Always a Salesman

Tony Chachere turned a retirement-years project into a hot product that made him a household name.

Tony Chachere is intricately linked to his famous Creole seasoning, had Chachere didn’t find his greatest success until late in life, after a career as a successful salesperson, banking everything from insect repellant to life insurance. What began as a cookbook project during Chachere’s retirement years became Creole Foods of Opelousas, and Chachere became a familiar name in southern Louisiana kitchens.

Chachere was the consummate salesman, and his persistence and charm brought him success no matter the product. His first job, at age 2, began before school each morning, when Chachere met the 3:30 train to collect the morning newspaper. He delivered them before school and returned to the depot after school for the afternoon paper. The ambition-second grader made extra money by reading news from World War II to the Italian grocer in his hometown of Opelousas.

One of eight children born to French Creole parents, Chachere underran the need for money. He quit school in the 10th grade to work. In his four days at Doce Bordeaux’s drugstore as an soda jerk, delivery boy and clerk. While adding to the family income, Chachere saved enough for a 500-word course in pharmacy. He returned to the druggist as a pharmacist, but soon recognized the potential in drug sales and set out on his own. He took more than training with him when he left Doce Bordeaux’s. His wife, Patricia Kern, a caddie, became his wife. The couple’s 55-year wedding brought them six children.

In 1954, with a borrowed $100, Chachere started a wholesale drug business called Louisiana Drug Company. He developed more than 150 products, including his best seller, Mamou rough syrup and Bon Soir Bug Repellent.

“Right after Prohibition ended, I bought a bunch of half-pint bottles from bootleggers. All insect repellents were selling in pint bottles for 80 cents and nobody was buying. So I shipped up some ketone and oil of wintergreen and called it Bon Soir Bug and went on the radio singing about it the tune of ‘Good Night Ladies.’” It sold, but it wouldn’t sell two bugs. Later, I added something and made it good,” Chachere told Ronnie Vaughs for a 1990 story in Louisiana Life magazine.

Chachere spent the 1940’s and 1950’s trying to sell his products. By the time he was 30 years old, Chachere, 30 by 30, had marketed $1 million. He sheltered his wages and invested in a peaceful life of hunting and fishing. But within two years, the idle lifestyle left Chachere bored. He started a new career as an insurance salesman for Equitable Life. In his first year, Chachere achieved the Millionaire’s Round Table designation, and maintained that mark for 13 years. He retired in 1970 and was inducted into the Equitable Hall of Fame, the company’s highest honor. At 65, Chachere retired again and went home to spend his time doing what he enjoyed—fishing, cooking.

Chachere’s passion for cooking had begun at age 24. After a fishing trip, someone cooked the day’s catch in a courtboudin and Chachere was hooked. He attempted his own courtboudin with little success, but in typical Chachere fashion, he continued to improve himself. In the 1960s, Chachere joined 23 amateur chefs to form Cooks Unlimited. The group held gourmet suppers twice a month, with each cook taking a turn as chef.

“We tried to sundry salt,” says Don Chachere, Jr., Chachere’s grandson and the company’s vice president and COO. “Always the competition, Tony Chachere quickly earned the nickname “Ol’ Master” by outshining the other club members.

At one of the dinners, Chachere noticed a fellow cook mixing salt, red pepper and black pepper in a bowl to season the meal. Chachere realized that he always used the same seven spices in his cooking. That night he went home and mixed a combination of his spices in a jar. Family and friends soon requested jars of his seasoning mix. After his second retirement in 1970, Chachere set out to fulfill a long-held dream of compiling a cookbook of southern Louisiana recipes drawn from his Creole upbringing and from the Cajun style that he had adopted. After two years he published Cajun Country Cookbook, which focuses on wild game and seafood recipes as well as gumbo, crawfish and jambalaya. In 1972, the word “Cajun” did not have the marketing appeal it does now, but Chachere, the salesman managed to sell 10,000 copies of the cookbook in the first week.

The highlight of the cookbook was a recipe for Creole smothering, Chachere’s “secret sauce” of spices. Chachere considered that one recipe “worth the price of the book.” Apparently, his readers felt the same way. Requests for the seasoning poured in. In 1976, Chachere formed Creole Foods of Opelousas and chose the now famous green shaker can for his new product.

As in all of his other ventures, Chachere dove into selling and expanding. He quickly developed Instant Roux and Gravy Mix, and returned to the life of a traveling salesman. He painted his International Scout with the words “Tony Chachere’s famous Creole Seasoning” and visited grocery stores along the Gulf Coast to pitch his product. In a few short years, his Creole seasoning could be found on grocery store shelves all along the coast.

In 1980, Chachere retired for a third time, but as with the first two retirement, his retirement did not mean an end to work. The 76-year-old Chachere turned over the day-to-day operations of the company to his son Alex and grandson Don Jr., but he showed up at work at the factory every day and continued to develop new products, including Salt Free, Lite Salt and Meat Spice versions of the Creole seasoning, as well as sauces and quick mixes for macaroni and cheese. In March 1996, the American Culinary Federation made Chachere the first inducer in the Louisiana Hall of Fame. One week later, Chachere fell with his family, then served up the day’s catch in a crawfish boil. The next day he died of an aneurism. He did the things he loved—fishing and cooking—until he was 70.

That September, the company published Tony Chachere’s Second Helping: A Cajun Cookbook. The book includes stories from Chachere’s childhood. His grandson Don Jr. points out that although Chachere told wonderful stories, he was much more than a storyteller. “He made a lot of stories, too,” he says.