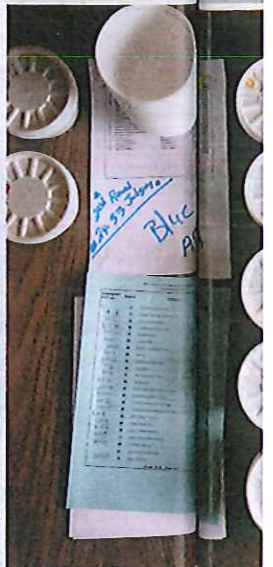
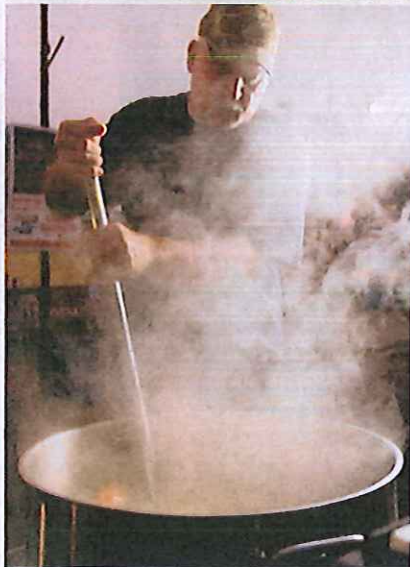
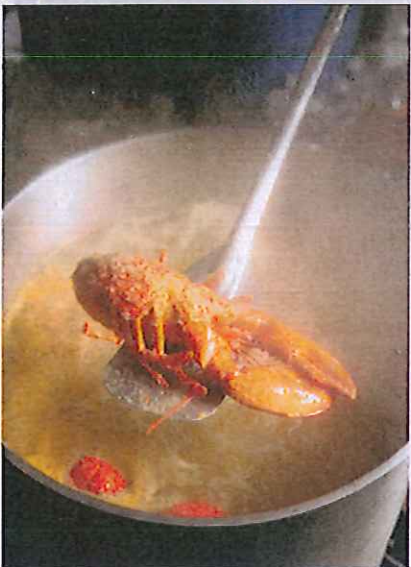


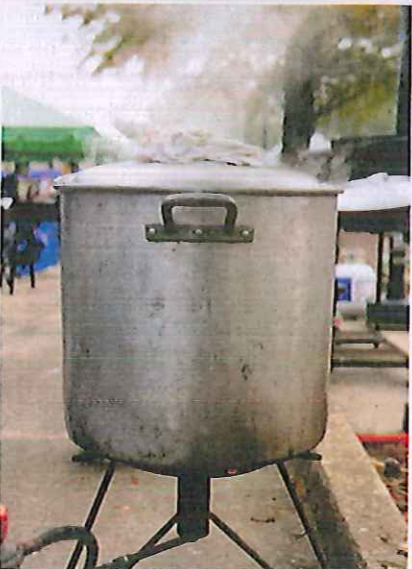


The Super Bowl of Gumbo

Simmering stock, stirring roux, gathering crowds—scenes from New Iberia, Louisiana's most heated cooking competition

BY Jennifer Justus





Gumbo Groupies
 The World Championship Gumbo Cookoff draws a varied mix of folks to New Iberia, Louisiana's Main Street—including teams of pros and home cooks, zydeco performers, dancers, enthusiastic eaters from near and far, and kids learning how to make this region's beloved dish by competing in the Youth Gumbo Cookoff.



At 5 a.m. on a warm October morning

in South Louisiana, the sun had yet to lift over the Bayou Teche, but Kevin Sonnier and his teammates were ready to make a few hundred quarts of gumbo in the dark. They hauled in bags of Gold Medal flour, jugs of vegetable oil, and packages of sausage and chicken. They strapped headlamps across their foreheads and allowed the “roux police” to poke through their coolers with flashlights looking for contra-band (premade roux). At 6 a.m., a shotgun fired, and the World Championship Gumbo Cookoff in New Iberia, Louisiana, officially began.

“We in cook mode now,” Sonnier said, a boudin kolacky from Meche’s Donuts in New Iberia in one hand and his spoon in another. Steam rose over cauldrons that dotted the downtown park, while the scrapes of whisks and spoons against gumbo pots skittered across the silence.

The festival began 30 years ago as a fund-raiser to pay off the mortgage of the Greater Iberia Chamber of Commerce. (In all those years, they’ve missed only one festival due to a hurricane.) Twelve booths offered gumbo in 1988, but since then, the count has bloomed to more than 80. Cooks can enter as amateurs or professionals, with the pros competing in seafood or non-seafood categories, while the amateurs can choose seafood (anything from the water), chicken and sausage, and *mélange* (meaning mixture). The latter is the wild card of gumbo with an anything-goes ingredient list that could include meats from duck to gator. But no matter the category, it’s a party—and it’s competitive.

A few tents down from Sonnier, another cook stirred his

roux while a friend pointed a laser thermometer into the mixture, which was deepening to the color of peanut butter. “I don’t eat gumbo at a restaurant,” said teammate Jamie Gaither, who worked over another pot nearby. “I learned from my mama in the kitchen.”

Gaither flies helicopters into the Gulf of Mexico oil fields by day. By night—for the past three nights, anyway—he has readied his stock with 10 pounds of leg quarters, a hen, and seasonings. “Everybody’s got a different idea, and nobody’s wrong,” he said, spooning roux into stock. “It just depends on your taste. Of course, ours is gonna be a little bit better.”

Working outdoors in big batches also means that cooking mishaps can happen. At yet another booth, Nelson Boutte, the hospitality chef for the McIlhenny Company (the maker of Tabasco), burned his first batch of roux. “I’ll be worn out for sure,” he said, vigorously stirring a second batch.

By 11 a.m., the park swarmed with locals sampling the deep, earthy flavors of gumbos in various shades as Cajun bands had two-steppers twirling under a pavilion.

A few hours before the trophy ceremony, the finalist teams received signs to hang on their booths. A sign means bragging rights and signals to patrons where they might want to snag a sample. Boutte and the Tabasco team earned a sign despite their rocky start. But Gaither and his team didn’t get one, even after many wins in the past. “That’s part of it,” said team leader Sandy Derise with a smile and a shrug.

Back at Sonnier’s tent, teammate Aaron Guilbeau showed off his lucky hot sauce bottle. He likes to keep it in his pocket while cooking, because he found it there after his first win seven years ago. He displays this bottle with the team’s winning trophies from years past and then puts it back in his pocket before each cook-off. This year, it helped make some of the most popular gumbo at the festival, but it didn’t bring the winning mojo.

“It was almost a perfect weekend,” Sonnier added. “LSU won. The Astros won. The Saints won. But we don’t have a finalist sign. Maybe next year.”

Cajun vs. Creole

ONE CAN EXPECT a fair amount of smack talk between teams at a gumbo competition. But Tookey Hebert, a former sugarcane farmer and festivalgoer from New Iberia, had a few fighting words from the whole

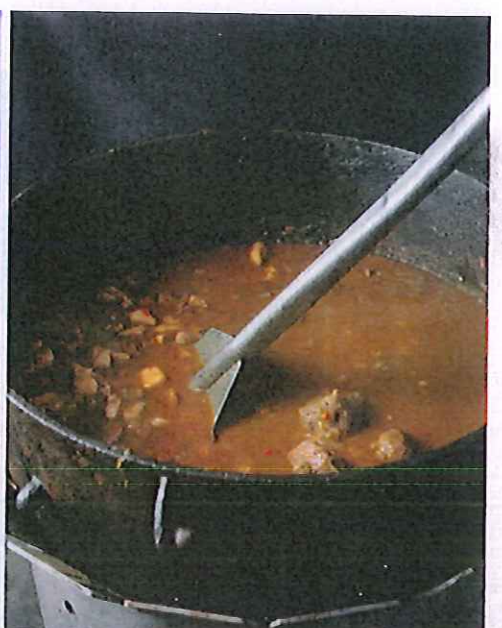
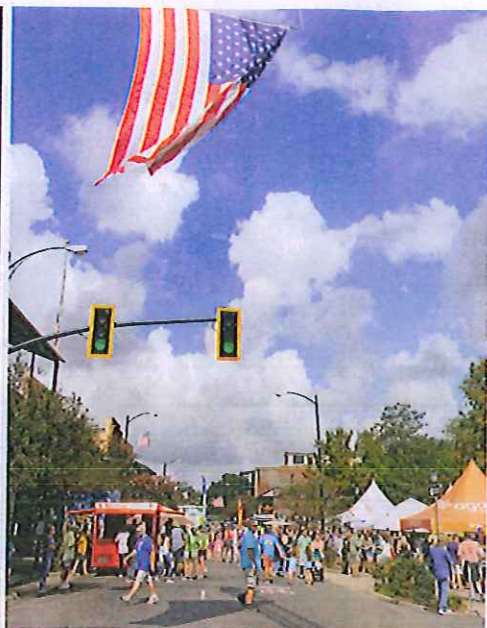
region. “You’re not gonna get a better gumbo than Acadiana,” he said. “New Orleans doesn’t have good food like here. It’s for drinking and cutting up.”

Hebert was just delivering playful jabs, of course, though the differences between Cajun country cooking and Creole city

dishes shouldn’t be underestimated. Gumbo cook-off chefs often cited a lack of tomato in Cajun gumbos as compared to New Orleans-style gumbos.

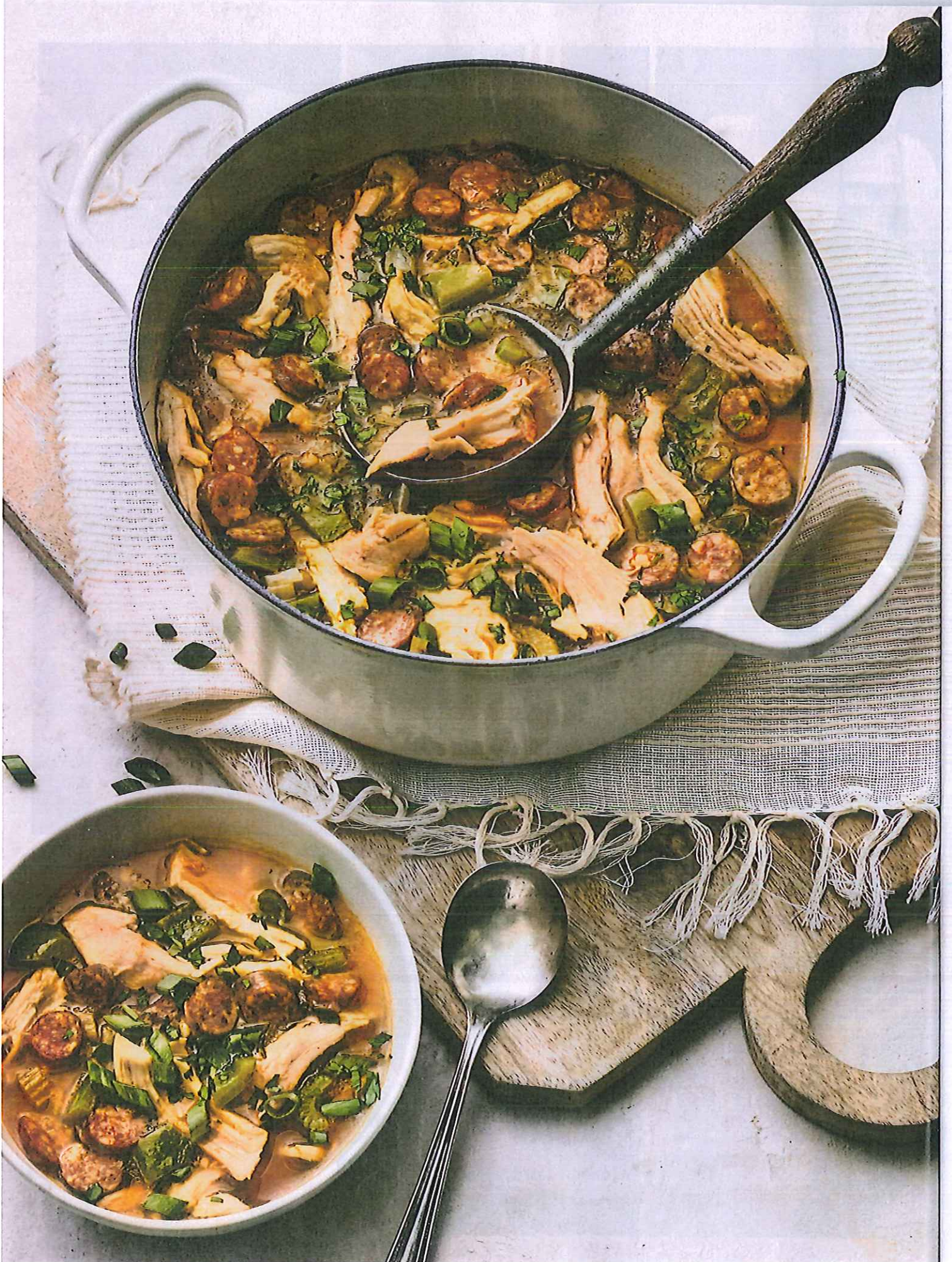
According to Sara Roahen’s excellent book *Gumbo Tales: Finding My Place at the New Orleans Table* (W.W. Norton &

Company, Inc., 2008), Creole gumbos are also thicker and lighter in color than the Cajun variety. Like many matters of the heart (and belly) in a place with as rich a history and collection of cultures as Louisiana, the definitions can be as murky as the dish.



Working in Harmony

Teamwork is the name of the game at the festival, whether it's Cajun bands collaborating onstage to keep spirits high and toes tapping or cooks gathering around gumbo pots. Friends come together to compete, as well as corporate groups such as Nelson Boutte's (pictured above) team representing the nearby Tabasco headquarters.



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Smoked Turkey-and-Andouille Gumbo

Beau Beaulieu and Andy Soileau's New Iberia Kiwanis Club team has taken first place 11 times at the World Championship Gumbo Cookoff. This recipe for their mélange gumbo won in 2015, 2017, and 2018. Beaulieu likes to serve it alongside potato salad and garlic bread. Leftovers taste better the second day, Beaulieu says, and this gumbo freezes well.

ACTIVE 2 HOURS - TOTAL 13 HOURS

SERVES 12

- 1 (10-lb.) smoked turkey
- 10 celery stalks, divided
- 1 medium-size yellow onion
- 2 small yellow onions
- 3 green bell peppers, divided
- 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 3/4 cups canola oil
- 2 lb. andouille sausage, cut into bite-size pieces
- 3 garlic cloves, minced (about 1 1/2 Tbsp.)
- 1 1/2 tsp. garlic powder
- 1 1/2 tsp. kosher salt
- 1 tsp. ground bay leaf (or 4 bay leaves)
- 3/4 tsp. cayenne pepper
- 3/4 tsp. white pepper
- 3/4 tsp. black pepper
- 1 Tbsp. hot sauce (such as Tabasco)
- 1/4 cup very finely chopped scallions
- 1/4 cup very finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- Cooked white rice for serving

1. Debone smoked turkey, trying not to shred meat. Cut turkey meat into manageable bite-size pieces, about 1 inch in size. Refrigerate turkey meat for later use in recipe. Place turkey carcass in a large (14-quart) stockpot.
2. Remove and reserve ends from celery. Remove and reserve ends and skins from all onions. Quarter medium-size onion. Quarter all bell peppers, and remove and

reserve membranes; discard seeds. Add celery ends, pepper membranes, and onion ends and skins to pot, along with quartered onion, 4 whole celery stalks, and quarters from 1 pepper. Store remaining vegetables, covered, in refrigerator for later use.

3. Cover with water, and bring to a roaring boil over high; reduce heat to medium, and bring mixture to a simmer. Cook, at a steady simmer, until reduced to 8 quarts of stock, which will take up to 8 hours. Remove turkey carcass and vegetable pieces, and discard. Pour stock through a wire-mesh strainer over a large bowl to remove remaining solids; return strained stock to stockpot.

4. Stir together flour and oil in a medium-size cast-iron pan with a slotted, flat spatula. Stir until mixture is thoroughly combined and lumps or bits of flour are no longer visible. Cook mixture over medium, stirring constantly, until it is dark brown in color (think of an aged penny), between 35 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes.

(This process depends on the heat, which varies from stove-top to stove-top, and the aggressiveness of the cook. Patience is very important.) If the roux burns, throw it away and start over. A burned roux cannot be used. The spatula should constantly rub or scrape the bottom of the pot to prevent mixture from sticking and burning. If the roux begins to clump, whisk out the clump with an aluminum whisk. Once roux has reached desired color, remove pan from heat; continue stirring until slightly cooled, about 10 minutes. (The roux will continue to cook as it cools.)

5. Bring stock to a light boil, and carefully

stir in cooled roux. Stir until roux has completely dissolved into stock, giving stock a dark brown color. (At this stage, mixture will be very bitter and taste flat.)

6. Lightly boil mixture, stirring constantly, 45 minutes. Continue to cook, stirring occasionally, 25 minutes longer.

7. Add andouille sausage, in batches, to stock mixture. (Adding in batches prevents mixture from cooling down too much.) Cook, stirring occasionally, 45 minutes.

8. Meanwhile, dice remaining refrigerated celery (6 stalks, about 1 1/2 cups), peppers (2 peppers, about 1 cup), and onions (2 small onions, about 2 cups). Keep diced vegetables separated.

9. Stir the minced garlic into the stock; stir in the "trinity" (diced celery, peppers, and onions), 1 vegetable at a time, adding onions last. Be careful not to cool down the gumbo. It is wise to add 1 vegetable and then wait 5 minutes, allowing the gumbo to heat back up before adding the next vegetable. Note the change in terminology: It's now a gumbo that is still in its infancy. Cook, stirring occasionally, 30 minutes.

10. Add turkey pieces slowly so the gumbo does not cool down. Lightly boil, stirring occasionally, 30 minutes. Stir gently to avoid breaking up the turkey pieces.

11. Add seasonings and hot sauce. If your taste buds are sensitive to seasonings, add only half of each seasoning (except the garlic powder) and hot sauce.

12. With a small aluminum ladle, begin to remove grease from top of gumbo. If additional grease rises to the surface, remove before serving. (Removing the grease is a key step.) Taste the gumbo. If it still seems flat, cook it longer for a greater depth of flavor. The amount of heat under the gumbo and the number of times it is stirred either shortens or lengthens the process.

13. Once you have settled on the taste and the gumbo is ready for serving, add scallions and parsley. Serve over rice, making sure you do not see the rice in your bowl and removing bay leaves (if using). It's not meant to be like a stew or rice and gravy. It should be served like a soup with rice at the bottom of the bowl. SL

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