

Gravy



**SPECIAL
LOUISIANA
EDITION**



**SPRING
'11**

A FOOD LETTER
FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

ISSUE
NUMBER
FORTY



PUBLICATION OF GRAVY IS UNDERWRITTEN BY MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER

Gravy

DOCUMENT • STUDY • CELEBRATE

ABOUT GRAVY

A publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a member-supported institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Visit www.southernfoodways.org.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ▶ PAGE 2
The High Art of the Plate Lunch
Francis Lam
- ▶ PAGE 5
For the Love of Okra
As told to Sara Roahen by
Brenda Placide
- ▶ PAGE 8
Eggplant, Oyster, and Tasso Gratin
A recipe by Susan Spicer
- ▶ PAGE 10
A Philosophy of Boudin
As told to Sara Roahen by
Bubba Frey
- ▶ PAGE 13
Lucullus Awaits
Nathalie Jordi
- ▶ PAGE 16
Burke on Boudin
James Lee Burke



National Rice Festival, Crowley, Louisiana (1938)

Louisiana's rich culinary and musical traditions are closely intertwined: The African-American zydeco tradition takes its name from a French phrase, "les haricots sont pas salés," meaning "the snap beans aren't salty." Here, a Cajun band competes in a contest at the Rice Festival in Crowley, which will celebrate its seventy-fifth anniversary in October 2011. Photograph by Russell Lee, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The
**HIGH
ART**
of the
**PLATE
LUNCH**



Easy conversation
and difficult menu
choices at T-Coon's

by Francis Lam

THE RACCOONS TORMENT US AT NIGHT. They arrived a few weeks ago, tired of the winter, founding their camp in our ceiling. Under them, we sleep, snug and in love, until the scratching starts. Then Christine jumps, screeching, panting from fear. I moan. I try to calm her; she flails. I pound the walls. We wail.

And yet, despite our shivery-eyed terror of small woodland creatures, our hearts melt at the sight of one particular cigar-smoking, apron-wearing, pot-stirring raccoon. Just a mention of T-Coon, a whiskered, ring-eyed restaurant mascot, will make Christine suck in an excited breath and sing, “I love T-Coon’s!” We smile and dance, full of remembrance of meatball fricassees past.

My friend Pableaux Johnson brought me to T-Coon’s in Lafayette as the first stop on a forty-eight-hour tour of his Acadiana homeland. For a trip that would involve the eating of sackfuls of cracklins and unpretty lengths of boudin off of truck tailgates, it was important to start with a proper meal, and so we came for meats smothered in two languages.

“This is the high art of the plate lunch,” Pableaux declared, the pronouncement hovering over his plate of smothered beef. The crawfish étouffée tasted of cream and pepper and the sweet, clean earth of mudbugs. And I swore I saw a halo ringing a big ol’ meatball with chocolate-brown gravy that seeped into a mound of Louisiana rice, chewy and angelically white. As the flavors soaked our brains, Pableaux said that these were the tastes he grew up on, “like what I ate in school, back when little old lunch ladies still cooked for kids in school.” He picked up a roll, imbued with a fresh squishiness and a spirit of memory.

I looked at the line to the cafeteria-style steam table, crooking around to the iced-tea station. In it were young people and old, people away from work for an hour, trays in hand, making easy conversation and difficult menu choices. A chest-high pile of fried catfish and shrimp? Red beans? Dressing—or rice and gravy?

Man, that rice and gravy.

T-COON’S is a deeply Cajun restaurant, but by that I mean that it is a place of this community, not a cayenne-dusted cliché. It’s a distinction that owner David Billeaud, T-Coon himself, takes seriously—in a “thanks-for-coming” note on his menu, he makes it a point to tell you that he doesn’t call his food “Cajun.”

“What *they* call Cajun is not even close,” he explained to me. “I like to call my food ‘zydeco cooking.’ Because what the hell is zydeco? At least they have nothing to stereotype it to.” But he continued, careful

to stake his claim: “Now, if you gotta know if I’m Cajun or not, you got a mental issue. I’m from five generations in Broussard. I cook in black iron pots.”

“This is old-time grandma cooking,” Billeaud continued, and, unprompted, he started telling me about his slow-simmered catfish courtbouillon. At its very mention, without even a pause for breath, he spelled out the name of the dish, so I wouldn’t write it “cubuyon” or something equally foolish. (The catfish, by the way, may or may not come from his own lines, depending on who you are and why you want to know.) Then he spoke of his fricassee, which he pronounced as if it should be written out in three words.

T-Coon grew up in his family’s meat market. “I never worked in a restaurant ’til I opened mine eighteen years ago. But I knew how to cook. I’ve been stuffing pork roasts since I’m knee-high.” One of seven children, he learned to make a roux from his father, who put him on a stool at the stove just to give him something to do, in the way most parents drop their kids in front of the TV. “We live to eat. That’s just how we are,” he said.

I took notice of the word “we.” He was starting to let on to what it means to be Cajun. “For us, everything’s done around food,” he said. “If someone comes, you make sure they eat your best stuff. That’s how we’re raised, that’s just how we do.”

If someone comes, you make sure they eat your best stuff. I liked that, wrote it down. As we were wrapping up our conversation—Billeaud’s catfish lines needed tending to—I told him that his potato salad, which tastes like deviled eggs in starchy disguise, might be my girlfriend’s favorite food. He let his catfish wait and told me how to make it, right then. He was making sure we’ll be eating his best stuff. 🍴

Francis Lam is the features editor at GiltTaste.com, and appears on the Cooking Channel series Food(ography). His work has also appeared in the 2006–2010 editions of Best Food Writing.

FOR THE



LOVE



OF OKRA



**Brenda’s Dine-In and Take-Out
of New Iberia, Louisiana**

as told to Sara Roahen by Brenda Placide, February 2011

MY NAME IS BRENDA PLACIDE, and I love to cook.

I have one brother, and he was working at Morton Salt. They were looking for some good plate lunches. So my brother asked me, he said, “Would you be interested in cooking for the guys at Morton Salt?”

Believe it or not, I started with about ten plate lunches, and it wound up to fifty, and then it wound up to one hundred. Then the word got out that Miss Brenda was cooking.

But I was cooking out of my kitchen at home. It got so big, and I had no license. So people started reporting me to the Board of Health. I spoke to my mother and I said, “Mama, I think I’m going to open me a little restaurant.”

And these words she told me, she said, “Well, if you open up a restaurant for the love of money, you’re going to have a short haul. But if you open it up for the love of the food, you’re going to have a long haul.”

She was telling me the truth. I’ve been here twenty-three years by the blessing of God and my mother teaching me how to cook at a young age. Mostly my recipes come straight from my mother’s. My mother worked in a lot of people’s kitchens cooking. When she had to go do housework or cooking, she would take me. So it just stayed with me. My mother’s name was Gustavia B. David. They used to call her Gussie or Tavia. My mother was from Parks, and then as a young girl she moved to New Iberia, and this is the only home I ever knew—New Iberia. The favorite thing my mother would make, that I loved so much back in the days, was smothered chicken, okra, and potato salad. That was a Sunday dinner, smothered chicken.

I have a very small kitchen, but I’d say I turn out maybe about seventy or eighty plate lunches to a hundred a day, out of that little bitty kitchen. I could sit about twenty-five people, but mostly my orders are to take out. They love my red beans and sausage. They love my fried chicken. And one thing they love—you have to taste my bread pudding. My mother used to make that for us when we were young. And it’s just old stale French bread. When I get here in the morning, I soak it in that Carnation milk, the canned milk. So you just soak it and let it get soft, and then you put your eggs in it, and then you put your sugar; a little vanilla, pineapple, whatever you want to put—bananas. People put raisins, different things in there, but my customers don’t like all that, so I just make it nice and plain for them. It comes with the lunch.

Today we have baked chicken, smothered pork chops, pork roast, baked spaghetti. They love the baked spaghettis. And we have smothered okra. Now the okra, a lot of people don’t put up okra, but when okra season comes around—that’s in the summertime—I put up like 200 bushels of okra. I have an okra cutter. It’s a little cutter that cuts the okra up for you. It doesn’t take but a half an

hour—maybe twenty minutes—to cut a bushel of okra. The frozen okra, it has too much slime. You can’t get that slime out. But I cut the okra, I precook them in the oven, and then I vacuum-seal them and put them in the freezer. I cook all the slime out of them before I vacuum-seal them.

My favorite thing to cook here would be my smothered cabbage. That’s awesome. You take that cabbage and you wash it. After you wash it, you put it in a colander and let it drain. And you drop your cabbage leaves in the pot with a little bit of grease. I use peanut oil when I cook. Then you drop your seasoning in it—my bell pepper, my celery, a little basil—and then you put your top on it and let it steam for about maybe a half an hour. Then you come back and put your salt meat or your ham on the top of your cabbage; cover it back and let it steam, and as it steams it’s going to be cooking down. And that’s why you call it smothered cabbage—not steamed. You’re smothering it now. You don’t have to stir it. Put it on a medium fire. And just let it smother with the top on it. And after you cook it, you put you a little sugar and a little garlic powder in it. You always put a little pinch of sugar in your cabbage. 🍴

Photograph by Sara Roahen.



Smothered okra is just a phone call away: Brenda Placide with her grandson, Typann.

EGGPLANT, OYSTER, AND TASSO GRATIN

A NEW SORT OF TRINITY

by Susan Spicer

YOU ARE, NO DOUBT, FAMILIAR WITH the so-called trinity of Louisiana cookery: onions, celery, and bell pepper. Susan Spicer of New Orleans, a self-described eggplant freak who cooks in an internationally inflected Creole style, has honed a new sort of trinity: eggplant, oysters, and tasso.

Here, tasso, an intensely flavored smoked pork of Cajun origin, serves as a seasoning, in the same way that a smoked pig trotter flavors a pot of greens. Although Spicer recommends that you serve scoops of this gratin as an appetizer, consider yourself warned: We have done the same. And no matter what we served to follow, it paled in comparison. Your guests might be happier with a large helping of this Creolized casserole and a salad.

Makes 4 to 6 servings

1 pint shucked oysters with their liquor	2 ounces finely chopped tasso (about 3 tablespoons)
2 tablespoons butter	1 garlic clove, minced
2 tablespoons flour	1 teaspoon chopped fresh sage
1/2 cup chicken stock or milk	1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary
1/2 cup cream	1/2 cup dry bread crumbs
Salt and ground black pepper	2 tablespoons chopped parsley
Hot sauce	1 tablespoon butter, melted
Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg	2 tablespoons olive oil
1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil	2 ounces Grana Padano or Parmesan cheese, grated (1/4 cup)
1 small eggplant, peeled and diced (about 2 cups)	
1 medium onion, chopped	



1. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Butter a two-quart baking dish and set aside.
2. Pour the oysters into a bowl and check for bits of shell. Strain the liquor through a fine sieve into a small bowl and set aside. Set drained oysters aside in a small bowl.
3. Melt the butter in a small saucepan over low heat and whisk in the flour. Whisk in the reserved oyster liquor and stock. Increase the heat to medium-high and bring the mixture to a boil, whisking constantly. Whisk in the cream. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer gently, stirring from time to time, until the sauce thickens, about 10 minutes. Season the sauce with salt, pepper, hot sauce, and nutmeg. Remove the pan from the heat and cover to keep the sauce warm.
4. Heat the extra-virgin olive oil in a medium skillet over medium-high heat. Add the eggplant and cook, stirring often, until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Stir in the onion, tasso, garlic, sage, and rosemary. Cook until the eggplant is tender, 5 to 7 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer the eggplant mixture into a colander to drain for 5 minutes.
5. Stir together the crumbs, parsley, melted butter, oil, and cheese in a small bowl and set aside.
6. To assemble the gratin, spread about one-third of the oyster liquor sauce in the bottom of the prepared baking dish. Spoon the eggplant mixture into the dish. Arrange the oysters in a single layer over the eggplant mixture and drizzle with the remaining sauce. Sprinkle the crumb topping over the entire dish. Bake until golden brown and bubbly, 10 to 15 minutes. Serve hot. 🍴

Originally published in Crescent City Cooking, by Susan Spicer and Paula Disbrowe. Featured in The Southern Foodways Alliance Community Cookbook, edited by Sara Roahen and John T Edge.



A PHILOSOPHY OF BOUDIN



MOWATA STORE, Mowata, Louisiana

as told to Sara Roahen by Bubba Frey, August 2007

MY NAME IS BUBBA FREY. I'll be fifty-one my next birthday and I haven't ventured very far from Mowata.

I used to be a rice and crawfish farmer, and then around the early '90s all my equipment that I had gotten from my grandfather and my daddy, it was obsolete. For me to stay in farming, I would have had to pick up probably 1,000 more acres and spend a bunch of money on equipment. And at the time, the store came up for sale over here. Back then it was still a little grocery store, and people still shopped there instead of going to the big Walgreens or Winn-Dixies. They were making a little bit of sausage here before, and boudin.

And then through the years, things were changing. Canned items, sometimes they were a year old; I had to take them home and use them myself or throw them away because they got too old. Home staples—groceries and stuff like that—just weren't going to cut it in here. So through those years I started making sausage and the tasso, deboned stuffed chickens, bacon. I've started raising guinea [hens] and chickens. I will make 400 pounds of boudin in one given day.

I learned through my great-uncle Lawrence Frey. Every time he made boudin, I was there to help him. I would follow him everywhere he'd go. I knew that one day these people weren't going to be around here anymore—it was going to be shoved underneath the table and forgotten forever. When we'd make boudin we'd grind it up, and they'd taste it: *What do you think it needs?* A little bit more pepper or salt or whatever, so everybody would give their input.

Here at the store, I'm making it almost identically to the way that my uncle was making it. Now, I don't put the internal organs in it for the simple fact that that generation is all dead and gone now. The young kids today, if it doesn't look like a chicken nugget or a French fry, they're not going to eat it. Now, if you tell somebody that you got kidneys and heart and liver in there, you know they ain't going to touch that with a ten-foot pole. So I leave the internal organs out. And people come in and say, "it tastes just like the boudin my mama used to make." In fact, I had one man come in here; he argued with me that I put too much liver, and I just had to tell him—you know the customer is always right, so I just had to tell him—"next time I'll cut back a little bit on it."

I have very little grease in mine. I don't profess to have the best boudin in the world, but mine is the least greasy, I can tell you that. I don't tell too many people what I do around this part of the country, because everywhere you look there's a boudin shop. Right there in Eunice, there's three or four major boudin operations. One of them went out of business—Johnson's. They were the ones that started making boudin first in this part of the country. If you got boudin anywheres in the Eunice area, you got it at Johnson's or you didn't get it at all. And it was only on Saturday mornings, and I seen it over there to where if you drove at five o'clock in the morning, people were already lining up outside the door of his grocery store. Now if you got there late on a Saturday morning, if you stood in line and didn't get any boudin, the worst part was that you didn't get any boudin. The best part was you knew what went on in Eunice the whole week before. 🍷

HOW MOWATA GOT ITS NAME

There was a Mr. Atterbury from around New York [who] came down before the Depression, and they bought up pretty much all the land around here. They had the corn farm, they had the cotton farm, and right around here it was called the rice farm. There was a severe drought at the time, and the community of Mowata didn't have a name yet, so they were going to call it More Water. Southern Pacific Railroad is the one that would map out the spurs and stuff like that in the little towns, so they were in charge of bringing the sign. So all the dignitaries got together at the train depot the day that they were supposed to christen Mowata as More Water, and when they pulled the sign out of the boxcar, it was a misprint. And it was printed M-o-w-a-t-a, like broken English. And that's how it got its name.

Photograph on page 10 by Sara Roahen.



LUCULLUS AWAITS

*In the French Quarter, a bountiful
collection of culinary antiques*

by Nathalie Jordi

NEW ORLEANS' JACKSON SQUARE, with its silver-painted mime statuery and sunburnt tourists in sock-footed sandals, is an unlikely neighbor for Lucullus, the Chartres Street culinary antiques shop where Patrick Dunne holds court. The shop's burgundy façade offers a beguiling portal into a lush and genteel past, where mother-of-pearl caviar paddles and milk-glass Easter eggs make agreeable, spit-shined bedfellows to nineteenth-century French marble mortars, picnic baskets, and a cavalcade of absinthe spoons.

Dunne himself is the walking embodiment of the store's ethos of mannerly connoisseurship. He wears natty glasses, striped ties, and tweed jackets, and his voice sounds like a concert harp playing a languorous boogaloo. He grinds his coffee daily, drinks water from glass decanters, and hones the points of his pencils with a manual sharpener. His thoughts amble along a philosophical wisteria vine that twists its way from Kant to Tea Party politics to irreverent, foggy reminiscences of costume parties long ago. According to Dunne, garbage disposals eat silver, and blenders ruin mayonnaise. "I am devoted to the whisk," he says firmly, and believes that washing dishes by hand is the ultimate digestif, excellent Cognac presumably notwithstanding. Nothing electric pollutes his sainted kitchen other than a toaster.

Dunne spent his childhood in a "rather eccentric" Corpus Christi family, with no air-conditioning and no television. After a few glasses of wine, some around the table would feel compelled to spout Shakespeare or a few lines from an opera.

Dunne's father, a politician and gourmet, trotted his boy around Corpus Christi's various constituencies, treating him to the best local versions of kolaches, sauerkraut, chiles en nogada, and corn mush they could unearth. Dunne believes this exposure laid the groundwork for a love of New Orleans. "That cosmopolitan spirit in the midst of a great provincialism gives rise to our diffidence, our humor," he says. "We glory in our provincialism here."

After graduating from Georgetown, Dunne moved to New Orleans—that "mystical, magical place"—and became a fixture on the downtown scene. He worked at Waldhorn's, the oldest antique shop in the Quarter, and at Marti's, a fabled bar and restaurant on Rampart

Street. As a founding member of the Krewe of St. Ann, he helped launch one of the more creative and iconoclastic of New Orleans' Mardi Gras parades, and still maintains a townhouse in the Marigny.

The story of Lucullus starts, "as all stories do, here in New Orleans, and around a table." At Galatoire's, late in the afternoon on a Friday and after a second bottle of Chablis, the thought of a culinary antiques shop popped into his head fully formed. Lucullus opened shortly thereafter. Some confidantes believed he'd never find enough merchandise to fill a store, but Dunne calculated that mankind's timeworn lust for satisfying edibles would provide more than enough material. The gatekeepers of the French and English troves may have believed that Americans wanted only gilded furniture, but Dunne was interested in trivets and copperware, in grape-gathering baskets and Danish bread guillotines, and in the way food, worship, and disease are means to understanding societies and human history.

His shop in the French Quarter, comfortably ensconced at the nexus of one of the most aesthetically rich and layered cities in the South, was perfectly situated to serve those on a pilgrimage toward the ever-receding horizon of the cultivated self. His timing, too, was excellent. People were beginning to manifest a nostalgia for nourishment, and they were ready to spend money to satisfy it. "For people who love pasta rolled by hand, the logical next step is old silver," he explains.

Twenty-six years later, the nostalgia has, if anything, intensified. Dunne's customers are an even more diverse bunch, and his work as a home-decoration consultant keeps him moving all around the country. In recent years, he was also an editor-at-large for *Southern Accents* and *House Beautiful*. "One of our myths as well as one of our abiding dreams is to be cultivated, and the South is still a place where the notion of a cultivated person holds sway," says Dunne. For those on that journey, Lucullus awaits regally on Chartres Street, poised to provide the accoutrements. 🍷

Nathalie Jordi is co-owner of People's Pops, a fresh-fruit popsicle business, and splits her time between New York and New Orleans. Photograph on page 13 by Nathalie Jordi.

BURKE ON BOUDIN

“He...covered the pool tables with oilcloth on Thursday nights and served free chicken gumbo as bar owners often did back in the bayou country, never called the cops to settle a beef, kept hard-boiled eggs in big pickle jars on the bar, and made hot boudin that would break your heart.”

—James Lee Burke, *The Neon Rain*, 1987

Photograph by Mary Beth Lasseter.



IF YOU'RE READING THIS IN A RESTAURANT OR STORE,
it's yours for the taking.

IF YOU'RE READING THIS AT HOME,
and you're not yet an SFA member, please join at www.southernfoodways.org.

IF YOU ARE AN SFA MEMBER,
well, thank you.

THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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