

Culinary Creations of New Orleans

Though cuisines are often born in strange and wondrous ways, it is doubtful that any other than Creole got its start because housewives threatened a governor with cast-iron pots and pans. In 1722, in what became known as the "Petticoat Rebellion," about fifty young wives marched on Governor Bienville's mansion in New Orleans, pounding their frying pans with metal spoons and protesting their dreary diet of cornmeal mush.

With a dash of admirable dexterity, Bienville put the women in touch with his own housekeeper, a certain Madame Langlois, who had learned more than a few secrets from the local Choctaw Indians. It was she who calmed the angry wives by teaching them how to use powdered sassafrass for flavor in gumbo, how to make hominy grits, how to get the most from the region's abundant fish and game. From this education, a tempering of French tradition with Indian pragmatism, Creole cooking was born.

Ever since the bizarre beginning, and probably even before, two things have been clear about the Creoles. The first is that no two people agree on who or what they are. The second, fortunately, is that everyone agrees they really know how to cook.

By some definitions, virtually everyone in New Orleans seems to be a Creole. By others, there's hardly anyone who measures up. According to most dictionaries, Creole comes from the same Latin root as the word "create," with the French creating their creole from the Spanish *criollo*. Over time, this went from denoting a person born of Spanish parents overseas to a person born similarly of French parents. A child of the colonies, in either case. Yet Creole can also mean a mix of black and white parentage, or even undiluted black. It's undeniable that much of the sweat and soul that went into Creole food came from the black women who ran every home kitchen and the black men who labored in every professional one.

Despite a Creole passion for bloodlines, generations of alliances legal and otherwise added more tangles to the web that produced their cuisine. To French, Spanish and African roots, successive waves of immigrants contributed fascinating touches from Italy, Germany, even Yugoslavia. The Cajuns, a distinct French-speaking group living along the bayous, brought a love of hot peppers--though they never pushed Creole cooking dramatically in that direction. After all these years, the result is a cuisine that looks French in sophistication yet packs more punch and, on any table, carries more surprises.

Today, Creole is as different from Cajun as city is from country--with each boasting its own delights and its own enthusiastic partisans. Cajun cuisine (at least the real Cajun food, before the onset of chic) is home cooking at its finest, usually requiring large amounts of time and love to make up for missing expenditure. Creole cuisine is the city cooking of New Orleans, much closer than Cajun to the classic techniques of Paris and much more likely to involve an eye-catching degree of theater.

What follows is part glossary, part travel guide, and part collection of helpful hints. It covers the most famous New Orleans creations and the main ingredients, vegetables and flavorings used to prepare them.

BEIGNETS To natives of New Orleans, there's no such thing as a meal too huge to top off with fresh beignets at a sidewalk cafe in the French Quarter. These air-light yeast pastries are deep-fried in oil so hot they puff out in surprise, then they're covered with blizzards of powdered sugar.