ACADIANA is a region unlike any other in the United States, because everything here is
accomplished by the French history and heritage of the area. Acadians is proud of its past,
and especially of the fact that it forms a vital part of the present.

The history begins in 1605, when French colonists established themselves on the south-
eastern coast of Canada, in a region they called Acadia. In 1713, England was awarded
the territory by the Treaty of Utrecht. The transfer of the province was followed by
years of political and social harassment by the English officials, despite the Acadians’
vows to remain neutral. Finally, in 1755 they were cruelly deported. Some were relocated
to France, others were dispersed throughout Colonial America. But the Acadians were a
proud and independent people who did not want to lose their identity. When they heard
of French Louisiana, they began to make their way here. It was 1763 before most of them
made it, and by that time Louisiana was under Spanish rule. But the Spanish authorities
welcomed them, and gave them land grants. The similarity of language and the commonly
held Catholic faith aided them in establishing themselves, while the isolation of their
land holdings helped them to preserve their culture. “Cajun” is derived from Acadian.

This history gave rise to many legends. The most popular concerns Louis Pierre
Arceneaux and Emmeline Labiche, sweethearts who were betrothed in Acadia and separated
by the exile. According to the local legend, they met years later in St. Martinville,
but Louis was pledged to another, and Emmeline died of a broken heart. This local story
was told to a friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne; he told Hawthorne; and Hawthorne related
it to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Wadsworth based his narrative poem Evangeline on the
story, but changed the sweethearts’ names to Gabriel and Evangeline, and changed the
ending of the legend. In his poem, Evangeline finds Gabriel in a hospital in Philadelphia,
and he dies in her arms.

Dr. Thomas Arceneaux, a descendant of the real Louis Pierre Arceneaux, was so inspired
by the history of his ancestors that he designed a flag for Acadia. The following is his
official description of the flag. “To symbolize the French origin of the Acadians, a
portion of the arms of their mother country — three fleurs de lis, silver on a blue
field is used as part of the flag. To symbolize Spain, the nation which controlled
Louisiana at the time of the Acadian migration to Louisiana and under whom they prospered
after years of exile, the old arms of Castille — a gold tower on a red field — appears
in one section of the flag. The gold star on a white field represents “Our Lady of the
Assumption” (Maris Stella), Patroness of the Acadians. The star also symbolizes the
active participation of the Acadians in the American Revolution, as soldiers under Calves.

About 45% of the people of Acadia speak FRENCH. In the areas of St. Martin Parish,
Ville Platte, and Abbeville, this figure rises to almost 80%.
The lush, primitive beauty of Acadia is appreciated by people from all parts of the world. This beauty is produced by the combination of our subtropical climate and the geography of our land. The 22 parish (county) area has two regions, the northern alluvial forest and the southern treeless prairie. Bayou meander along throughout the area. A bayou, or creek, has little current due to the flatness and lowness of the land. Southern Acadia has both marshes and swamps. A marsh is a low-lying, boggy, treeless area that is covered with grasses and interlaced with bayous and creeks. A swamp is also low-lying and boggy and interlaced with bayous and lakes, but it is forested rather than grass covered. Chertiere, oak covered ridges that are remnants of ancient Gulf of Mexico beaches, are located along the coast.

The houses of the Acadians were functional, economical, and comfortable; they were well suited to the land and climate. They were built of cypress, which was plentiful in the nearby swamps, and were insulated with boussillage, a mixture of mud and Spanish moss that was placed between the interior and exterior walls of the house. The high-pitched roof was designed to shed rain and to provide attic space that could be used as a garconniere (sleeping quarters) for the young men of the family. The stairway leading to the garconniere was placed on the front porch to conserve interior space and to provide seating for the porch, as it was often used for additional living and sleeping area.

Climate and the land determine Acadia's agriculture. Sugar cane is grown along the alluvial lands of Bayou Teche and Bayou Lafourche. Rice is cultivated on the flat plains of western Acadia. Hot peppers thrive on the "islands" produced by the large commercially mined salt domes that thrust upward through the marshes in the south central portion. Yams (sweet potatoes) and cotton do well on the terraces of northern Acadia. Soybeans are grown throughout the area. Underneath it all lies rich reserves of Oil and Natural Gas that are taken from the earth without disturbing the natural beauty of the land.

The land and the climate determined what could be planted as well as what was available naturally, such as herbs, seafood and game. The Acadians took their French culinary heritage, adapted it to the foods that were available, put in a dab of colonial Spain and a pinch of native Indian, seasoned to taste with spices and swamps. A marsh provided the food for which this region is so deservedly famous. Many of the dishes are based on a roux, which is made by combining oil and flour and browning it slowly in a heavy pot. Various seasonings, water, and whatever meat or seafood the cook desires is added to the roux and left to simmer until good. Okra can be used to make gumbo in place of the roux. Filet (ground saguamassus leaves) is added to gumbo made with a roux (never to okra gumbo) when it is served into the bowl -- never cook filet. All gumbo is served over rice. Jamhalya, which is a blending of various meat and seafood with oil and is another popular dish. But perhaps the most delicious of all is crawfish etouffee, a rich, delectable blending of crawfish and seasonings served over rice. The crawfish is found in many places in the world, but it took the Cajun to appreciate and popularize the delicious taste of this small fresh water cousin of the lobster.

Any Cajun will tell you that even the best food tastes better when enjoyed in good company with good music. The expression "joie de vivre" (love of life) sums up the Cajun's desire to enjoy life to the fullest. A good place to do this is at a "fais-do-do." The fais-do-do began as a dance in the home, where one room was set aside for the babies, who were told to "fais-do-do", or go to sleep. Now a fais-do-do is a dance held in the street or dance hall, and few bother to fais-do-do. The roots of the rhythmic music go back to medieval France, but Cajun music has evolved into a distinctive form. Most is not written, but is passed down orally. The songs are usually either very sad or very happy, with simple lyrics and music that makes your feet want to dance. The original instruments were the fiddle and the triangle. They were later supplemented by the accordion, introduced by the Germans, and later still by guitars, drums, and harmonicas. Cajun musicians are not full-time professionals; they work during the week and play music on the weekend. Some of the best places to go to hear traditional Cajun music and experience a fais-do-do are: Prejeans in Carencro, Fred's Lounge in Opelousas, the Triangle Club in Scott, and Harry's Club, La Poussiere, and Mallette's in Breaux Bridge.

The music of the Acadians and their "joie de vivre" are expressions of the carefree side of their character. But the Acadians are also determined, hard working people with a deep pride in themselves and their heritage and way of life. Cajuns believe that there are things worth having and fighting for, as indicated by the expression, "lache pas la patate", or don't let go (of the potato). Cajuns are close to their families, even including third and fourth cousins. Friends are called "cher" (dear). The Acadians' love of people and their generosity is shown by the custom of "laganape", -- a Cajun baker's douse. Laganape is something extra, and Acadia is laganape. So stay awhile, enjoy, and LAISSEZ LE BONS TEMPS ROULEZ (let the good times roll).