it's been over a decade now since the isolated bayous of South Louisiana produced a universal trend called Cajun Hot! Most of us living here in the mid-1980s thought that the initial blitz of worldwide media focus on Acadiana's food, music and people would soon fizzle out. We all expected it to be just another fad that would fade away as quickly as it had sparked the collective American consciousness.

But here it is, 10 years later, and the Cajun culture has been permanently established as a part of the American scene. It's a continual discovery of an important piece in the jigsaw puzzle of the American psyche. Now Americans are discovering Creole culture, a unique expression of Louisiana's blacks. It's similar to Cajun culture, but fundamentally so different.

The Cajun Hot! trend—and the Creole offshoot—has also made lots of local individuals rich and famous, or at least made them more renowned. These ambassadors, as we have dubbed them, are well-known. Names like the late Clifton Chenier, George Rodrigue, Michael Doucet, the late Dewey Balla, and Stanley "Buckwheat" Dural are but a few. But of all the Cajun and Creole ambassadors who've helped put Acadiana on the world map and on America's dinner tables, none has had more impact than Opelousas native Chef Paul Prudhomme.

"Certainly Chef Paul is the person most responsible for the fact that people around the country know about our Cajun food," says Carolyn Leday, former co-chairwoman of the first Paul Prudhomme Homecoming Day in 1987 in Opelousas. (It has since developed into the St. Landry Parish Heritage Festival, a sumptuous event that brings world-famous guest chefs—all Prudhomme's friends, of course—to Opelousas for a week each May to learn how to prepare Cajun and Creole dishes that they'll serve back in their own restaurants.)

"The interest in Cajun food started out as just a fad," Leday says. "But now it's just part of the American food, and it'll always be there. There are certain things we have introduced to the rest of the country. Chef Paul has done an incredible amount of good for Louisiana as a whole for tourism. And, for the fact that people come to Louisiana for the food, let's face it. Chef Paul is the embodiment of how people feel about Cajun food.

"But Chef Paul is also an ambassador probably for the fact that he symbolizes our hospitality and openness and all the good things about the South, and about Louisiana especially."

A trademark of Prudhomme's Cajun hospitality is his method of demonstrating food preparation. Whether it's inside a bookstore or a TV station or a festival tent, Prudhomme ensures that everyone gets a taste. And hardly a toothpick taste, either. More chefs may be doing the same thing now. But Chef Paul's feed-the-masses food demos were, as Leday puts it, truly unusual when they were first unveiled to the public.

Truly unusual is also a great way to describe Chef Paul, the 13th and last child born to Eli and Hazel Prudhomme on July 13, 1940. The Prudhommes were struggling sharecroppers who lived on farmland they cultivated just outside of Opelousas.

By the age of 7 Prudhomme was helping his mother with her never-ending job of cooking for the family. According to Enola Prudhomme, Paul's sister, their mother was the only woman she knew who could take two fryers and stretch them out to feed 12 kids (one son died at the age of four months) and two adults.

Paul absorbed some of his mother's tricks for good cooking, and he especially learned the importance of using fresh foods and vegetables. That appreciation for freshness was born out of necessity. The family had no electricity, so no refrigeration. To this day K-Paul's in New Orleans doesn't have a freezer, and the restaurant seats 113 people.

Chef Paul also learned how to be economically creative with food as well. Evidence of that is his so-called poor man's dish, Blackened Redfish, now his most famous recipe and the one that catapulted him to celebrity status.

Prudhomme was a chef at Mr. B's in New Orleans for some time before he persuaded a banker to loan him enough money to start a business of his own. K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen, named after Paul and his late wife, K Hinrichs Prudhomme, was started on a shoestring budget in 1979. Prudhomme didn't have enough money to buy a fancy grill like he had used at Mr. B's, so he got inventive. He decided to heat his big, black iron skillet until it became white-hot. Then he grilled the spice-coated fish on it.

By Katrinna Chéri Huggs
Thus was born a culinary phenomenon. Blackened Redfish became such a national craze that the Gulf of Mexico was practically emptied of the species. Laws were passed to put limits on catching the suddenly too-popular fish.

Sure, it was a bit of a fluke. Blackened Redfish wasn’t even a traditional Cajun recipe. Nevertheless, Prudhomme’s career skyrocketed. And the man who learned how to cook in his mother’s kitchen (no fancy cooking school here) became a culinary god. He had the touch.

Louisiana Kitchen, Prudhomme’s first hardcover cookbook, became a cookbook classic. Written in 1983, it made the New York Times’ best-seller list. His latest cookbook (there are nine, four are softbacks), A Fork in the Road, written exactly one decade later, was published last year and sold several hundred thousand copies within the first few months that it hit the bookstores.

“He is held in extremely high regard from chefs around the country,” says Leday. “Jasper White, [the owner of Jasper’s in Boston and a guest chef at the Heritage Festival], for example, told me he thought Chef Paul had done more for American food than anyone else. I don’t think people realize what a profound influence he’s had on those chefs.”

People who love to cook wear out a Paul Prudhomme cookbook. And a generation of new master chefs has gotten its start under Prudhomme. Among those lucky enough to have had the opportunity is Jan Birnbaum, a Baton Rouge native who opened his own restaurant, Catahoula’s, this past February in California’s Napa Valley. Birnbaum, who worked under Chef Paul for five years, rates his friend and mentor as one of the top chefs in the world. He describes Prudhomme as a man who is both very visionary and very tenacious in seeing that his vision becomes reality.

“And,” says Birnbaum, “he had a real exciting way of making cooking fun. It was a lot more than a job to anyone who worked for him. It was more like an amusement park ride.”