

The Cajuns and the Creoles

Strictly speaking, a New Orleans Creole is a descendant of an early French or Spanish settler, "born in the colony," not in Europe. Most colonials in the eighteenth century were French. They dominated New Orleans cultural and social life for more than 100 years, long before the "Americans" arrived in any number. Most Creoles called themselves "French," spoke French and considered themselves the only true "natives." The late-coming Anglo-Saxons, arriving after the Louisiana Purchase (1803) were considered "foreigners" and called "*Les Americaines.*"

In Lafcadio Hearn's "Creole Sketches," he mentions that some French Creoles residing in the old French Quarter wondered why "anyone would care to cross Canal Street." (Uptown was contemptuously known as "The American Side," alien territory.)

Until the Civil War, the proud Creoles educated their children in France, spoke the French language, and centered their lives around their closely-knit families and their cultural nexus, the grand French Opera House. They called themselves "*la creme de la creme.*" The pure Creoles eventually were outnumbered and isolated, trapped in part by their stubborn insistence on the French language, culture and tradition. Creole men shunned manual labor as uncivilized. Many refused to speak English or socialize with those who did. As a result, the ingrown, aristocratic French Creole was submerged economically by Anglo-Saxon industry and drive.

But one should not despair. The Creole temperament lives on. Creole, as a meaningful term, survives in many ways, an unmistakable part of New Orleans -- its food, its music, its architecture, its French Quarter. Creole no longer is a specific race or breed. Essentially it defines that rather special New Orleans attitude toward life -- "*joie de vivre, laissez-faire, bon apetit!*" In this sense, spiritually, all New Orleanians are Creoles, *mes amis.*

One thing must be understood. Creoles are not Cajuns, and Cajuns are not Creoles. Both groups are distinctively French in their descent, dating back for centuries. But there the distinction ends.

From the beginning, when New Orleans was founded in 1718, Creoles were strictly cosmopolitan city-dwellers; Cajuns, on the other hand, were rustic, self-sufficient country dwellers. They lived along the bayous and amid the swamps of South Louisiana for two centuries, isolated, clannish, devoutly Catholic, French speaking and happily removed from mannered city society. They were hunters and trappers and fishermen, farmers, boat-builders, breeders of quarter-horses who worked hard weekdays and weekends celebrating life with their fais do-do's. "*Laissez les bon temps rouler*" (Let the good times roll) has always been a part of their basic philosophy. Lacking formal education, they lived close to the land, intermarried, and proudly retained their customs, their religion and their own provincial form of the French language. This "*patois*" is a form of provincial French passed down orally for three centuries. It dates back to their ancestral home in Brittany and Normandy. Quite different from both the written Parisien (and Creole) French, "Cajun French" has virtually disappeared. But their distinctively accented English, and Cajun idioms prevail – as do the music, the food, their "fetes," and their strong sense of family bonding.

The Cajuns' ancestors were cruelly exiled from New Acadia (Nova Scotia) by the British in 1765. In one of the nation's largest mass migrations, more than 10,000 found a permanent home in Louisiana. The word "Cajun" is a corruption of "Acadian." Today, nearly one million people of Cajun or mixed Cajun blood live in Louisiana.

Cajun and Creole food both rely heavily on a variety of herbs and spices. The Cajuns, in particular, like their food hot and spicy. Paul Prudhomme, raised in a rural