



Lâche Pas

*Sustaining and spreading
the tradition of Cajun boucherie*

By Melanie Warner Spencer & Photography by Denny Culbert

ALIGHT MORNING FOG LIFTS OFF THE FIELDS IN THE distance, as a resident black barn cat ambles into the gravel driveway. About 15 yards away from the white wooden farmhouse, four tents are planted in a row near the fence. The sun begins to rise, as four indistinguishable figures emerge from the tents, their silhouettes receding into the dim light of daybreak. The men step into dewy grass to shake off sleep and get to the day's business. Nearby the peaceful rustling and snorting sounds of a 258-pound hog drift out of a small black stock trailer. A version of this scene has become commonplace for the men of Lâche Pas Boucherie et Cuisine – those guys filing out of the tents—who now are quite well-known throughout Acadiana and beyond, because they have made it their mission to carry on the tradition of and educate people about the practice of Cajun boucherie.

On this day, the boucherie is in St. Bernard Parish, about two and a half hours from Lafayette, at Docville Farms (a culture and learning center project of the nonprofit Meraux Foundation). Attendees range from culinary students and chefs to members of Slow Food New Orleans and their children, with proceeds from the event benefiting both the upcoming Slow Fish 2016 and a memorial fund for victims of the shooting in Lafayette and their families.

At dawn, before the arrival of curious attendees, Lâche Pas' Brian Kyzar burns sage and performs a private Native American pipe ceremony and Sun Dance with prayer songs. Kyzar says he began the practice at age 14 and it seemed fitting to incorporate the ceremonies into the boucherie. Soon, artist, carpenter and Lâche Pas' resident butcher and chef Toby Rodriguez – whom many are familiar with from his appearances on the popular "Cajun Country" episode of the Travel Channel's "Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations," and Bravo's "Top Chef" – begins the ritualistic process of laying out on a wooden picnic table and artfully arranging the tools of his trade, including an immense collection of all manner of knives (some antique; some made by Rodriguez; and some gifted or heirlooms from his father and grandfather), mallets, saws, antique ivory handled strait razors (also a gift) and a hatchet. For 30 minutes, the long and lean Rodriguez, clad in a plaid pearl snap shirt and Levis with a red handkerchief dangling out of his back pocket and brown work boots sharpens the blades that need it and loads his Ruger .22 caliber, single six-shot revolver.

"I pray for an easy passage," says Kyzar, as Rodriguez makes his way to the stock trailer. "That the pig accepts it and dies very easily. There's always a prayer; I just take it up a notch or two."

Rodriguez enters the trailer. His voice mingles softly with the snorting and vocalizing of the pig. Outside, Kyzar lights a bundle of sage.

"We really like to push [the ceremonial] side of things, to let people know how special it is," Kyzar says. "It's life and death."

Rodriguez exits the trailer as attendees quietly gather around it. Chris George of George Family Farms in Montgomery, Alabama, who raised the pig, offers a blessing. Rodriguez opens the trailer door ever so slightly and makes shushing noises as the hog approaches the door to have a bite of food from a pan. There is a faint black "X" on the animal's forehead. A shot rings out and the pig falls sideways into the trailer.

The Lâche Pas team quickly pulls the animal toward the door. Rodriguez draws a knife across her throat, beginning the process of draining the blood into a pan for use later in making the boudin. The sound of Barrett Dupuis scraping a metal whisk on the sides of a stainless steel bowl to combine salt into the blood and keep it from coagulating mixes with the stifled sobs of a few of those in the circle around the trailer. Kyzar and Chris McIntyre stroke and comfort the animal until the end.

"There she goes," says Kyzar.

Swiftly, the pig is transferred from the trailer to a wooden platform with handles. The men carry the platform and its cargo to an area closer to the house and hoist it onto a pair of sawhorses. Kyzar hands Rodriguez a bottle of Buffalo Trace Kentucky Bourbon, and he takes a swig. He then passes the bottle to each member of Lâche Pas, and they each have a pull. The animal is covered with burlap next, and Rodriguez douses the temporary wrapping with boiling hot water.

"When you are there at a boucherie, or any time an animal is killed, they put it on the table and there is a pathos," says Kevin McCaffrey, Louisiana Folklife Program Commissioner and the documentary film producer behind "No One Ever Went Hungry: Acadian Food Traditions Then & Now."

"At some point, an animal turns to food."

McCaffrey says the experience of the boucherie historically is about survival, community and sustainability.

The 268-pound hog was raised at George Family Farms in Montgomery, Alabama. Rodriguez of Lâche Pas Boucherie et Cuisine and his team work to keep the animal comfortable and calm throughout the morning. A blessing is conducted prior to the slaughter, to show gratitude and honor to the animal and to mark the solemnity of the occasion.





“The family raised it and the animal gave its life,” McCaffrey says. “But, it’s what you do with preparations, especially in the Cajun sense – you try to use it all. The boucherie itself was a kind of sustainability.”

In the early 1900s, the use of the French language was banned in schools, setting off a chain reaction that would send Cajun culture into decline.

“Where they found that Cajun-French culture was in the music and food,” McCaffrey says. “You had guys like [musicians] Marc Savoy and Michael Doucet who carried on a tradition of boucherie.”

As Rodriguez and the culinary students begin shaving the pig to remove the hair, the faint sound of music is in the air. Roddie Romero of Roddie Romero and the Hub City All-Stars and a couple members of the band are providing the day’s musical entertainment. They are warming up in the covered picnic area. It’s announced that cowboy coffee and homemade blueberry cornbread are available on the patio, the bar is opening soon, and as Romero and his bandmate quietly play a few songs on the accordion and guitar, the earlier solemnity gives way to festivity.

Suddenly, a Ford F-150 rolls up, and an imposing man sporting a moustache and overalls yells out the window in Cajun-French. Several attendees respond in kind. The newcomer is Tom Crosby, and he’s here to make the cracklins or grattons.

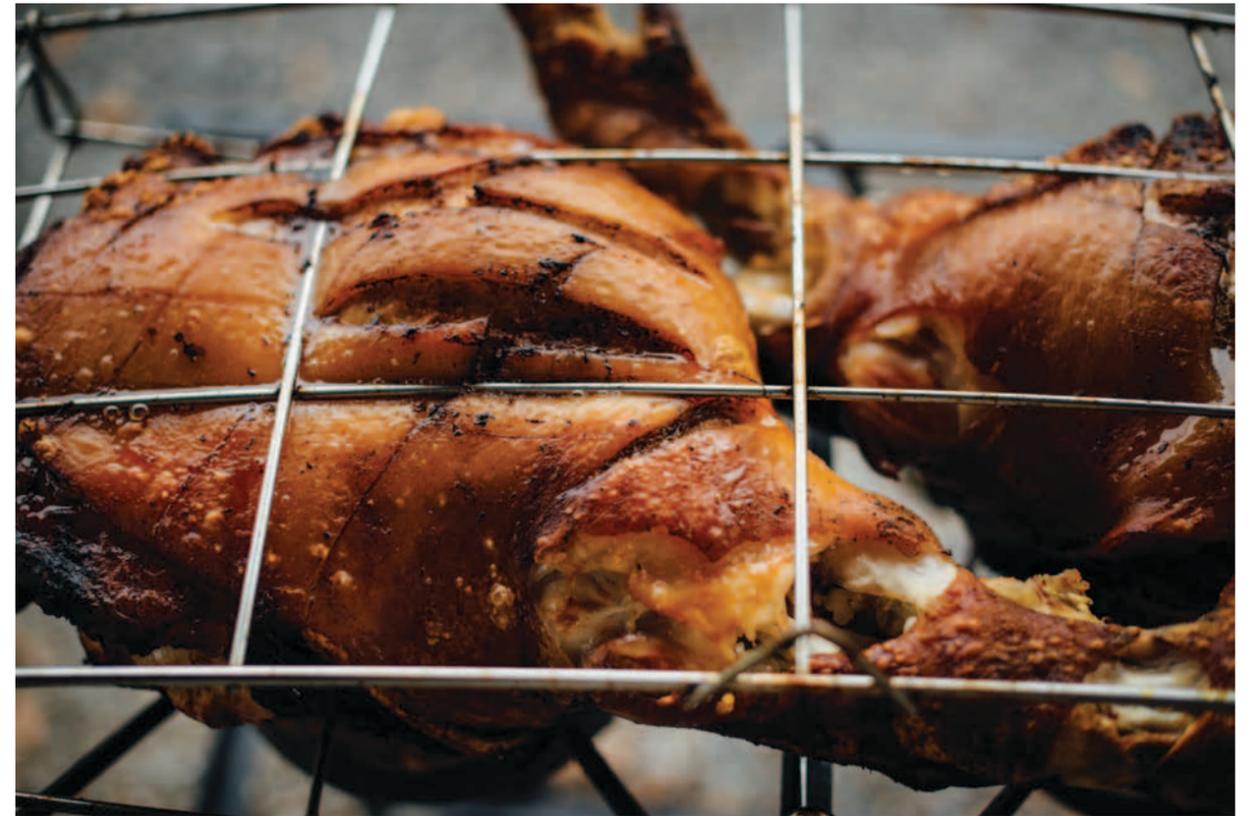
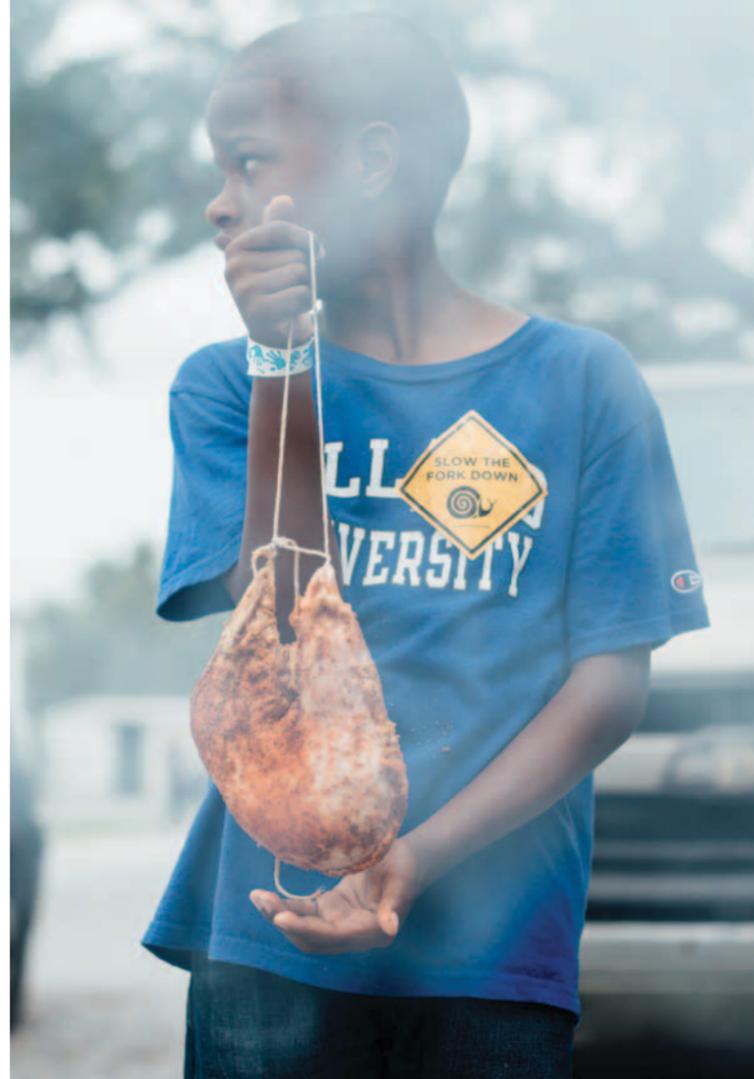
Toby Rodriguez of Lâche Pas Boucherie et Cuisine walks toward the butchering station as members of his team and attendees move the pig. Culinary students then assist at shaving the pig and finally Rodriguez runs a blowtorch over the skin to make sure there are no stray hairs. A chef cuts organ meat for the fraisseurs. The Vaucresson’s Sausage Company team mans the sausage station.

Crosby jumps out of the truck, walks over to the table and slaps the pig saying, “Me and you gonna be good friends for the next four hours!”

Once the students, Kyzar and Rodriguez finish shaving the pig, Rodriguez makes a final pass at it with a blowtorch to ensure that it is clean and free of fuzz.

“There’s nothing worse than hairy cracklins,” jokes Chris Haines, a member of the board of directors for the Meraux Foundation.

The pig is turned onto its back. Rodriguez, ever the showman, says that as an artist he’s aware of subtle nuances that open people’s minds and allow them to absorb what’s in front of them, resulting in a strong sense of presence. He leaps onto the table with one foot on each side of the animal. A long white apron is tied around his waist and hovers above the smooth belly of the pig.



A hatchet hangs from one side of his belt in a leather holder and an orthopedic mallet and other tools swing from the other side. He begins to explain the butchering process.

"Usually this would be done by hanging the pig nose-down," Rodriguez tells the group. "This is the way I grew up doing it."

The goal, Rodriguez explains, is to keep all of the parts clean, since they want to use as much of the animal as possible. He makes the first cut from the chin down through the neck then splits the sternum with the mallet and hatchet as a person holds each leg.

Quickly, Rodriguez begins butchering the hog. With a sculptor's precision, he carves and shapes the sum down to its preferred parts. He is assisted by Ryan Hughes, chef and owner of Purloo, located in the Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans. Hughes, who often takes road trips throughout the South and Cajun country to farms, restaurants and

other culinary events and destinations, is dedicated to learning about the region's culinary traditions and educating culinary students and the public at large about the culture and history behind the cuisine.

The band is in full swing and the bar is slinging beer from 40 Arpent Brewing Co., located in nearby Arabi. Cornbread and red beans and rice are offered up on the patio to pacify growling bellies while the butchering is completed, the cracklins sizzle in a big black cauldron under Crosby's watchful eye and the meat is prepared for cooking.

Vance Vaucresson of Vaucresson's Sausage Company starts getting sausage ready for the barrel smoker and the other stations are prepped by their respective captains for the grilled meats, hams cooked in the "Cajun microwave," (a large charcoal-heated Dutch oven) and fraiseurs or organ meat stew.

Chris McIntyre, who assisted earlier with the slaughtering of the pig and some of the butchering, is now sipping a beer near the fraiseurs station.

"Typically I do the fraiseurs," McIntyre says, explaining that he relinquished his captain status to a local chef for the day.

He didn't experience boucheries growing up. After architecture school in Lafayette, McIntyre worked with Rodriguez on building projects and was introduced to it.

"Every night someone was cooking," McIntyre says. "That's how [Lâche Pas Boucherie et Cuisine] sort of started."

Over the past two years, the Lâche Pas group has done more than 40 events all over the United States in keeping with their mission to educate people and keep the boucherie custom alive.

Each station is tasked with preparing a different part of the animal. From smoking sausage in a barrel smoker, to grilling and manning the "Cajun Microwave," or large Dutch oven, the goal is to use every part of the animal that's possible. In the pre-refrigeration days, the meats would be prepared for storage and used in the coming months. The tradition of Cajun boucherie is handed down generation to generation through a mentoring program, says Louisiana Folklife Commissioner, Kevin McCaffrey. Rodriguez says he has taken part in boucheries his entire life and has done it professionally for about seven years.



Traditionally the many fruits of the day's labors would of course be set aside for the coming months, since in pre-refrigeration days when the tradition started the purpose was to preserve meat for winter. These days however it has become more of a celebration of culture and community – and in this case education – so by days end all of the meat is heartily consumed by ravenous attendees.

Not long after the lines die down and everyone has their crack at pork chops and loin, sausage and stews – and Crosby's creamy, crispy cracklins – Rodriguez bellies up to the bar for a well-earned break and a cold beer.

Slaughtering and butchering a pig is of course physical work, but also emotional, spiritual and creative. McCaffrey says the performance element is cultural, traditional and ritualistic. The artist and adept performer in Rodriguez are on full display during the boucherie and for several reasons, including those McCaffrey cites.

"There is an element of theater," Rodriguez says. "If you can get people to connect emotionally, they'll be more affected by it. There is an emotional detachment to where people's food comes from. When people are close to the source, you think twice about throwing away a half plate of food. The boucherie becomes a vehicle for someone to feel emotional toward their food source, which starts out as a living creature."

Rodriguez writes poetic prose on the Lâche Pas Boucherie et Cuisine website and blog about his other inspirations for keeping

Community, sustainability, spirituality and ritual are all integral elements of the Cajun boucherie. It's important to honor the animal for its sacrifice and sustain the bounty by limiting waste. For the Slow Food New Orleans boucherie, the waste amounted to less than a third of a five-pound bucket. It would have been less had someone agreed to make chitlins with the intestines, a challenging and messy endeavor. (L to R) Barrett Dupuis, Chris McIntyre, Toby Rodriguez and Bryan Kyzar of Lâche Pas Boucherie et Cuisine have done approximately 40 boucherie events across the United States over the past two years. They hope to educate people about the tradition and keep it alive in Acadiana.

the tradition alive. He writes that it's about family, friends and community, but most importantly about preserving the culture and sharing the heritage with his daughter. Getting people to connect with their food source however, is a large part of the public message.

"It's absolutely essential these days," Rodriguez says. "We have no guilt or remorse. It's just a patty or a sausage. It's not a cow or a pig."

Echoes of these strongly held sentiments are driven home again and again by the Lâche Pas team.

"It's a spiritual thing," McIntyre says. "It's very emotional and special. You're taking the animal and turning it into food. There's no waste. It's the most honorable way an animal can go out. That's what it's about. And community. •"

