The History of Cajun Cuisine

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Cajun cuisine is a fusion of food from different regions with very rich histories, such as France, Canada, and the southern U.S. It was originated by peasants of French ancestry. These immigrants settled in the "Acadian" region of the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia from 1604 to 1654. By 1755, the population of these settlers had grown to about 15,000. They survived on cereal crops such as wheat, barley and oats, and garden vegetables including field peas, cabbage, and turnips. This diet was supplemented by domestic livestock, wild game, and fish. (History of the Cajuns. (2001). www.terrebonneparish.com)

Because of increased tensions between the French settlers and the British, the Acadians were forced out of Nova Scotia. This was a long and grueling journey for those that survived. Many of the Acadians were sent first to Maryland, then back to France, and finally to Louisiana where they attempted to reunite with their family members. Because of their strong drawl, the name "Acadian" was transformed to "Cajun" by the English-speaking inhabitants of Louisiana. The Cajuns grew to be a unified ethnic group as a result of their struggles to overcome discrimination as refugees. (History of the Cajuns. (2001). www.terrebonneparish.com)

Initially, all incoming Acadian immigrants arrived in New Orleans. They were met by a tepid Spanish government that was eager to relocate the settlers to more rural

areas. These included the regions north of New Orleans along the Mississippi River, as well as the prairie lands of Southwest Louisiana. The Acadians newly settled into the river basin soon found difficulty in growing their familiar crops of grain and cool weather vegetables. The heat and humidity required the Cajuns to adapt to a new environment and diet. Assistance from the Spanish government came in the form of corn seed. The prairie was ideally suited for cattle, and successful ranches were soon established in this region, providing New Orleans and the surrounding area with much desired beef.

A dual class system emerged with the Acadian settlers, dividing Acadians into the small elite planter class, and the working class farmers; a minor intermediate,"middle" class existed as well. The elite planters soon adopted slavery, farming large tracts of land. They became successful in farming cotton by the early eighteenth century, which was replaced with sugar by the mid-eighteenth century, and rice shortly thereafter. The planters identified with the "Creoles," a more wealthy and educated class than the emerging Cajun culture. As farm land became more valued with the profits of cotton in the early part of the nineteenth century, the poorer Acadians in the river valley were forced to sell their land and move into the less desirable unclaimed swamp area. Swamp life was difficult and isolated, but did provide the emigrants with a generous supply of foodstuffs that added to the unique diet of Cajuns. (Cajun Country. (2003). www.cs.wisc.edu)

In both wetland and prairie Cajun homes, kitchens were simple and practical. Kitchen cookware consisted simply of a cast-iron kettle suspended over a hearth; and a few families had a cast-iron frying pan. Subsistence farming and hunting produced such

mainstay foods as corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, beans, squash, okra, and rice. Their diets were further supplemented with wild game, domestic livestock (pork and beef), and home grown fruit (figs, oranges, plums, pecans. And grapes). Wheat flour was the only food staple that was not locally grown, and was purchased instead at markets. Originally, Cajun meals were bland, and nearly all foods were boiled. The development of the *roux* gave more versatility to boiled dishes. Rice was used to stretch out meals to feed large families. While milk and wheat flour were considered "company foods," sugar and molasses were locally available, and used frequently; molasses topped cornbread was served at nearly every meal. Social functions were vital to culture, and parties, dances, and feasts were frequent and abundant. Coffee (usually black) was served generously, and gumbo was brought out to feed guests at midnight. Other events such as communal harvests and butchering were also social gatherings with generous amounts of food and drink. (Ross, Paul. (2000). Real Cajun Cuisine. www.fiery-foods.com)

Cajun food is essentially the poor cousin to Creole. Today, Cajun food tends to be spicier and more robust than Creole, utilizing regionally available resources and less foods gained through trade. Some popular Cajun dishes include pork based sausages such as: andouille and boudin, various jambalayas and gumbos, coush-coush (a creamed corn dish), and etouffee. The symbol of Cajun cooking is perhaps the crawfish, but until 40 years ago, crawfish were used mainly as bait. It took too much effort to remove the meat from such a tiny crustacean.

The history of Creole cuisine can be traced back to the first European occupation of Louisiana in 1682 by the Frenchman La Salle. By 1722, New Orleans had become the

capital of the region; French and other immigrants had settled in the area by this time. In 1762, the French government turned the Louisiana territory over to the Spanish, who welcomed immigrants with an open door policy. By the eighteenth century, trade was active and spices from the Caribbean were easily obtainable in the French Market. The Creole culture and cuisine (originally "Criolle," meaning "native born") emerged in this setting. (Cajuns. (1990). http://gatewayno.com/culture/Cajuns.html)

Creole cooking is based upon French soups and stews, and is influenced by Spanish, African, Native American, and other Anglo Southern groups. The Spanish brought into the cuisine the use of cooked onions, green peppers, tomatoes, and garlic. African chefs brought with them the skill of spices and introduced okra. Native species; crawfish, shrimp, oysters, crabs, and pecans, also found their way into both Cajun and Creole recipes. From the Choctaw Indians came the use of *file*, a powdered herb from sassafras leaves, to thicken gumbo. One factor typically overlooked in the development of Creole-style cooking is that it was food prepared for affluent whites by their black slaves and servants. So often the emergence of a new dish was the result of creative chefs intermingling their recipes and heritage with the tastes of their masters. The Creoles differed from the Cajuns in another aspect: their insatiable sweet tooth. Such delicacies as pecan divinities and flan were commonly enjoyed by the Creoles.

New Orleans, the capital of Cajun cuisine, had established an excellent reputation in the culinary industry by the 19th Century. Antoine's Restaurant opened in the French Quarter in 1840. The region experienced drastic food shortages and economic disaster following the Civil War, but had regained strength by the close of the 19th century. This

time period also marked a revival in Cajun cuisine, ironically at the same time the culture itself was on the decline. The first Cajun cookbook was published in 1885; before this it was difficult to establish the origins and evolutions of certain dishes. (Savoy, Marc. (2005). Cajuns Today. www.frommers.com/destinations/neworleans)

Cajun cuisine is a fusion of food from around the world, giving it a very rich and colorful history. It was filled with great ideas and integrations from the French, Spanish, Africans, and Native Americans. After many years Cajun cuisine has developed into what it is today: a well respected southern culinary classic.

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