Louisiana, We’re Really Cookin’ Cajun

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The Cajun phenomenon is the marketer’s dream come true. It has been an American classic: the rags-to-riches success story.

The success of Louisiana Cajun’s marketing story has been part happy accident, part the cooking and promotional talents of Paul Prudhomme—and since his initial breakthrough, the cooking and showmanship of numerous other Louisiana chefs—part awareness by private and government leaders of a good business opportunity, and part recognition and appreciation by those outside Louisiana’s borders of a heritage and cooking unique to America: Cajun food, as cooked by Cajuns, is delicious.

Origin of Louisiana Food

Prudhomme didn’t start Cajun cooking, of course. That began 225 years ago in the swamps and bayous of south Louisiana as a small colony of exiled French families from Nova Scotia (then Acadia) known as Acadians—colloquially, Cajuns—struggled to make a new life in a strange land. But Prudhomme, directly descended from that group, did begin, and kept fueling, the madcap media blitz and promotional tours that catapulted Cajun to the forefront as the preeminent cooking craze of this decade.

Prudhomme consistently refers to his food as “Louisiana food.” Although Louisiana food is best known as Cajun, it also includes its big-city first cousin, Creole, which has many of the melting pot influences of New Orleans with its French, Spanish, and African heritage.

Cajun is usually referred to as “poor country folks” fare, derived from the trapping, hunting, fishing, and small farming legacy of its forebears. Creole is a more sophisticated offering and usually includes some type of tomato portion. It results from the cooking styles of the commingled wealthy French and Spanish in New Orleans in the pre-Cajun era in Louisiana. Both include the “holy trinity” of finely chopped onions, celery, and green peppers.

Many have as their base stock the “roux.” A roux is a thickening agent without which many Cajun/Creole dishes would be little more than a soup. Cajun cook Alton Pitre calls the roux a “controlled burning of flour and oil—equal parts of both.” Although simple in concept, the roux is critical and if not stirred constantly and attended to with precision, it becomes a charred mess in the bottom of the skillet. To the base ingredients add wild game, the vast array of freshwater and marine seafood, seasonings, and vegetables available in Louisiana, and rice. The result is Cajun food in its many manifestations.

Cajun Chef Prudhomme Starts Craze

Although Prudhomme ticks off a series of events in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s as significant along the way to making Cajun a household
word, for him it started years earlier. For 12 years Prudhomme tramped through the kitchens of America’s restaurants. Along the way, he soaked up the food types, cooking styles, and food industry hype that were all to figure in what today is a multimillion-dollar food industry business for himself and his Louisiana Cajun contemporaries.

In 1982, he started his own line of products, “Cajun Magic.” In 1983, he did blackened redfish for *New York Times* food critic Craig Claiborne's birthday party. There was a huge media turnout. Several chefs were cooking for the affair, but “All of a sudden this smell started coming from my side of the room. People started tasting blackened redfish and the whole attitude changed. It was the hit of the party.”

**Other Chefs Promote Cajun Cooking**

Part of Louisiana’s Cajun heritage is that cooking is not confined to the female in the household. Many Cajun men cook and cook well, and serve as role models for their sons, handing down the heritage through the generations. When Prudhomme broke through the State’s boundaries, many excellent Cajun cooks and chefs were waiting for the opportunity to show their culinary art.

The common denominator of the most successful chefs is a willingness to take their cooking to the public. As roving ambassadors for the taste of Cajun they have covered the globe in the 1980’s.

Paul Prudhomme didn’t start Cajun cooking, but, as a descendent of those that did some 225 years ago, he has helped catapult Cajun to the forefront as the preeminent cooking craze of this decade. (*Restaurants & Institutions Magazine*)
Chef Buster Ambrosia was asked by the Louisiana Department of Agriculture to cook for the 1986 annual meeting of the Lions Club International in Taiwan. "We cooked for thousands of people—Lions Clubs from all over Europe, the Middle East, Far East, you name it. During our stay we prepared a total of 135 dishes. We took more than 2,000 pounds of spices, seasonings, sauces, and other ingredients as well as our crawfish, crabmeat, and red snapper and added them to some of the seafood they had over there. We introduced a cuisine to people from all over the world in that one spot. People had heard a lot about it, but they had never had a chance to taste it."

Currently scores of Louisiana chefs are making personal appearances across the country and around the world. John Folse is another of Louisiana's premier celebrity chefs who was permitted to open the only American restaurant in Moscow during the 1988 Reagan-Gorbachev summit talks and recently started a line of prepared Cajun products tailored to the European market. One of Folse's first big breaks came in 1985 when he was invited to Hollywood by 20th Century Fox to cook for a party for Cybill Shepherd. Since then, he has done additional Shepherd-instigated crawfish cookouts for some of Hollywood's biggest names. "And while we're cooking we also give them a little Cajun and Creole culture and history lesson."

One of the largest gatherings of Louisiana chefs to promote Cajun was at Bloomingdale's flagship store in Manhattan during June and July, 1986. Prudhomme, Folse, and seven other Louisiana chefs made personal appearances in a kickoff event which included much of the New York media.

The 2-month promotion, sponsored by the Louisiana Department of Agriculture, featured some three dozen Louisiana food manufacturers who, according to Glen Senk, operating vice president of Bloomingdale's, "otherwise would never have had the chance to reach this type of major national market."

Cookbooks a Marketing Tool
While personal appearances got the fledgling Cajun food industry off the ground, cookbooks are probably the single largest marketing factor keeping the food style before the public. Almost all of Louisiana's celebrity chefs have branched out into the cookbook business and acknowledge that selling cookbooks is a major business enterprise.

In January 1988, one Baton Rouge bookstore had 53 Louisiana cookbooks, many in their fifth or more printing. Some were multiple efforts by a single chef. Wilson had four; Prudhomme, two. Chef Paul Prudhomme's Louisiana Kitchen was in its 50th printing. The book has won a number of major awards in the cooking field and since its publication in 1984 has sold more than 700,000 copies. Three versions of "River Road," the No. 1 best selling community cookbook in the country published since 1959 by the Baton Rouge Junior League, were available, but most were a compilation of the cooking expertise and recipes of a single chef.

Cookbook sales not only reach the homemaker/cook, family, and friends, but also spawn media book reviews. Prudhomme says, "There was a span of about 3 years when it seemed like every writer who came to my restaurant or wrote about my book tried to write a better article about it than the guy before him."

Free Media Exposure
Aside from Wilson's appearances on PBS, cookbooks, and media accounts
One of the greatest marketers of Louisiana Cajun is Justin Wilson. In his folksy Cajun country dialect in Tangipahoa Parish, Wilson reaches across America each week on public television with his show "Justin Wilson’s Louisiana Cookin’ Outdoors." (WLPB TV, Baton Rouge, LA)

of personal appearances, countless other print and air time has been given to Cajun in the 1980’s. As Prudhomme points out, people hurried to write or broadcast the cutest, most electrifying, best quotable quote extolling the virtues of Cajun. The reams of material range from Craig Claiborne and Dan Rather to thousands of pieces in local media in the farthest reaches of America.

Food Shows
While Louisiana chefs have been the most visible component of Cajun,
many behind-the-scenes efforts insure that Cajun continues to have staying power and makes the transition from temporary fad to permanent trend. Among these has been the work of the marketing staff of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture. Aside from hosting media promotional events, the marketing specialists have attended some 50 food shows all over the world in the 1980's selling Louisiana Cajun.

The major food buying decisions by the large restaurant and supermarket chains here and abroad are made at food shows, where those selling their products staff booths handing out literature, providing demonstrations, and taking orders from interested brokers.

The number of products available for sale at these food events has mushroomed in the last 6 years. The Louisiana Department of Commerce estimates that more than 100 new Louisiana companies in the 1980's were geared to the Cajun food market.

Pride in Cajun Culture

But the existence of a Cajun culture on which to predicate the Cajun food industry was in jeopardy only a few short generations ago. As recently as the 1930's and 1940's, Cajun children were caned at school for speaking their native Cajun French. The idea was to become American—speak English. Fortunately, there has been a renaissance of pride. They now take immense pride in their French heritage as seen in a revival of their language (a Cajun French dictionary was recently published for the first time) and their music.

Cajun music, Creole Zydeco, and new styles that blend the two, featuring the fiddle and accordion, are now being heard nationwide. Last year Cajun-Zydeco festivals drew huge crowds in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Two of the top ten pop albums of 1987 featured a new musical hybrid fusing basic rock with authentic Cajun/Creole music. "The Lonesome Jubilee" album by John Cougar Mellencamp features accordion and fiddle on each track. And Paul Simon's Grammy-award winning pop album "Graceland" featured two Zydeco songs.

Jimmy Bulliard, Sr., founder of Cajun Chef Products in St. Martinville, recalls the furor in 1958 when he came out with his product line. "You should have seen the letter writing campaign people started to the local paper. People felt Cajun was degrading, 'Shame on us,' they said. They said we should call it Acadian or Creole, anything but Cajun."

Bulliard persevered with his "Cajun Chef" line of hot sauce, cayenne peppers, gumbo filé, pickled peppers, and others and is now one of the venerable ancestors of Cajun food. His product line has had a steady, gradual increase through the years. He markets through brokers and distributors while attending trade food shows sponsored by a specific grocery chain.

His concerns about long-term viability are echoed by a number of other Cajun food producers. "There are too many getting into it. Down the road, some of them are not going to be able to stay."

The elder in the Cajun-related Louisiana food business is B.F. Trappey's Sons, Inc., founded in 1898. Trappey's has for generations been known to Louisianians for their canned yams, cut okra and tomatoes, black-eyed peas, and red kidney bean products, and a selection of hot sauces and peppers.

Getting on the Cajun bandwagon, Jack Blendeman, president of the company, says that, although much of
their product line is Cajun to the core in terms of ingredients, they only recently began marketing a specific line with the Cajun name titled Cajun Style Seafood Okra Gumbo, Cajun Style Okra Gumbo, and Cajun Style Chicken Sausage Gumbo.

He says of the impact of Cajun, "Our business is growing substantially each week." Aside from food shows and work through distributors, his latest marketing angle is the U.S. military. Approached to develop a line to go to military commissaries, he points out that 53 percent of military personnel are from the South. He plans to make presentations of their products to individual military purchasing districts here and overseas.

New Companies

Although a number of companies have been in business for years, many more are recent creations to take advantage of the Cajun's newly found fame such as the Pizzolato family's business.

Ten years ago, Tony Pizzolato and his five sons were in the seafood business. "Tony's Seafood" was a small takeout seafood store in Baton Rouge. The five sons were on the road, each in his own truck, selling shrimp from the roadside in the Baton Rouge and Lafayette areas. After a heart attack sidelined the father, several of the sons came back to run the store while Tony recuperated. While convalescing, son Cliff says, "Dad began piddling around with some of the fish fry mixes he had been making for us at home for years and we began selling it through the store."

As requests for the fish fry mix mounted through word-of-mouth advertising, Tony decided to have art work done on a packaged product. And then the name changed.

"There was a Tony's Shoe Shop down the street and a Tony's Donut Shop across the way. And, besides, Tony's sounded too much like pizza," the elder Pizzolato said. So they settled on the name "Louisiana Fish Fry Products, Ltd."—a name he now acknowledges has proved to be a stroke of genius.

"Anything with Louisiana or Cajun in it is going to sell these days," Cliff says. Now the Pizzolatos have seven salespersons on the road nationwide. Their products are selling in 34 States. Their most popular sellers are the Cajun Jambalaya Mix, Cajun Etoufee Mix, Cajun Gumbo Mix, Cajun Hush Puppy Mix, and Cajun Brown Gravy Mix. Last year the family bought the entire square block the original store was located on, and this year they have just completed the purchase of an adjoining square block needed to expand their manufacturing facilities.

"Business has increased between 50 and 75 percent each year since 1982," Cliff says. What marketing expertise do they use to launch a new line, now numbering some 15 products? "We put our latest product up against what we think is our major competitor," Cliff says. "We get at least 150 customers coming through the store to try each in a blind taste test. And we keep mixing and remixing it until we get at least 8 out of every 10 customers to say they like our version best."

Carroll Thomas is another descendant of the original Acadians. Although his product line numbers just two items, Cajun Power Garlic Sauce and Cajun Power Spicy Hot Sauce, they are selling from Alaska to Singapore to Europe.

"I've gone from zero business to distribution in 65 percent of the United States without spending a dollar on advertising," Thomas says. His break came when he was asked to do a cooking demonstration in Santa Fe for actress Jessica Lange. A local restaurant there kept a bottle of his garlic sauce on their tables where a Cali-
fornia food critic for *Metropolitan Home* magazine tried it.

A story in the magazine praising the sauce led to “thousands and thousands of orders,” which resulted in samples of the sauce being featured on the television series “Hour Magazine,” where it was touted by the show host Gary Collins as “my all-time favorite.”

“I chose the ‘Cajun Power’ name before Cajun really got out of the Cajun area and it’s been dynamite. It’s a case of we always knew how good our food was but we kept it to ourselves. Now everybody wants it.”

**Not All Success Stories**

Not all of the Cajun entrepreneurs, however, have been fortunate enough to get that lucky break that brought their product to the attention of millions of American consumers.

Alton Pitre is one of the small Cajun entrepreneurs who, 4 years ago, started selling his own line of seasoning, “Pitre’s Original Creole Seasoning.”

Pitre, cooking since the age of 11 for his large family in Abbeville because, “Mama was more productive in the field with the farm chores than I was,” says of his venture into the Cajun business, “It has been tough, real tough. I haven’t lost any money on it, but I sure can’t retire on it either.”

He had made his seasoning for 15 years before putting it on the market. “The problem is that there are 15 to 20 similar seasonings on the shelves in Louisiana now. It’s a situation of if they sell a case of mine it will be at the expense of someone else’s product.”

He is in one warehouse in Dallas and handled by four small distributors in Illinois as well as in several specialty shops in New Orleans. But, Pitre says, “It’s hard to sell a one-product line. If the bigger stores are going to carry something, they want a complete line of products. They want to buy a complete package from one supplier. Less bookkeeping, less headaches all around.”

**Tourism Advertising Promotes Cajun Food**

Figures on the dollar impact of Cajun outside the borders of the State are not available. Neither are the exact sales figures on Cajun food products. Bruce Morgan, director of promotions for the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, with an annual budget of $4.6 million, is responsible for developing the advertising material and placing the advertising for the State’s tourism industry. He says spending on foodservice in 1986 was in excess of $1 billion, or 27 percent of the tourist dollars spent in the State by the 13 million visitors that year.

Foodservice accounts for Louisiana’s largest travel-related payroll, totalling $252 million or 35 percent of the State total. More than 37,000 Louisianians are employed in Louisiana restaurants.

Most of the State’s tourism budget is aimed at paid advertising emphasizing Louisiana cuisine. The State promotes Cajun and Creole foods in publications nationwide. The primary slogan used in the paid tourism advertising indicates where Cajun food ranks in the things Louisiana has to offer: “Louisiana, We’re Really Cookin’.”