodriguez's traditional style of south Louisiana cooking with Jarrod "Wu" Adams of Tsunami Sushi's Seoul style of cooking.

Adams became enticed by...
the culinary world while washing dishes at Prejean's Restaurant during college. He eventually attended culinary school and cooked in many places before returning to Lafayette and working his way to executive chef of Tsunami.

"With Runaway Dish, we're learning a lot more from each other," Adams said. "We're learning different techniques and using different ingredients because we're getting to do what we want to do."

Runaway Dish is a nonprofit organization that was founded by married duo Denny and Katie Culbert in 2013 as a way to cultivate the creative chef community while giving back to local organizations.

Runaway Dish hosts four dinner parties per year that challenge two chefs from different backgrounds to deliver a dinner in any way they see fit. There are no cost or ingredient limitations as they might encounter in a restaurant kitchen.

More incredible than the $20,000-plus raised for nonprofits is what it has done to the culinary community. "We went from a whole bunch of chefs who were basically isolated and never bumped into anybody else," Denny Culbert said, "and now they throw each other birthday parties. They go out to St. Martinville, like they basically take field trips together."

There are no strangers at a Runaway Dish or pop-up pantry event. No chef is too proud and no cook too insignificant to pitch in to create something special. And no dinner guest is too much of a foodie or too picky to enjoy the courses found in front of them.

"I think restaurants will be born out of it," Denny Culbert said. "I think a lot of relationships and partnerships will come from Runaway, but we're still kind of in the infancy."

In addition to Runaway Dish's quarterly dinners, chefs come together monthly at Dark Roux for pop-up restaurants.

"With talented minds come together, the sum is usually greater than the total parts."

The culinary renaissance happening in Acadiana is fueled by pop-up restaurants and dinners that have "no restrictions, no egos and absolutely no competition."

"Within the last couple of years — just because of putting those chefs and cooks in the same room together — we've seen a much more collaborative chef culture in Lafayette," Denny Culbert said.

"It's amazing how fast it's happened."

Rodriguez and Adams have known each other for less than a year, but they have become friends and collaborators through Runaway Dish.

"I think we're headed in a great direction," Adams said. "Lafayette chefs are bringing new things to the scene."

Rodriguez says now is the time to be in the Acadiana culinary scene.

In a place where almost everyone can cook and appreciate a great meal, it takes a movement like this to bring something new to the table. "I feel like it's just starting to catch its stride," he said. "It hasn't even started running yet. I have high hopes of what's yet to come."