

The Soul of Food

Lesson 3: The Bayou



Photo Credit: Maya Marie Stansberry

"The best way to know people is through food, get them to talk about food. Talk over food. It might be about food, but you're also talking about issues." - *Leah Chase*

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Cover Page Quote from this video interview: <https://www.southernliving.com/recipes/leah-chase-gumbo-z-herbes>

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(A Word from [Soul Fire Farm](#) about using and repurposing educational materials, which is good for us all to practice.)

Lesson 3: The Bayou

Where We Going? Louisiana

Capital: Baton Rouge | Population: 4.6 million

Land and Original People



Note on the Map: Many of these groups were more fluid in their locations than what a map can illustrate, but this map gives an idea of where they were generally. If you look at the maps of nearby states, you can see the location of indigenous people spread in and outside the United States border lines. However, once European colonizers arrived in the 1500s many indigenous groups were forced off their land to other areas of what is now the U.S., and state lines like those of Louisiana were created to become what we see today.

Louisiana is located on what was once the territory of several indigenous groups including the **Choctaw, Natchez, Houma, Atakapa-Ishak, Chitimacha, Tunica, and Caddo**. Of the many groups throughout Louisiana, the Chitimacha have a history of being one of the most powerful prior to and during violent colonization from the French and Spanish¹.



To this day, even though they are far smaller in numbers, **Chitimacha** are one of the few indigenous groups of Louisiana who still live on some of their original land in Charenton of St. Mary Parish. Here Chitimachans work to preserve their cultural heritage through traditional cooking and art practices². One of these art practices involves weaving traditional Chitimacha baskets which are made of the river canes that grow in the region, and are often dyed red, black, and yellow. The baskets can be used for harvesting, serving food, or storing funerary remains.



Remnants of indigenous peoples of Louisiana can also be seen in the names of parishes around the state which were named for significant people, places, foods, and tasks. Such as the Tangipahoa Parish meaning “ear of corn” or “those who gather corn” in the Muskogean language of the Acolapissa people who joined the Houma during European colonization in the 1700s. As well as the Caddo Parish, named after the Caddo people.

¹ Chitimacha History by Lee Sultzman <http://www.dickshovel.com/chi.html>

² <https://64parishes.org/entry/chitimacha-baskets>; <https://harvardmagazine.com/2010/07/vita-clara-darden>



Other modern markers of indigenous people in the land of Louisiana include the beautiful bayous, which can be found throughout the state. The word bayou comes from the Choctaw word “bayuk” meaning small stream. These marshy bodies of water feed into lakes and rivers like the Mississippi River.

Louisiana’s Creole and Cajun Foodways

By the early 1700s the number of indigenous groups in Louisiana would be greatly reduced due to many being driven out to neighboring states by Spanish and French colonizers. Others would die out from

European diseases such as smallpox.³ By the year 1718 French colonizer John-Baptiste Le Moyne would go on to found New Orleans. It is in the city of New Orleans that Louisiana’s most well known cuisines would be developed by enslaved African and Caribbean people, French and Spanish colonizers, and the remaining Indigenous population.

The two most well known cuisines in Louisiana include Cajun and Creole cuisine. Although the terms Cajun and Creole are often used interchangeably to describe Louisiana cuisine, as well as the people, this is done mostly by folks who live outside the state and isn’t accurate. The inaccuracy is partly due to some overlap in the ingredients used by both cuisines, but also because of brands like Zatarans and Popeyes dominating the cuisines’ representation.

Cajun cuisine is believed to have been born out of French-Canadian refugees, formerly called Acadians, fleeing to Louisiana along with indigenous Canadians (Mi’kmaq people) starting in 1755 during the decade of The Great Expulsion in Canada. From that time and through the early 1900s is when Cajuns would combine their Indigenous and French culinary traditions of slow-cooked, cauldron-centered dishes with the seafood and meat available in the Bayou regions of Louisiana, and swap out their wheat for corn.⁴

Creole cuisine has been around slightly longer than Cajun cuisine, and is also a fusion of foodways, however that fusion includes African, Caribbean, European, and Indigenous cultures and ingredients. One of the major reasons for the influx of Caribbean people, particularly Haitians, into Louisiana was due to the Haitian Revolution in the 1790s bringing French colonizers and their slaves to the state. Influence from enslaved peoples of the Caribbean and West African diaspora brings along the use of spices like cayenne, fruits like okra, grains like rice, and legumes like field peas. The use of beans, corn, sweet potatoes, squash, and sassafras come from the many indigenous tribes of Louisiana. Combined together is the result of dishes such as jambalaya, gumbo, seafood boils, and more.

³ <http://www.native-languages.org/louisiana.htm>

⁴ Cajun Foodways by Carl A. and Ryan A. Brasseaux from The New Encyclopedia of Southern Cuisine Volume 7: Foodways edited by John T. Edge

Lena Richard

Entrepreneur, Chef, TV Show Host

Born: September 11th, 1892 | New Roads, Louisiana

“When I got way up there, I found out in a hurry they can’t teach me much more than I know. I learned things about new desserts and salads. But when it comes to cooking meats, stews, soups, sauces and such dishes we Southern cooks have Northern cooks beat by a mile. That’s not big talk; that’s honest truth.” - Lena Richard



- Learned how to cook as a domestic worker during her early teen years, and in her late teens the family she worked for paid her to go to Fannie Farmer’s Cooking School in Boston.

- A few years after graduating from culinary school, Lena opened a home-based catering business which quickly expanded.

- In the late 1930s she opened a cooking school and would teach private cooking classes around New Orleans with her daughter Marie Richard Rhodes.

- The 1940s were a big decade for Lena

because she published her first book *New Orleans Cookbook*; opened two restaurants, Lena’s Eatery and Lena Richard’s Gumbo House; and **became the first black woman to have a cooking show** (and possibly the first black person and first woman).

Her show would air on Tuesdays and Thursdays on Louisiana’s local NBC network WDSU.



Read More!:

New Orleans Cookbook by Lena Richard <https://www.amazon.com/New-Orleans-Cookbook-Lena-Richard/dp/1565545885>

High on the Hog (pg. 192-195) by Jessica B. Harris

The Story of Lena Richard by Sarah Nerney <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.com/blog/blog-post-archive/the-story-of-l>

Lena Richard carved culinary path for African-Americans By Bill Daley

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/dining/drink/sc-food-0313-giants-richard-20150310-story.htm>

Mahalia Jackson

Gospel Singer, Civil Rights Activist, Cook, TV Personality

Born: October 26th, 1911| New Orleans, Louisiana

"This type of work that I do, it is not merely something for entertainment. It is an uplift, it is a revival for humanity." - Mahalia Jackson



- Renowned gospel singer who grew up singing at Mount Moriah Baptist Church before she created hits like "Move On Up a Little Higher" and "How I Got Over". Mahalia also sang "I've Been Buked and I've Been Scorned" at the March on Washington in 1963.

- Was very entrepreneurial, having launched businesses for Black people, including a make-up line.

- Opened Mahalia Jackson's in 1968, a chain of restaurants that served the popular Glori-Fried Chicken. Behind the food, Mahalia's mission with the restaurants was pretty radical. Having been a domestic and food service worker as a young child and teenager, Mahalia aimed to create jobs that would change the experience of Black food service workers. Her labor practices would include paid vacation, sick leave, and leadership training for employees of Mahalia Jackson's Chicken.

- Started the Mahalia Jackson foundation, to provide scholarships for kids to go to school, this was inspired by the fact that she never formally attended school and had dreamed of being a school teacher.



Read More!

Mahalia Jackson's Glori-fried Chicken [Gravy Podcast episode] (25 min.)

<https://www.southernfoodways.org/gravy/mahalia-jacksons-glori-fried-chicken/>

Biography of Mahalia Jackson <https://www.biography.com/musician/mahalia-jackson>

Glori-Fried and Glorified: The Mahalia Jackson Story by Alice Randall

<https://www.southernfoodways.org/glori-fried-and-glori-fied-the-mahalia-jackson-story/>

Interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-UwQMkWLKE> (<https://youtu.be/p-UwQMkWLKE?t=490>)

One of Her Songs "How I Got Over" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l49N8U3d0Bw>

Sugar Cane

Sukkar (Arabic) - शर्करा Śarkarā (Sanskrit) - Saccharum (Latin) - Zucchero (Italian) - Sukere (French) - Azucar (Spanish) - Sugar (English)

“Sugar was a revolutionizing commodity. It demanded considerable labor to tend and cut the fields and feed the cane through the sugar mills, tasks that over time increasingly fell to enslaved Africans.” - Judith Caney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff (In the Shadow of Slavery)



PLANT ORIGIN AND NAME HISTORY

Sugar can be sourced from a variety of plants including beets and corn, but the sugar most people are familiar with comes from sugar cane. Sugar cane is a grass in the *Saccharum* family of plants, and one which needs lots of warmth to thrive. Therefore it shouldn't come as a surprise that sugar cane originated in the tropical regions of Southeast Asia and Oceania (e.g. New Guinea, Taiwan, and China) where it was domesticated over 6,000 years ago⁵.

The roots of the word sugar stem from the Sanskrit word for gravel which is “sharkara” and the Arabic word “sukkar”. Other languages’ words for sugar, including the Latin (*saccharum*) and Spanish (*azucar*) forms are all adaptations of these earlier meanings for sugar which relate to the small refined grains.

SUGAR’S MIGRATION TO OTHER LANDS

Sugar had a long journey from its origins before landing in the United States and Americas. Over 5,000 years ago sugar made its way to India, and from there sugar would migrate to Persia where Islamic Arabs would eventually take it to African and European countries⁶. From Europe the Portuguese would be introduced to sugar, and then Italian colonizers like Christopher Columbus would bring it to Brazil in the late 1400s and eventually the Caribbean islands right before the trans-atlantic slave trade would begin.

The main sites of sugar cultivation in the Americas would be in the Caribbean countries of Jamaica, Barbados, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, where slave plantations would drive the sugar economy. During the mid-1700s Catholic priests would introduce sugar growing to Louisiana, but it wouldn't be until 1790 that sugar cultivation in New Orleans would



⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_sugar

⁶ On Food and Cooking by Harold G. McGee p. 648

become a lucrative business for slave owners due to improvements in sugar processing⁷. Similar to rice in South Carolina, sugar plantations would build the wealth of White and European enslavers in Louisiana until the emancipation of slavery.

CULINARY USES

Early uses of sugarcane in New Guinea and China would be extracting it for juice or just chewing on the stalks, but it was also common for farmers to use it as animal fodder. However when sugar made its way to India, inventors there would improve cultivation practices and design a refining process that could produce granules. Throughout Southeastern and Western Asian countries people would combine sugar with grains, sesame seeds, or nuts to create sweets like cakes and halva. Greeks and Romans would initially use the expensive granules only as a medicine for stomach or bladder problems, or as a spice to preserve food.

Once sugar plantations became prominent in the Caribbean and South during the 1700s, demand for it would become higher among folks of the wealthier White class throughout the United States colonies and Europe. With that came demand for more slaves, and at least 300,000 enslaved West Africans were working on Louisiana sugar plantations during the mid-1800s. Despite sugar largely being cultivated by enslaved West Africans in the Southern U.S. and Caribbean, it was not something that was easily accessible to them due to it being an expensive commodity, and one that was strictly reserved for White people. Therefore enslaved people's experience with sugar largely came from preparing desserts like peach cobbler and other sweets for slave owners.

⁷"Sugar and Sugarcane" by Scott R. Simmons in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Cuisine: Foodways* edited by John T. Edge

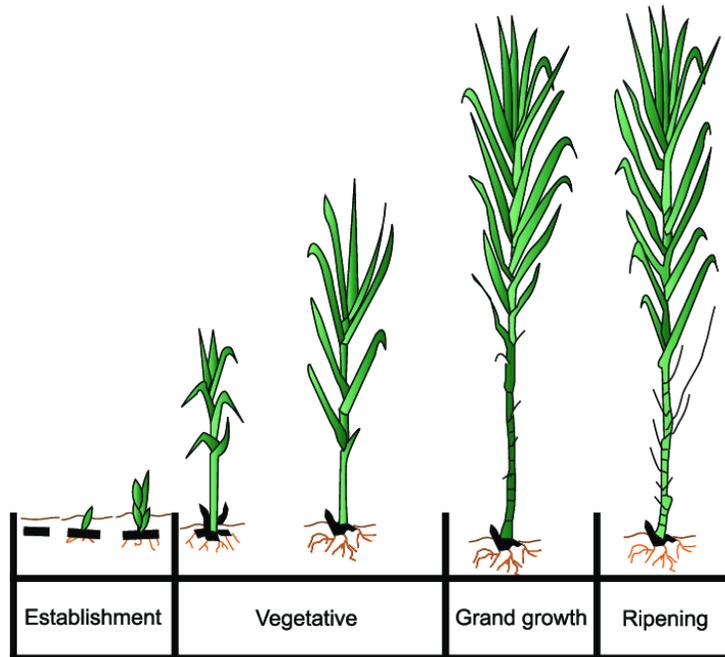


Illustration by Juan Encasio

There are three main types of sugarcane that are grown for different uses. While they all produce sugar, some may be better for just chewing on if the variety has a lot of fibers. A crystal variety of cane would be better for producing sugar because it has an ability to produce high amounts of sucrose crystals that can be later dried into granules. Juicing varieties are, as the name implies, good for juicing and drinking.



Sugarcane is grown vegetatively, meaning that cuttings from the plant tissue are used rather than growing the cane from seeds. While sugarcane produces small seeds, they don't ensure the plant will grow as healthy as its parent plant did, therefore the plant is cloned vegetatively through cuttings.

These cut pieces of sugarcane are then planted in the ground lengthwise to establish roots. They can also be grown by placing the canes in water to establish roots before transplanting into the ground. Either way, sugarcane grows best in hot climates (80-100F) that allow for the plant to get established and ripen for a duration of 8-24 months depending on the location.

Growing Guides & Videos:

3 Ways to Grow Sugarcane <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmggNLdb6WM>

Guide to Growing Sugarcane <https://www.smart-fertilizer.com/articles/guide-to-growing-sugarcane/>

Louisiana Agricultural Center <https://www.lsuagcenter.com/articles/page1538661493623>

⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237695968_Irrigation_of_Sugarcane_in_Texas; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmggNLdb6WM>

Okra

Abelmoschus esculentus (Latin) - Okra (English) - Gumbo (French) - Okuru (Igbo) - Ngombo (Bantu) - Nkuruma (Twi)

“We do okra gumbo. As I said earlier, as recipes come down the line in the community, you change them according to the products or ingredients you're going to use. So when that gumbo came down all the way from Africa through the islands, it was made with okra, I would imagine, because that is gumbo. . . If you cook that okra down, you don't need to put a thickener into the gumbo, because it's going to be already thick.”⁹ - Leah Chase interview with Charles Henry Rowell

PLANT ORIGIN AND NAME HISTORY

Okra was first domesticated in Ethiopia over 3,000 years ago, and is in the Malvaceae or Mallow family with plants like hibiscus, cacao beans, and cotton¹⁰. Its name however originates from the Nigerian Igbo word for the plant which is okuru. Okra is also known as gumbo which comes from the southern Africa's Bantu words ngombo, ochingombo, and guingombo which was shortened by the French to gumbo¹¹.

Okra made its way to the Americas like many other African-origin crops by way of enslaved Africans carrying the seeds with them during the trans-atlantic slave trade. Once they arrived in the Americas and Caribbean islands, enslaved Africans would grow okra along with other nutritious crops if

they were allowed to have subsistence gardens or plots on the plantation.

Okra was an important crop at that time, and continues to be, due to its spiritual significance and ability to nourish as well as heal the body. Both the pods and leaves of okra are edible and provide a bounty of nutrients including protein and fat alongside essential vitamins and minerals like iron. The seeds of okra can also be dried, roasted, and made into a drink similar to coffee. Humans aren't the only ones who like okra, as it's an important offering to Brazilian Orishas. Alongside being a food for many, okra is also used as a medicine for various purposes. The leaves can be



⁹ Leah Chase on Callaloo/Gumbo Z'Herbes An Interview by Charles Henry Rowell with John O'Neal

¹⁰ *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Foodways* (General Editor, Charles Reagan Wilson; volume editor, John T. Edge) Pg. 206-207

¹¹ *High on the Hog* by Jessica B. Harris pg. 17

pounded into a mash to relieve pain or itching on the skin, while the inside of the pods can be used to induce abortion¹².

OKRA'S MIGRATION TO OTHER LANDS (CULTURE - GROWING AND EATING Okra)

In the United States okra is best known for being used in dishes like gumbo and jambalaya which have many versions of recipes throughout the Southern U.S. but especially in South Carolina and Louisiana. The mucilaginous pods are also popular in other countries around the world including Jamaica, Trinidad, Haiti, and China.

AGRICULTURE

Some types of okra

		
<p>White Velvet Okra (True Love Seeds)</p>	<p>Burgundy Red (True Love Seeds)</p>	<p>Clemson Spineless (High Mowing Seeds)</p>
<p>“Because okra germinates and grows best when planted in soil that has warmed above 80 degrees F, northern gardeners often start seeds in flats and transplant seedlings when the weather heats up. In warmer regions of the country, seeds are often direct-sown. Nicking the seed coat of okra seeds can help improve germination rates. Sow okra seeds ½ inch deep. When direct-sowing okra, space seeds 2 inches apart and thin to a final spacing of 12-18 inches apart. [They take about 6-18 days to germinate]. Okra develops best in warm climates with warm nights, preferring temperatures between 68 and 95 degrees F. . Okra pods are harvested for eating when they are young and immature, just after the flowers fade. Okra pods can be harvested every few days with pruning shears or a sharp knife. If pods are longer than 5 inches, they might be tough, though there are some varieties that grow longer than others and these may still be tender.” from <i>The Seed Savers Exchange</i></p>		
<p>Other Growing Guides: True Love Seeds https://trueloveseeds.com/products/hill-country-red-okra Southern Exposure Seed Exchange https://www.southernexposure.com/okra-growing-guide/</p>		

¹² Africanisms in American Culture edited by Joseph E. Holloway pg.46; Natural Liberty:Rediscovering Self-Induced Abortion Methods by the Sage Femme Collective
Written and Compiled by Maya Marie S. for The Soul of Food 2020

Okra Gumbo

This recipe is an adaptation and combination of recipes by Leah Chase and Lena Richard. Gumbo wasn't something I grew up eating very often, but the few times I ate it, it had sausage so I really wanted that to be in this recipe.

Yield: 4-6 servings

Ingredients:

¼ cup	Vegetable oil
4 medium	Andouille Sausages, sliced into ¾" pieces
1 lb.	Fresh Okra (sliced thin)
1 large	Yellow Onion, medium diced
1 medium	Green Bell Pepper, medium diced
2 stalks	Celery, ¼" inch slices
2 cloves	Fresh Garlic
2 tbsp.	Tomato paste
½ tsp.	Cayenne pepper
2 tsp.	Paprika
1 tsp.	Dried Thyme
1 tbsp.	Salt
1 ½ quarts	Vegetable Stock
2	Bay leaves
1 lb.	Shrimp (cleaned and deveined)

Directions:

1. Heat oil in a large heavy pot over medium heat. Add in the sausages and cook to brown, then remove from pan and set aside.
2. Add in the okra, onions, peppers, celery, and garlic and saute for about 5-10 minutes. Then add in tomato paste and spices, stirring to combine and cooking until fragrant, about 5 minutes.
3. Slowly add in the vegetable stock and bay leaf, cook for another 15-20 minutes.
4. Then add the shrimp and continue cooking for another 10 minutes, then add sausage back in. Serve over rice.