Carroll Thomas, dit Chef Caro, is a redhead. It doesn't matter that his hair is graying.

His face is freckled and nearly always alight with a smile.

But it's his flamboyant energy that gives him that flammable, explosive ambience.

Take too much of some of his peppery products (It's hard not to over-indulge) and you're bound to feel it one way or another.

He calls this transmission of his energy - and that of the rest of his family - Cajun Power. Those are the words atop the labels of his hot sauce, herbs and spices remedy for blandness and - first and most important - garlic sauce. He's coming out with what he calls a Cajun Worcestershire and for 1992 a garlic sauce designed to make hospital food taste better without cholesterol, fat or salt.

"Somebody told me, 'All somebody has to do is throw gasoline on you and you're on fire, there you go,'" he says at his bottling plant in front of his home on the Vermilion River north of Abbeville on Hwy.

"I've got a lot of drive and I'm probably stupid," he adds.

USL professor Carl A. Brasseaux in his very humanistic, well-researched book The Founding of New Acadia applauds the industry of the Acadians of now Nova Scotia. He points out that during the winter it was not uncommon for the entire family to become involved in truly cottage industries.

They made, for instance, things like wooden shoes or sabot in French. Often, these products were smuggled into present-day Maine.

If cottage industries are part of a Cajun tradition, Thomas has brought it to its zenith of modernity. Ask him who's making and bottling his products and he proudly tells you it's wife Marilyn, sons, their girlfriends and one other lady.

Henry Ford would be proud of their assembly line: bottles being filled from a newly designed and installed 1,000-gallon vat, those bottles topped, sealed, packed into boxes which are then glued shut.

His 79-year-old father, Alfred J. Thomas, easily handled Scelfo's strict regimen.

It was the 1954 football season and Thomas was the 12th man on the team they called the Iron Dazzler, the team that had only 12 players hard enough to handle Scelfo's strict regimen.

Carroll Thomas, far left, sorts his mail order materials. Left, Thomas prepares a 50-gallon drum of his peppery product for bulk order customers. Below, Thomas' family and friends help form an assembly line. Thomas' son Coby (red hat) pours the sauce. Then, Sable Dubois (stripes) caps the bottles. Thomas' wife, Marilyn (pink), then tightens the caps and seals the product. Next, Dana Broussard (red) and James Gary (white) package and stack the finished product.
“Sauce

about the time he saw another fluid market, went to National Red Cross Aquatic School and set himself up in the swimming lesson line. He rented time in a large Lafayette swimming pool and offered lessons to anyone of any age for $20 apiece with a guarantee of success.

He hired some help, of course, but by working from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. almost every day he came out of the summer with a hefty, if somewhat wet profit.

“I taught ages 3 to 83, 20 kids to a class.”

“The discipline and drive came from sports,” he says.

“I’ll be 53 in September and probably have as much drive as at any part in my life.”

Another Cajun influence, he readily admits, was fellow Abbevillan (now deceased) Dudley J. “Cousin Dud” LeBlanc, who was flourishing about the time Thomas was achieving glory on the football field. One can easily draw a parallel between Thomas mixing the first batch of garlic sauce in a bowl and LeBlanc mixing his Hadacol elixir in a wash tub in the back yard of his Park Avenue (in Abbeville!) home.

But it was after high school and an active duty stint in the Louisiana National Guard, that Thomas really got into high gear.

He started selling beer for an uncle with a Jax distributorship. He can still rattle off the sales pitches invented back then faster than the fastest rap group on any label. His garlic sauce, he says, "would make a rabbit hug a hound."

“I was 20 years old and another brewery offered me a territory of five parishes. That was unheard of at the time.”

It was something he really enjoyed. He’d stop the truck on a back road and summon a farmer from his field to have a free cold Jax with him, making customers.

“But I had to get out of it,” he says with that friendly, cherubic smile. “If I didn’t, I’d probably be an alcoholic by now.”

Some say he’s a workaholic. He comments, “I’m not afraid of work, that’s one thing. I can lay down and go to sleep right next to it.”

For years, he’d make a lot of money and then blow it. “I’d retire for a year,” he says, “then I’d go out and make some more.”

It was while running a drive-in restaurant on Maude Avenue in Abbeville, in partnership with his parents, he developed the garlic sauce. He eventually sold the restaurant but kept the sauce.

In all, there was a string of businesses opened, run well, sold for a profit and temporary “retirement” while he watched those businesses go down, most of them to fail.

There were marinas, burglar and fire alarms etc. “A lot of it was luck,” he admits, “and a lot of it was timing, just a sort of sense of timing.”

And he admits to a thrill at “living on the edge” or going over it on a whim, giving “110 percent” to life.

Take, for instance, the time his wife wanted a two-seater bicycle. He was reluctant because he figured he’d be doing all the pedaling. But he sort of gave in. He bought a dozen two-seaters in the spring.

He rented them out at the drive-in, helping his customers work up a thirst and an appetite. He sold them for half-price in the fall, but never pedaled in between, he insists.

And there was the time he bought an 18-wheeler full of pool furniture to get the items his wife wanted, sell the rest and pocket $7,500.

Life, to him, is like a chess game. He’s always thinking ahead. He built “a fortress” of a house anchored to 49 12-inch piling driven eight feet down into the hard, natural ridge of the Vermilion River.

“I wouldn’t even go to the courthouse in a hurricane,” he says proudly. But the kicker is that it’s designed and wired for a restaurant that should decide to get back into the business.

It was at Carroll’s Drive-in that he discovered not only the garlic sauce, but the little mascot My Love that graces the labels he designs himself.

A frequent visitor was a good-natured, rotund Cajun character named My Love. My Love used to be a rather common name in Vermilion Parish. This reporter once saw Thomas sell a bag of air to the real My Love just for the sport and without misrepresenting the contents.

“I wanted a symbol that kids could grow up with,” Thomas explains. “Something cute that they could remember.”

“That’s the secret (to success),” he says, almost with a wink, “people.”

Then he hurried back to his people on the assembly line, mentioning over his shoulder that, “We can do 12,000 bottles a day.”

What a challenge, but he’s already thinking ahead, like the entrepreneur chess-player he is.

Sooner or later, he says, he will sell out to a major distributor. Then he’ll probably “retire” for a while again until he can digest the ideas he already has for future enterprises about which, cagily, he isn’t talking.