BISQUE This is another of those New Orleans dishes that can embody the best of peasant food or the finest in haute cuisine, depending on just who is making it. Its French origins are fairly ancient and mysterious, with some authorities pointing to a half-forgotten puree of wood pigeons, other poultry and game. Other researchers, however, have traced the word bisque to a shellfish soup of Provence. That, at any rate, is the root of the thick delicacy Creoles and Cajuns love today.

CRABMEAT Around New Orleans, the most popular way to enjoy crabs is to boil them with a peppery Creole sauce blend, dump them on a table covered with newspaper, then crack and consume them with icy beer. Yet the meat of the blue crab (sometimes called the Atlantic crab) enlivens some of the finest dishes in the Creole repertoire.

CRAWFISH There was a time when northerners pronounced it "crayfish" just to make Creoles and Cajuns mad, and they tirelessly mocked the entire notion that these tiny "mudbugs" were edible. The French have always known better. And finally, so does just about everyone else. In fact, tons of crawfish a year stream off to parts unknown--places like New York and Paris. At the very least, this newfound international chic keeps prices at roadside crawfish stands from plummeting so low at season's height that the locals live on nothing but.

ETOUFFEE' The Cajuns traditionally kept to themselves, their main encounter with English-speaking people having been their exile by the British from Nova Scotia. Yet they did contribute many a touch to classic Creole cooking, sometimes a pinch of this or that and sometimes an entire dish. Etouffee', usually prepared with crawfish or shrimp, is one of the latter contributions. The name means nothing more than "smothered," but the tastes and textures are much more interesting than the name.

GUMBO It's said that duels have been fought over which kind of gumbo is really the best—okra or file'. Of course, around New Orleans, duels have been fought over a lot of things. Suffice it to say that in Creole country, gumbo is the ultimate soup. It also carries a tangled pedigree that goes back to the farmer's pot-au-feu and fisherman's bouillabaisse in France, to tribal stews in pre-slavery Africa, and to Indian boiled seafood in pre-colonial Louisiana. Like virtually any great stew, gumbo can be made with just about anything--and good times or bad, it already has been.

JAMBALAYA No visit with the Cajuns or Creoles would be complete without at least one serving of jambalaya; and no visitor could find much within a day's drive that hasn't turned up in this famous dish. According to language experts, the name is derived from the Spanish word for ham, *jamon*, a regular ingredient in the 18th century. New Orleanians, however, love to defy language experts right along with everybody else. Jambalaya, they insist, got its name when a gentleman stopped at an inn too late to find anything to eat. The cook, whose name happened to be Jean, was directed to "mix some things together"--an order that came out "*Balayez.*" The guest loved the concoction that came his way, dubbing it "Jean Balayez" in tribute.

MUFFULETTA This is a New Orleans sandwich extravaganza of Italian meats and cheeses, lavishly spread with olive salad and stuffed between seeded buns the size of dinner plates.

OKRA This one is a bit of an oddity unless you're from the Deep South, where it's used as a thickener by the Creoles and Cajuns, pickled or fried by just about everyone else. Okra has a long history, including cultivation by the ancient Sumerians and extensive use by the Egyptians (including its pounding to make papyrus). A favorite of African jungle tribes, it reached America with the slaves along with its original name in Tshi–*gombo*. Since the slaves were kept naked during their voyages to bondage, it is said they preserved the gombo seeds just about the only way they could, hiding them in their ears.