

*New
Orleans*
HOME COOKING



New Orleans HOME COOKING

DALE CURRY



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To Jennifer and Elizabeth



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Introduction

Not the least of possessions that Hurricane Katrina swallowed up in 2005 were the cookbooks and recipe files of hundreds of thousands of residents of greater New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. How many times have I heard the sad stories of a lost grandmother's recipe or a treasured collection of clippings? Irreplaceable. That's what they say.

Around the time that Katrina hit, I was already on the case of "lost" recipes, those not felled by waves or winds, but by—amazingly—lack of interest. Young people not cooking, too much fast food in easy reach, no time to spend in the kitchen. Thus, my goal in the food columns of *New Orleans Magazine* was to teach young people the wonders of Creole cooking, show them how to do it, and help save one of the world's greatest cuisines from the abyss of lost recipes.

Then, Katrina made it essential to combine these and other recipes into a cookbook to help keep alive the classic Creole and Cajun recipes that have taken New Orleans to legendary heights. On the menus of fine restaurants remain the great dishes—*étouffées*, gumbos, stuffings—that started in the kitchens of nineteenth-century home cooks

whose families came to New Orleans and south Louisiana from France, Spain, Africa, and the Caribbean. With the influence of Native Americans and a wealth of resources, the melting pot created a new style of cooking, one that is different from any other in the United States or the countries that influenced it. The basis of New Orleans tourism, it is the reason why people come to the city again, again, and again. "We come here to eat," they say.

I grew up in Memphis but was lucky enough to have a grandmother who lived on the edge of New Orleans. Every summer my mother and I spent several weeks with her and sometimes a few days between Christmas and New Year's, too. During that time, New Orleans became the Paris of my universe, the center of my fantasies.



When I went home, my friends heard how I'd eaten piles of boiled crabs, cracked their claws, and sucked their meat and about fishermen who donned hip boots, walked into the swamp and scooped up crawfish, which were delicious bugs that we ate. When I was older, I told them how a boyfriend and I made a wrong turn and found ourselves in the middle of a Zulu parade.

My friends had trouble envisioning these escapades, but the tales were so vivid that my best friend's father named me "Good Hope" after the little town where my grandmother lived. I was always going to Good Hope or had been to Good Hope and shared my treasure chest of thrills with all who would listen. Even when I was an adult, he still called me Good Hope.

You can imagine my delight when my engineer husband graduated from Georgia Tech and was offered two jobs in New Orleans. YES! I knew all about New Orleans and especially the food. There were oysters and soft-shell crabs and Beulah Ledner's bakery for the best éclairs and cream puffs in the world. We could go to Middendorf's and eat mountains of crabs, and late-night

beignets were just waiting for us at Café Du Monde. I hadn't meant to upset him so, but when we were driving near the lakefront looking for an apartment, I spotted a sign that said "Boiled Crabs" and insisted on having lunch there. He watched me pull off the crabs' legs, clean off the dead man's fingers, pick out the meat, and slather the fat on crackers. I remember his exact words. "You must be a terrible person to eat that," he said. I tried a little more sophistication with my eating frenzies after that but soon reverted to paganism when he, too, discovered the gourmet treat of prying open a fat crab and devouring the succulent meat with its yellow fat as the sauce.

It was a starting point but little did I know what was to come. Before long, I met a friend under the clock at Holmes' and was introduced to the joys of oysters Rockefeller and stuffed eggplant at Galatoire's. I began collecting recipes at dinner parties and saving recipes that NOPSI (New Orleans Public Service, Inc.) circulated on streetcars. I made my own gumbo and entertained with grillades and grits soufflé. I was in heaven.

There was something about New Orleans that inspired me to cook. I would eat an oyster and artichoke soup in a restaurant and want to duplicate it at home. This was during a time when young people had dinner parties and feverishly swapped recipes. Sadly, young people today are so busy with multitasking that takeout is all too tempting. Yet the great cooks who sired this food were busy too, washing on scrub boards while red beans simmered, growing their own peppers and tomatoes, and salvaging every leftover morsel for the next day's étouffée and bread pudding.

For those of us who enjoy cooking, it is fun and actually relaxing

after a long day at work. Smelling the onions sautéing while sipping a glass of wine and overseeing the homework at the breakfast bar can be a great pleasure. And family time around the dinner table is matchless.

In my mind, there are no better recipes than those handed down to us in south Louisiana. We have a legacy to perpetuate. We have home cooks to thank for their uses of roux, seasonings, sauces, spices, and indigenous ingredients from our waters and soil.

So I say to the young folks. Start your own recipe files. A child in your household may thank you some day. Meanwhile, don't forget to smell the onions.

