

You Don't Have to Go to New Orleans to Eat the Best Cajun and Creole Cuisine On the Planet ~ You Can Make It Right at Home Easy, Gumbo Soups and More..



by Terry D. Clark

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Chapter 1: Introduction - Who are the Cajuns and the Creoles

For years when one hears the words "Cajun" and "Creole" it makes one think of New Orleans, Marie Laveau, Congo Square and Jazz. In truth these are two side by side cultures of two distinct groups of people who parallel in many regards in one region of the Good Old US of A. They are two ethnic groups of people residing in the same region of Louisiana, one of the Southern States in the United States of America.

When we think of Creole we think of mixed bi racial people that have descended from forefathers in New Orleans and Louisiana. This is partially true but it isn't the whole definition of what a person of Creole heritage is. In reality the Creole's were the first Europeans that settled in New Orleans and in the Mississippi Plantation Regions. Those original creoles considered themselves of aristocratic ancestry and were wealthy many times. They were descendents of French, Spanish and Portuguese Europeans who located in those regions.

The word itself "Creole" derives from the "Latin" word "creare" meaning to beget or create. After what was considered the "New World's" discovery; Portuguese colonists (slave traders) used the word "crioulo" to denote a slave of African Descent that was born in the "New World". After that for a time the word Creole was the designated word to describe all the New World colonists regardless of ethnic origin living along the Gulf Coast in particular Louisiana.

There the Spanish introduced the word "criollo" during Louisiana's colonial period from 1699 to 1803. Eventually the word's connotation grew to mean anyone of African or European heritage in that area. By the middle of the 19th century the word Creole implied those Black, White and Mixed persons who were not of Anglo Saxon heritage or foreign born Anglo Saxons. Creoles of Color (or gens de "couleur libre", "free persons of color") became their own ethnic group. Being half white they enjoyed many of the legal rights and privileges of white people.

They occupied a middle ground between the black slaves and whites. Many of the Creoles of Color owned property and had formal educations. Some were given high political appointments by the crown. Creole holdings involved shipping, banking and plantation ownership. Their businesses faltered after the Civil War without slave labor. However after the Civil War, the majority lost their status and joined the ranks of the impoverished black former slaves. The word "Creole" did sustain itself as a term also to white upper class Louisianans of non Cajun origin. This was confusing at times because Cajuns were called Creoles by people who were outsiders not indigenous to the region. This was mainly due to the fact that those outside of Louisiana were not familiar with the various differences of the ethnic groups there. Just like the Creoles of Color the White Creoles (called French Creoles) also suffered socio-economic decline after the Civil War.

In Arcadiana which was the part of French Speaking Louisiana where the Cajuns resided the newly impoverished Creoles married lower class Cajuns and assimilated into the Cajun culture. Today the word Creole is mainly used in Arcadiana to describe those of full or mixed African American Heritage. It is still understood that the term "Creole of Color" means creoles of mixed race heritage.

Black Creole means those who are predominately African American that are not mixed. In the past there was animosity between the two African descent groups based on color and social standing but today both are concerned with preserving the Creole culture together.

The term Creole still has vast grey areas where black, white and mixed race people may claim exclusivity to being the true Creole ethnically in relation to others who consider themselves Creole also.

Arcadians/Cajuns who originated from the West Coast of France primarily Brittany and Normandy first settled in Nova Scotia in 1604. They were for the most part peasants with little or no education at all and worked with their hands as a result. They were loaded on ships by the British after being expelled from Nova Scotia and began arriving in Louisiana in 1705. The Cajuns settled in the Bayous and open prairies. There they fished, farmed and traded what they trapped.

The Cajuns who were descendants of French Speaking Arcadians lived in isolation since their eviction from Nova Scotia in the early 1700 until modern times. It wasn't until the Oil Boom came that they had to fight to survive. So they hunted fished and gathered what they could selling the best to the outsiders and lived off of the leftovers. This is also what inspired Cajun cooking; which like Slave Food derived from the scrapes left over from the Plantation big house. In essence Cajun Food was anything that was edible that was not sold that could still be eaten. Cajun cuisine became a combination of making meals out of left overs and overlapping with the flavors of the south in addition to its Arcadian Roots.

"Arcadiana" also known as Cajun country spreads over a large area from the swamps in the bayous right up to the outskirts of New Orleans. They say the most interesting and robust Cajun food comes from Opelousas, Henderson, Breaux Bridge and Ville Platte - all small towns in south Louisiana. As you move down the swampy wet lands of the Atchafalaya Basin and its bayous which is the land of crawfish; the food gets milder but less delicious. Although Cajun food tastes good it doesn't necessarily look good. It's basically hearty country peasant food. Much of it is one pot food or food in pots such as stew type food. The pretty food that is in restaurants that is listed as Cajun goes against the grain of Cajun food

traditionalists.

In terms of cooking; in broader terms Creole cuisine is "City" cooking based on French Traditions but influenced by the Spanish,

African and the other ethnic groups that make up Creole nationalities. Cajun food is considered "Peasant" food that the Arcadians traditionally later evolving into Cajun. Cajun cuisine developed as they learned to live in the swamps of Southern Louisiana. By nature creole food is more refined and subtler while Cajun food is more spicy and pungent.

One of the main factors that makes the two types of food distinct is the fact that both groups took different paths once they got here in the new world. Cajuns isolated themselves in swamp areas and remained as such while Creoles were integrated into cosmopolitan life. The french quarters in New Orleans became the Creole Sector. What happened is many other Americans began to come to New Orleans to build their homes and businesses and Canal Street which was the main dividing line was the thoroughfare for the Creole French Quarters and the rest of the City and its inhabitants. So Creole food became cosmopolitan and blended with the many cultures that settled in New Orleans. This lent a certain sophistication to Creole cuisine that the Cajun cuisine did not have.

In 1880 writer George Washington Cable made an observation about the distinction of Creole Cuisine in his book "Old Creole Days. His book was so popular that it made Creole culture and Cuisine a popularity. A few years later at New Orleans first World's Fair called "The Cotton Centennial" Cable who collaborated with Lafcadio Hearn. They wrote the first guidebook to New Orleans. Included in the book was descriptions of foods that were recognizable. They also pointed out that the food from New Orleans was different from anywhere else.

As the two cultures kept intertwining there has been a love of evolution of the two cooking styles as well. Today you will find some inland Cajun dishes different in some regards to the ones from the Bayou Cajun dishes as they are different from the Creole food served in New Orleans. In actuality a lot of the distinction has also been lost because the two cultures are so intermingled. In truth both Cajun and Creole food in terms of seasonings are more alike than dissimilar. What happens is you find subtle differences as you go from area to area in the region and that's what

makes the two styles different. There are however dishes that are distinctly Cajun and Creole.

What you can say is there are similarities and differences between Cajun and Creole cooking. The Cajuns base a large portion of their Cuisine on stews, gumbos, okras and rice dishes. Creole food incorporates European food and African traces into its repertoire. If you were to compare a Cajun Jambalaya to a Creole Jambalaya the first thing you would notice is the color. Cajun Jambalaya is Brown while Creole Jambalaya is Red because of the tomatoes in it. Gumbo has a smokier flavor as you move out of New Orleans and into Cajun country. Both cooking style uses a roux to thicken the Gumbo. Creole food is more tomato based while Cajun roux based. The major differences in seasonings has merged for the most part. Both use rice, flour and oil for roux, crab, shrimp, oysters, crawfish, fish, frog, turtle, pork, beans, tomatoes, okra, yams, and pecans. Seasonings used by both cuisines are: parsley flakes, onion powder, garlic powder, salt, cayenne pepper, black pepper, and white pepper.

Chapter 2: Cajun and Creole Cuisine - What's in the Pot

So we established that Cajun people are the French Speaking Arcadians that were immigrants from Arcadia in Canada that the British kick out of Canada, Nova Scotia. They ended up in Arcadiana region of Louisiana USA. Cajun food is considered rustic food. It is made of local ingredients with simple preparations.

Creole people on the other hand; were those who are originally from French, Spanish and Portuguese Europeans first that mixed other ethnic descendants who landed in Louisiana. They mixed with the different cultural groups including Cajuns which gives their cuisine a distinct flavor as well. According to Chef John Folse creole cooking blends the distinct ethnic components of Louisiana into one flavor. Some of the contributions are still alive and well in the dishes eaten today

in this region. Gumbo which is a Louisiana favorite tradition originally began from the French soup Bouillabaisse. The Spanish contributed spices and the dish Paella which became Jambalaya. The Germans brought cattle to the region namely pigs and chicken. It was the Native American Indians who introduced corn to the settlers as well as ingredients like saffron and bay leaves. The Africans contributed "kin gumbo" okra. Each ethnic group brought something to the new land that went into the pot. Creole cooking also relies heavily on milk, butter and sausage all the remnants of French Cuisine.

Authentic Cajun Meals usually consist of three pots. One pot is dedicated to the main dish, one to steamed rice, skillet corn bread or some other grain dish and the third is whatever vegetable is around in bounty. Both Cajun and Creole cooking use what is called the holy trinity. These are the three aromatic staple seasoning vegetables; namely bell peppers, onions and celery. The three are finely diced and combined in cooking in a method similar to mire "poix" in traditional french cuisine. "Mire Poix" in french cooking combines finely diced onion, celery and carrot instead. In Creole and Cajun cooking the bell pepper replaced the carrot. Characteristic seasonings in Cajun and Creole cooking are parsley, bay leaf, green onions or scallions and dried cayenne pepper.

The Arcadian refugees that came from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick adapted their French rustic cuisine to the local ingredients that were available. Local ingredients include rice, crawfish, sugar cane and saffron. Cajun cooking relied heavily on game which was supplemented with rice or corn. Cajun cooking also has hints of quite naturally French with Spanish and even some native American in it. Another feature of Cajun cuisine is the use of smoked meats. This is another common aspect of Cajun cooking.

Creole cooking is thought of to be more aristocratic or continental than Cajun cuisine. Creole cuisine uses a lot of the ingredients that was brought to this part of the world in addition to the local ingredients. Both cuisines do however make use of what is on hand at the time and incorporate local ingredients to the basic foods in their dishes.

Some of the Cooking techniques used in Cajun and Creoles use cuisine are:

1. Barbecuing- slow to low cooking technique like "Texas Cuisine" But with Cajun Seasonings; can involve grilling or baking.

2. Grilling- direct heat on a shallow surface; fastest of the different varieties of grilling which also include: Charbroiling which is direct dry heat on a solid surface with wide raised ridges; Gridironing which is direct dry heat on a solid or hollow surface with narrow raised ridges Griddling-direct dry or moist heat along with the use of oils or butter on a flat surface

3. Braising- combining a direct dry heat charbroil-grill or gridiron-grill with a pot filled with broth for direct moist heat, faster than smoking but slower than regular grilling or baking; time starts fast then slows down then speeds up again to finish.

4. Baking- direct and indirect dry heat in an oven or furnace; faster than smoking but slower than grilling

5. Boiling- As in boiling crabs, crawfish or ship in seasoned liquid

6. Deep Frying

7. Etouffée- cooking a vegetable or meat in its own juices, similar to braising but in New Orleans they call this "smothering" (Southern cuisine uses "smothering" also with a gravy)

8. Frying-also known as pan frying

9. Injecting-Using a large cooking syringe to infuse seasonings deep inside of meats through incisions made in them. This is a newer technique but is used all

across Cajun Country.

10. Stewing -also called "fricassee"

Cajuns also deep fry turkey or oven roast Turduckens (which are combinations of deboned Turkeys with deboned ducks inside of them and debone chickens inside the duck.) So turduckens have all three birds one inside the other. This is a more recent addition to Cajun cuisine as is blackened fish or chicken and also barbecuing shrimp in the shell. All these are not traditional Cajun cooking.

The main staple grains used in Cajun and Creole Cuisine are:

1. Corn

2. Rice-long, medium and short white rice grains are all used as is popcorn rice. In early Arcadia rice was considered a valuable item. Because the climate was conducive it was grown all over the region even wild. Rice became the predominant starch because it was easy to grow, store and prepare. The oldest rice mill in the United States is the Conrad Rice Mill In Iberia Louisiana.

3. Wheat-is used for baking mainly breads- They do use Flour meals and grains as well. White flour, corn flour and corn meal are common flour used.

The main staple fruits and vegetables depending on what's in season are:

1. Bell Peppers

2. Black Berries

3. Cayenne Peppers

4. Celery

5. Cucumbers
6. Figs
7. Limes
8. Lemons
9. Mirlitons also called Chayotes or Vegetable Pears
10. Muscadines
11. Okra
12. Onion
13. Pecans
14. Satsuma Oranges
15. Scallions(also known as green onions)
16. Squash
17. Strawberries
18. Sweet Potatoes
19. Tabasco Pepper
20. Tomatoes (mainly in Creole Cuisine)
21. Beans (canned and Fresh) Red Beans and Black Eyed Peas are a must
22. Chili peppers

Cajun folks had to learn how to preserve meats because of lack of refrigeration in the past. Smoking meats still occur today but such preparations as a turkey or duck confit (which was a turkey or duck preserved in poultry fat with spices is seen as quaint and almost nonexistent now. Hunting game is still wide spread in Arcadiana. Also the increase of Cat Fish farms along the Mississippi Delta has brought an increase of using it in cooking where before traditionally wild caught trout was used. The wild trout was the salt water species and red fish.

Both Cajuns and Creoles use quite a lot of Seafood.

Here is a List of some of the main ones used in Cajun Cuisine: Both use Crab, Shrimp and Oysters as well as the Crawfish

1. Bass
2. Catfish
3. Trout
4. Sac-au-Lait (White Perch or Crappie)
5. Yellow Perch

Saltwater or Brackish Water Species

1. Trout
2. Red Fish
3. Pompano
4. Drumfish
5. Flounder
6. Grouper
7. Perch-many varieties
8. Snapper

Shell Fish

1. Crawfish-Either Wild Swamp or Farm Raised
2. Shrimp
3. Oysters

4. Blue Crab

Also as part of the Sea Food Mix are what are called "Trash Fish". Trash fish are those fish that don't sell in the fish market because of their high bone to meat ratio or that they are complicated to cook. These are the type of fish the fishermen brought home to feed their families with. Examples are Garfish, Black drum also called Gaspergou or just "Goo", Croaker, and Bream.

Poultry

Farm Raised

1. Turkey (and Turkey Confit)
2. Chicken (and Guinea Hen)

Game Birds

1. Dove
2. Goose
3. Quail
4. Duck (and Duck Confit)

Pork

1. Andouille- A spicy dry smoked sausage; characterized by a coarse ground texture
2. Boudin - A fresh sausage made with green onions, pork and rice. Pigs blood is sometimes used to make "Boudin Rouge"
3. Chaurice- Similar to Spanish Chorizo
4. Chaudin-A pigs stomach stuffed with spiced pork and smoked. Also known as

"Pounce"

5. Ham Hocks-Is the joint between tibia and fibula and the metatarsals of the foot of a pig; where the foot is attached to the hog's leg.
6. Head Cheese- Is a cold cut that originated in Europe. Another version is pickled with vinegar and known as "Souse." It is not cheese at all but rather a meat jelly made from the flesh of the head of either a calf, cow, pig or sheep in aspic.
7. Gratons- Hog cracklings or pork rinds. Gratons are seasoned, fried pork skin and fat with occasional pieces of meat attached. Similar to Spanish Chicarrones
8. Fresh Pork Sausage- Neither smoked or cured; but highly seasoned. Mostly used in Gumbos. This sausage does not have rice in it which is what makes it different from Boudin
9. Tasso-a highly seasoned pork shoulder

Beef and Dairy

Beef isn't a main meat in Cajun or Creole cooking. But dairy products are used in the desserts and some of the bread and breakfast foods.

Other meats include:

1. Alligator
2. Frog Legs
3. Gros Bec commonly called Night Heron
4. Nutria or Coypu (a semiaquatic rodent)
5. Rabbit
6. Turtle (farm raised)

Herbs, spices and the use of seasonings play an important role in Cajun and Creole cooking.

Individual Seasonings

1. Bay Leaf
2. Oregano
3. Bell Peppers (Red or Green)
4. Black Pepper
5. Cayenne Pepper
6. Celery
7. Garlic
8. Onion
9. Parsley(Flat Leaf)
10. Sassafras Leaves dried and ground into a spice known as file(accent over the e) for gumbo
11. Sugar Cane; also cane syrup, brown sugar and molasses
12. Thyme
13. Holy Trinity- Onion, Celery and Bell Pepper
14. Allspice
15. Cinnamon
16. Cloves
17. Dill Seed
18. Mustard Seed
19. Peppercorns

20. Salt

Blended Seasonings

1. Hot Sauce
2. Seafood Boil Mix
3. Vinegar seasoned with small hot green pickled peppers is a common condiment with Cajun and Creole meals
4. Persillade-a sauce or seasoning mixture of parsley (French: persil) chopped together with seasonings including garlic, herbs, oil, and vinegar.
5. Marinades made with olive oil, brown sugar and citrus juices
6. Various barbecue rubs similar to other states

Whole peppers are rarely used in Cajun cooking. Ground Cayenne, Paprika and Pepper Sauces predominate.

Oils

1. Butter
2. Bacon Fat
3. Lard(pork grease)
4. Peanut oil
5. Vegetable oil
6. Olive oil

Bases

Cajun and Creole Cuisine uses different bases in their cooking style. The Cajuns and the Creoles inherited Roux from the French .

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