

Louisiana Foodways Activity Unit

A Classroom Resource for Teachers

Created by

**Louisiana Voices Folklife in Education Project
Louisiana Division of the Arts Folklife Program**

www.louisianavoices.org

Comments from Teachers:

"The materials allowed students to open a dialog with parents, caregivers, or others they chose to observe and interview. An added value of doing this project is that it allowed students to see the family cooperation and values reinforced. It also opened a dialog with older relatives who were more than willing to give brief history lessons as well as show off their cooking skills. "

"What a wonderful unit! It was so enjoyable for my students & their families, as well as academically rewarding, that we plan to do it again next year."

"Great material! We enjoyed it."

Please let us know your thoughts!

Louisiana Voices is an ongoing project. Our materials are revised periodically and we value all input. Please let us know the strengths, weaknesses, obstacles to classroom use, ideas, and challenges you discovered when using the activities.

Credits

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Louisiana Foodways Activity Unit

Everyone has folk traditions- the expressive customs of people in everyday life-regardless of age, sex, or ethnic heritage. Incorporating folklife in the classroom educates, motivates, engages, and fosters the creative expression of students and, at the same time, connects them to their communities and their state.

Louisiana is blessed with a broad spectrum of cultures and traditions. These diverse aspects of the state make Louisiana one-of-a-kind, and they offer Louisiana educators an exceptional opportunity to enrich their curricula. The award-winning Louisiana Voices Folklife in Education Project offers a set of free, online, interdisciplinary study units, collectively known as the Louisiana Voices Educator's Guide.

The Guide contains 42 lessons in 9 units. These units are correlated to the Louisiana Content Standards, particularly those in English Language Arts and Social Studies. This specific lesson was originally in Unit VII Material Culture: The Stuff of Life, Lesson 3 Introducing Louisiana Foodways.

During the 2004-2005 academic year, the unit was revised and enhanced. A Louisiana Foodways Network of teachers around the state tested the activities in their classrooms. Their comments and suggestions were incorporated into this revised booklet. Louisiana Voices staff would like to especially thank the teachers, their students and families for their inspirational work.

The goal of this unit is to help teachers

- Involve parents and community members as resources,
- Engage multiple intelligences and foster critical thinking,
- Authentically address cultural diversity and tolerance for others,
- Motivate students through familiar and interesting content,
- Help students meet the Louisiana Education Standards in innovative ways, and
- Improve the connection of students to their tradition bearers.

Folklife can be explored, shared, presented, and enjoyed - after all, it is what makes Louisiana unique.

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Louisiana's Many Food Traditions

Background

Gumbo, jambalya, Vietnamese spring rolls. Louisiana's complex blending of cultures over 300 years produced distinctive regional food traditions for which we are known worldwide. But we have other food traditions that are not so well known. Each cultural group has retained food traditions, and even within cultural groups, traditions vary from community to community, and family to family.

Gumbo is an excellent example of **cultural blending**, or **creolization**. This dish so closely identified with south Louisiana, melds African, European, and Native American cultures. The word itself is derived from the Bantu word for okra, *nkombo*. The okra plant, a favorite in Africa, is originally a Middle Eastern plant brought to America from Africa by Portuguese traders. Filé (ground sassafras leaves) is Native American. The origin of gumbo--usually defined as a soup-like dish featuring two or more meats or seafood and served with rice--is often attributed to the French bouillabaisse, but the strong preference for soups in Africa reinforced the tradition.

Any gumbo researcher soon discovers that there are many types and that there is no consensus about what makes a good gumbo. If your family prefers an almost black roux, your family probably has ties to the prairies west of the Atchafalaya Basin. If your family prefers a lighter roux or you add tomatoes, you are more likely to have ties to southeast Louisiana east of the Atchafalaya.

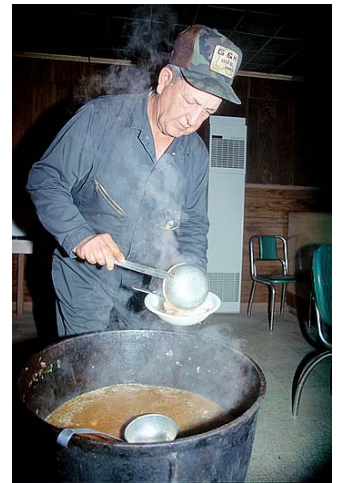
Although people in all parts of south Louisiana make meat and sausage gumbo thicker with filé, seafood gumbo thickened with okra is more common along the coast, where seafood is more plentiful. If you make duck, venison, or squirrel gumbo, you most likely have a hunter in the family. If you put a scoop of potato salad in your gumbo before serving, you likely have some German influence. If you make the much less common, meatless *gumbo z'herbes* for Lent, you are likely Catholic and your family has been in Louisiana many generations. You are less likely to find this in many of the Cajun and Creole cookbooks so readily available now. And if your family wants to extend the gumbo, you might add boiled eggs.

No matter which type of gumbo you make, though, you likely feel that the gumbo that you make is the "right way" to make a gumbo. If eating and cooking gumbo are favorite pastimes in Louisiana, arguing about what is a good gumbo comes in a close third. And, if you didn't realize that gumbo was so complicated, you likely are recent to Louisiana.

Gumbo also illustrates **cultural diffusion**, or the spreading of a cultural trait, because even before the Cajun food craze, gumbo, hot sauce, and other south Louisiana foods spread into north Louisiana and south Mississippi.

Cultural maintenance can be illustrated by food traditions in many cultural groups whether they descend from the colonial settlement, were part of the later waves of immigration, or recently arrived. Food reminds us of home and family and becomes central to special occasions and rituals. As a result, food traditions can be the most resistant to change.

Examples of cultural maintenance abound throughout Louisiana. The German enclave of Roberts Cove in Acadia Parish still makes sauerkraut. Hungarians have been in Tangipahoa Parish for about 100 years and take special pride in their Hungarian sausage. Filipinos celebrate special occasions with the noodle dish *pansit*. Croatians in Plaquemines Parish keep goats just so they can make goat milk cheese. The Irish in New Orleans celebrate St. Patrick's Day by parading and throwing to the crowd the ingredients of potato stew.



Gumbo is served at the L'Anse Maigre Mardi Gras.

Some of the most visible markers of Creole French influence in Natchitoches is the foodways: meat pies and Cane River cakes. West of Natchitoches in Los Adais in Sabine Parish, one finds colonial Spanish influences, and again, the primary evidence is in the foodways: tamales and salsa. One food tradition closely tied to Italian-American ethnic identity is the St. Joseph altar with its fig pastries, casseroles, cookies, cakes, and special breads in the form of Catholic symbols. Native Americans have retained some foods that have become symbolic to their identity, including fry bread and Indian tacos. A few Coushatta (Koasati) continue to make hominy soup, which has almost died out, as it is time-consuming and difficult, beginning with grinding the hominy by hand using a mortar and pestle.

The impact of Native American foodways is still seen in food traditions of people descended from the early settlers. Native Americans introduced Europeans and Africans in both north and south Louisiana to corn bread, grits, sweet potatoes, squash, beans, deer, turkey, fish, and such. Then, the newcomers added foods that were most important to them. Europeans brought carrots, turnips, beets, cabbage, and lettuce. Africans contributed okra, yams, peanuts (although originally from South America), watermelon, collards, hot peppers, and pepper sauce. Pork was central to the early settler's diet, and remains important to many.



Egma Pineda of New Orleans prepares Nicaraguan tamales. Photo: Greg Wirth.

Scholars divide the state into three major cultural regions--New Orleans, South Louisiana, and North Louisiana, each of which contains groups whose cultures remain distinct from that of the larger region. Distinct food traditions have persisted in each, but those in New Orleans and South Louisiana are entwined.

New Orleans is home to a vast array of food traditions, but it is best known for Creole cooking. At one time, it may have been possible to say that Creole cooking was the fancier cooking of New Orleans with more European influences and Cajun cooking the simpler food of the country folk, but this is no longer true. Today, it is difficult to distinguish between Cajun and Creole cooking as they are practiced in the home. Nowadays when applied to food, the terms *Cajun* and *Creole* are frequently used interchangeably or together.



Sarah Albritton and her son Lewen serve a plate in Sarah's Restaurant in Ruston, Louisiana. Photo: Maida Owens.

To appreciate south Louisiana foods fully, one must remember that Cajun and Creole cooking are the products of 300 years of continuous sharing and borrowing among the region's many cultural groups. For example, the French contributed sauces (*sauce piquante*, *étouffée*, stews, *bisque*), sweets (pralines, a modified French confection with pecans instead of the original walnuts), and breads (French bread, *beignets* or square doughnuts with powdered sugar, and *corasse*, fried bread dough eaten with cane syrup). The Spanish added jambalaya (a spicy rice dish probably from the Spanish *paella*).

Africans contributed okra, barbecue, and deep-fat frying and reinforced the Spanish preference for hot spices and soups. Germans, who arrived in Louisiana before the Acadians, contributed sausages (*andouille* and *boudin*) and "Creole" or brown mustard. Caribbean influence is seen in the bean and rice dishes of red beans and rice and *conгри* (crowder peas and rice). Native Americans contributed *filé* and a fondness for corn bread. Many of these foods are generally known, but far fewer are aware of lesser-known food delicacies in Louisiana as the prairie Cajun *langue bouree* (stuffed beef tongue) or *chaudin* (sausage-stuffed pork stomach).

One distinction about food in New Orleans and South Louisiana is that food is regarded as far more than mere sustenance. Food in these regions is so much more. Just as people argue over the right way to make a gumbo, they enjoy talking about food, exchanging recipes, and collecting cookbooks.

North Louisiana food traditions are more closely related to those of the American South than South

Louisiana, but food is still central to family and community life. North Louisiana food is less spicy but emphasizes different ingredients and recipes due to different settlement patterns. English-speaking British Americans and African Americans primarily settled North Louisiana which includes the Florida Parishes north of Lake Pontchartrain (in the "toe of the boot" as locals say) and parishes north of the French triangle. Even though the Florida Parishes are closer physically to south Louisiana, they share historic settlement patterns more with north Louisiana and Mississippi.

North Louisiana gatherings that feature food include ritual traditions reflecting their Protestant heritage. All-day singings and dinners on the grounds still take place after church services in many rural communities, frequently on the fifth Sunday in a month. Both black and white rural churches have gatherings such as Homecoming, bringing together extended families. Memorial Day, which commemorates all the deceased, not only military veterans, also provides an opportunity for extended families to visit graveyards, decorate graves with silk flowers, tell stories, and, of course, eat.

Through food, families maintain a sense of generation and extension. Older family members pass family lore to the younger ones, and individuals learn about their cultural identity as well as about their nieces, cousins, and aunts.

This has resulted in an environment where foods introduced by newly-arrived cultural groups are appreciated and readily accepted. Other ethnic groups open restaurants featuring new foods that are often highly spiced. The Chinese and Vietnamese have added their food traditions to the region's culinary history--so much so that Asian restaurants enjoy enthusiastic support and Asian chefs have begun to use such Louisiana fare as crawfish. Kung Pao Crawfish is a standard feature of Chinese lunch buffets in Baton Rouge

No matter where you are in Louisiana, the food traditions of families and other cultural groups reveal information about the people. It might be settlement patterns, historic connections, migration patterns, ethnicity, religious, or simply family traditions. Research in food tradition is one more way to learn about ourselves and our neighbors.



Robert Albritton of Ruston demonstrates preparing fish for frying. Photo: Maida Owens.

This essay is adapted from an article by Maida Owens, "Louisiana's Food Traditions: An Insider's Guide," http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/CSE/creole_food_trad.html.