

## Communicating Through a Bowl of Gumbo

"Creole cookery was devised by no man in no age, but evolved over the years out of the richness of the natural larder that is southern Louisiana. It has borrowed from other types, but is essentially itself..." (Barrios 5).

Louisiana is home to some of the most unique culinary and cultural history. An area filled with diversity of land, resources, people, and cultures intermingled with one another brought about foods and traditions unlike anywhere in the US. Cajun and Creole are two different groups of people formed by the give and take of peoples and beliefs. Needless to say, what they eat and the festivities they practice become reflections of the unique culture they have. When someone eats a bowl of gumbo, what are they participating in? How does a bowl of soup convey the culture of different people?

To appeal to a personal level, each person has a memory associated with a meal they have had. To some, this may be a casserole their mother made for them when they were younger. When they eat this meal, they participate in a gift given to them. One person has created this gift to sustain another. This gift may have been handed down from generation to generation. The gift was created due to what was available to a person to cook with. It was created because of cultural norms, religious practices, and larger historical events. This gift, this meal, reflects all these ideas and values, whether a person recognizes it or not.

To identify what a meal tells another person, we must know who is creating and receiving the meal. There are two distinct groups often mentioned together in Louisiana, those being the Cajuns and Creoles. Academically, these two broad groups are referred to as the Louisiana French. Although, these groups of people are not different words for the same group. While they are connected, they are distinct from one another.

The word Cajun originally came from the word Acadian. "Their original ancestors were French peasants who were exiled from Acadia, now Nova Scotia, in the eighteenth century and who resettled in what was to become south Louisiana" (Esman 200). As cultures would mix and time would pass, we would eventually arrive at what we now know as Cajun. Although, the term was originally considered derogatory, referring to lower-class people of Acadian descent. Now, we see that "...the Cajun identity is recent, the people are not culturally more Cajun than they were before" (Trépanier 170). Due to their French ancestry, Catholicism was deeply embedded in their culture from the beginning. The effects of Catholicism on a Cajun meal will become apparent.

Creole, on the other hand, comes from the Spaniards. "For the Spaniards, the children born of Spanish parents in a colony were Criollas. The French of the West Indies simply borrowed it to fit their reality. In Louisiana, then, strictly speaking, the Creoles were descendants from the colonists who came directly from France and Spain" (Trépanier 163). Originally, to be Creole, one would have to be French and native to the area. As slavery was being abolished, African Americans seeking an identity started to refer to themselves as Creole as well. This would create a distinction between white and black Creole.

Although, there is debate about exactly what it means to be Cajun or Creole. It is partly regional at this point, with Cajun being South-West Louisiana while Creole is primarily South-East. At certain times Creoles may refer to themselves as Cajuns for simplicity. In other circumstances, it is a matter of race. "In one instance, when the blacks organized a softball team and called it 'The Creoles', the whites' softball team was baptized 'The Cajuns'" (170). Overall, the line between Cajun and Creole has become muddled over time. While there is a historical precedent to keep in mind, it is now largely based on individual identity, and often the two

groups share extremely similar cultural practices. For this essay, festivals, practices, and cuisine will be referred to as Cajun.

Just like every cuisine, the first factor that would shape what a group of people ate was what was available. One ingredient that has stayed a staple is corn. Wheat was a luxury, for most Cajuns, especially the poor, it was rarely available. "The only source of supply was France, whose vessels, loaded with foodstuffs for the little colony, would arrive in port every two or three months, barring storms, pirates, and navigational disaster" (Barrois 133). Cornbread and grits, a sort of ground corn porridge, were important substitutes for early Cajuns and Creoles. Corn, a vegetable unique to the Americas, was given to earlier settlers and the early Native Americans would help the immigrants to cultivate the grain. Eventually, rice gained favor around the 1920s and wheat became more available with better trading from France and the colonies. Although, corn stays as a mainstay of Cajun cuisine in dishes like corn pudding, succotash, or the aforementioned cornbread.

Meat has an interesting relationship with Cajun cuisine. Because Cajuns and Creoles were predominantly Catholic, Lent made a large impact dictating the kinds of proteins they would eat and when. Outside of Lenten abstinence, chicken, beef, and wild game were popular as entrees. "Wild game was so surpassingly delicious and abundant that the greater part of the citizenry 'lived in idleness' and applied themselves to scarcely anything except hunting and fishing" (34). Hogs and cattle would be raised and slaughtered as a community at boucheries, or communal butcheries.

One of the first things tourists think of when someone mentions Cajun food is the variety of fish and seafood available in southern Louisiana. Shrimp, catfish, crawfish, oysters, and much more have embedded themselves in the cuisine. Lent had a large impact on what and how Cajuns

ate. Crawfish is often heavily associated with Cajun cuisine in the modern mind. For most of Cajun history, many Cajuns would turn their noses up at consuming this crustacean. "Many, perhaps most, middle-class prairie Cajuns did not eat them at all in the pre-World War II era, and those who did consume the crustaceans did not boast about it" (Bienvenu 96). Crawfish being labeled as undesirable led to a surplus of it. Red Cross workers would begin to can the crustacean and its abundance and reasonable price led to an increase in crawfish consumption. This would lead to the image of crawfish changing and growing in favor. Lent would become the time in which people would eat this cheap, abundant protein and cement it as a staple food.

A large part of what Cajun ate was determined by their economic class. Crawfish early on was looked down upon as food for the poor. Often freshwater fish would be available to anyone who either had the money or the ability to catch it on their own. Seafood was almost exclusively available to the rich. Oysters, crabs, and red snapper became foods of status reserved for the oil executives but also the oil workers. "Many roustabouts, particularly those from the prairie region, had their first taste of seafood in the famed galleys of the offshore rigs, and most soon developed an appreciation for the red snapper and other finfish caught by workers from the rigs and prepared by the galley cooks" (29). As time went on, taste would change, and with economic growth, seafood would become increasingly available to all people.

"The lands are very fertile and yield several crops each year. A man here, working two days, only digging the ground and sowing it would reap more than sufficient to support himself during all the year..." (Barrios 107). The variety of plants and vegetables people could eat in southern Louisiana is wide and varied. One reason is because of the warm climate and good soil of the area. The second reason is because of trades that would occur from different cultures and people. German, Spanish, French, Native American, and Colonial America would meet and trade

with the Southern trading hub that was Louisiana, especially New Orleans. Home gardens were common and required little effort. "Several varieties of peaches... three types of figs.. three types of plums... pomegranates; and pecans.' Finally, Acadian farmers cultivated several varieties of grapes, including the native muscadine. All of these foods made their way into the Acadian diet on a seasonal basis" (Bienvenu 21).

This is all to say that options for food in southern Louisiana, especially today, are not limited. The options that a person has to cook with are almost too much to decide. It does not take much effort to realize that the reason food is held in such high regard in Cajun culture is because of the extravagance of resources they have. It is hard to separate the cuisine from their culture. Many of the practices, holidays, and traditions have food as their focal point.

Boucheries were a practice that brought a community together, all with food as the center. "In the pre-refrigeration era, neighboring families in rural districts of French Louisiana parishes routinely pooled their resources to ensure a steady supply of fresh meat through communal butchering called boucherie" (84). Communities would gather and give away the meat of animals either raised or hunted, like cattle, pigs, elk, and other game for a lower price. Boucheries grew out of necessity but also because the Cajun's identity was based on their communal life. It was an important act because, as a community, "Boucheries forced Cajuns to confront mortality and the paradoxical notion that one has to take a life to sustain life" (90).

After the gathering of food, the preparation for a feast would begin. A common reoccurring feast that would be held in a Cajun household would be the Sunday dinner. "Cajuns considered Sunday a day of religious and secular obligation- mass and family, in that order" (79) Sunday dinners were more elaborate than a weekday meal. It was mainly a matriarchal event. Mothers and Grandmothers would prepare the meal and set the table, talking with one another

while the men and children would socialize within their groups. While the exact meal they had for dinner would change day to day and household to household, extravagant dishes like whole roasted chicken or fried fish accompanied with assortments of vegetables and grains.

Occasionally, the men of the house would take over and spend their time barbequing with one another. When the time to eat came, "Though separate before eating, all diners were equal at serving time" (81). They would line their table with plates and pots full of food to share as a communal meal.

Sunday dinners were not just a time for a person to dine on more lavish food than other days, it was and is crucial to their communal lives. All of their meals, whether lavish or not, were integral to how they lived with one another. "Food is the central catalyst for social interaction in the south Louisiana, where cooking space is unequivocally intertwined with social space" (63). The idea was that good food would encourage good company. By preparing and hosting an environment meant to welcome, comfort, and sustain another person, the meal would open a door for the person to be let into a community. Whether stranger or family member the dinner table would become a time to talk and be with other people. A bowl of etouffee accompanied by a hot cup of café au lait would strengthen the body while conversation would strengthen the person.

The goal of a Cajun meal is community. Whether acquiring and preparing food, eating at a feast, or enjoying coffee after dinner, every part is centered around the community. This is their heart. The vast amounts of resources provide homes with intentional menus to feed families and guests. The effects of poverty and the need to eat brought communities together to support one another in boucheries. The examination of Catholic practices like Lent and fasting days dictated how the community should eat. When a Cajun family eats a meal together, their goal is beyond

sustenance, all these aspects bring about what we know as a Cajun meal. No practice shows this off better than their festivals, one specifically shows us best. That being Mardi Gras.

Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, is the last day before the beginning of Lent. While many people associate this day with gluttony of food and drink with streets lined with people throwing beads and engaging in not-so-virtuous kinds of revelry, the root of this celebration is not so. While modern beliefs and tourism have no doubt affected this pseudo-holiday, the original reason for this practice differs greatly.

Around the 1960s with increased household income and an ease of acquiring food and necessities, the Cajun festival became about celebrating themselves. "The very fact that Cajuns are so interested in proclaiming and celebrating their identity suggests that they need assurance that it remains viable. The ethnic festivals provide this assurance. Repeated celebrations and proclamations can always help convince participants of the value of whatever is being celebrated, and Cajun ethnic festivals are no exception" (Esman 206). The celebration of being Cajun is shown in the zydeco music being played by quartets of brass, the smell of fresh beignets from local food stalls, and the many types of food associated with each celebration.

The other reason for celebration is to express their values. The first value comes from the Catholic vision. Mardi Gras sparks a love for what they have. With Lent and fasting around the corner, the sharing and consuming of good food and drink arises from the desire to go into the fasting season with a full stomach and full heart. There is little that Cajuns seem to value more than a good meal, the practices of Mardi Gras bring this value to the forefront.

There are two parts to Mardi Gras. The first is the parade that most people know, and tourists go to see. This is what people imagine, beads and doubloons being thrown down from windows while jazz bands and brightly dressed men and women walk down the streets for the French

Quarter. The second, and most interestingly is the *courir de Mardi Gras*. Masked men and women travel around their streets going from neighbors to stranger's doors and asking for food. "Friends, family, and neighbors who live along the prescribed Mardi Gras route often donate rice, onions, roux, parsley, green onions, sausage, or even live chickens for the gumbo. The meal represents one final moment of celebration before the community observes forty days of piety and self-sacrifice during the Catholic Lenten season" (Bienvenu 90). This practice seems to tie back to early communities and the poor asking for food. Now, it is about bringing the community together as a cohesive household. Inviting all members who wish to participate in its antics and then finally reminisce at the climax of the event, the feast.

"Hunger and the need for interaction remain, leaving the Cajun community to devise new strategies to cope with their evolving environment" (93). Gumbo, one of the most recognized dishes from Cajun culture, exemplifies what it means to be Cajun. Gumbo is a unique dish found in southern Louisiana cookbooks no earlier than the Louisiana Purchase. The word itself comes from an African word, *gombo*, meaning okra. Okra comes from Africa. Sausage is a culmination of German and French cuisine. Cayenne, onion, and bell pepper can be traced back to Spain. File, or ground sassafras leaves, an herb unique to Native Americans. The soup allowed all households to change it as needed. Chicken and other fowl were common but for Lenten observance, seafood gumbo was and is common. "Gumbo Choux, or Cabbage Gumbo, was the soup of the poor, but as soul foods go, it was nonetheless a feast when a ham hock simmered gently in the fragrant 'pot likker'" (Barrois 83). It was a meal for all. Entire festivals were built around it. "The ethnic festivals are sponsored by local civic or charitable organizations rather than Chambers of Commerce or industry and are usually fundraisers for civic projects such as the building of a community center (the Gumbo Festival)" (Esman 204). People celebrated



around a pot of gumbo. The Cajun feast was a way to grow in the community. "While many kinds of food are a popular vehicle for social interaction in south Louisiana, gumbo holds a special place within the food hierarchy. The phrase 'having a gumbo' implies a special social event that centers around the soup" (Bienvenu 135).

"... the meals' central role is not gastronomic, but social- sustaining family ties and fostering an attendant sense of community. This, quite simply, is what Cajun cuisine is all about" (Bienvenu 177). What is said about being served a bowl of gumbo or jambalaya with pralines and coffee to round off the meal is, at its heart, an invitation into a community. Every good meal is meant to do this, but Cajuns live it. It is hard to look at the history of French Louisiana without looking at what they ate and how they ate it. Every festival, every home, every person centered around the dinner table. The clashing of cultures intermingling to bring about a new cuisine shows this. The boundaries of what was originally French, Spanish, African, or Native American have faded. When you eat a bowl of gumbo you partake in all of them, but most importantly the person who gave it to you. They bring you to them and the community that made it. "This spirit, in its symbol and in its reality, is worth preserving" (Barrois 2).

Works Cited

- Esman, Marjorie R. "Festivals, Change, and Unity: The Celebration of Ethnic Identity among Louisiana Cajuns." *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1982, pp. 199–210. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3317149>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- Trépanier, Cécyle. "The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity." *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 157, no. 2, 1991, pp. 161–71. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/635273>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2023.
- Bienvenu, Marcelle, et al. *Stir the Pot: The History of Cajun Cuisine*. Hippocrene Books, 2008.
- Barrois, Joseph, et al. *Recipes and Reminiscences of New Orleans*. New Orleans, Parents Club of Ursuline Academy Inc., 1971.