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# CULINARY HERITAGE

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By Jyl Benson &  
Photographs by  
Denny Culbert

## **WELCOME TO *LOUISIANA LIFE'S* CELEBRATION**

of the culinarians who are making a mark on our unique state. The beauty of our culinary heritage and the people who are moving it forward while preserving and revealing the treasures of our past are well worth exploring. We asked each of them to share a recipe they feel best reflects their efforts.

¶ Tell me what you eat (and cook) and I will tell you who you are. This I believe, nor more than ever since I have come to know each of these gifted people who employ those gifts to utilize Louisiana's bountiful agricultural harvest to sustain, enlighten, educate and dazzle us.



# WEST AFRICAN INFLUENCE

**DR. HOWARD CONYERS IS FRUSTRATED BY** the lack of recognition the enslaved West African people of America's past have received for their contributions to the cuisine of the American South. Just put a bowl of okra gumbo next to a bowl of Senegalese soupou kanja and the root is undeniably there.

With a Ph.D. from Duke University and a career with NASA testing rocket engines, Conyers, 35 (a native of Paxville, South Carolina, and resident of New Orleans), started using his spare time to bring attention to dying art of whole hog barbecue as it was taught to him by his father.

He is frequently called upon to address youth groups and others nationwide, sometimes with the support

**Dr. Howard Conyers is a NASA engineer by trade and a whole hog barbecue cook by his South Carolina family tradition. Currently he is also a research fellow at the National Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans, the city he now calls home.**



of The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, as he uses the practice of cooking hogs to connect his passion for the preservation of his heritage to his work as an engineer and scientist.

As a Research Fellow with the National Food & Beverage Foundation and the Southern Food & Beverage Museum (SoFab), he has curated several projects: "South Carolina Barbecue — Culture, Misconceptions and Preservation" and "From the Low Country to the Bayou: A Creole and Gullah Family Reunion." The latter examined ongoing efforts toward agricultural and culinary preservation across America to expose the influence of West African culinary traditions on contemporary Southern cooking. To execute the program he brought famed Gullah chef B.J. Dennis of Charleston, South Carolina. This spring he presented "Jolof to Jambalaya: An Evening with Chef Pierre Thiam," at SoFab. The event explored the cultural and culinary ties between Senegal and Louisiana, and included a five-course meal prepared by celebrated Senegalese chef and cookbook author Pierre Thiam, executive chef at the celebrated Nok by Alara in Lagos, Nigeria.

Most recently Conyers assumed the role of mentor, partnering with Chef Serigne "Love" Mbaye, 23, a classically trained chef raised in Senegal, who now serves as senior line cook at Commander's Palace. Together they presented a dinner featuring Senegalese foods made with ingredients indigenous to Louisiana. As is his way, Conyers eschewed the spotlight, instead serving as host as he deliberately trained attention on his young protégé.

Never one to rest, Conyers is currently at work on a book that examines barbeque through the voices of his African-American ancestors who shared their traditions orally for future generations. In 2016, he was one of 40 leaders selected nationwide by *NextCity*, a national urban affairs magazine and non-profit organization based in Philadelphia, to receive the prestigious Vanguard award, which is presented annually to top urban innovators age 40 and younger who are working to make positive changes in American cities.

**Dr. Howard Conyers, by appointment only, [howardconyers.com](http://howardconyers.com).**



## DR. CONYERS' HOE CAKES

with cane syrup

Combine **1½ cups of cornmeal** and **½ cup all purpose flour** in a bowl. Mix well. Add **2 cups hot water** and beat vigorously with a wooden spoon.

Add **1 egg** and **2 tablespoons salted butter (melted)** and stir well. If the batter is too thick add additional hot water until a batter the consistency of pancake batter is achieved. Take care not to make the batter soupy.

Use a ladle to pour out 3-to-4-inch cakes on the prepared cast iron skillet or griddle. Cook the cakes until small bubbles start to form at the edges then carefully flip them over, pressing slightly in the center to ensure even cooking. Cook until golden on both sides, about 3-5 minutes in all.

Drain the cakes on paper towels. Serve warm with cane syrup.

Makes 12

# LIFE ON THE FARM

**EVERY DAY EVAN MCCOMMON BELLOWS OUT** a “Woooooop.” After a pause he will do it again. In response, hundreds of cows, their calves and bulls will stampede toward him. Among the heritage breeds (or, breeds that have been around for decades or hundreds of years) are Piney Woods and French Charlais.

“We’ve conditioned our herd to come to that sound,” McCommon, 40, says. “When they hear it they know something good is about to happen.”

Here, the animals are happy and a veterinarian could starve to death for lack of work. Animals that do not thrive at his farm’s minimally invasive approach are sold.

Welcome to Mahaffey Family Farms, located in Princeton, about 15 minutes outside of downtown Shreveport. The land has been in the family since 1927 when H.H. “Happy” Mahaffey bought it and established a farm with cattle, an orchard, a sawmill, goats, poultry, pigs, vegetables and a large haying operation, employing many people in the community. Following his sudden death in 1953, Happy’s widow, overwhelmed, slowly sold off the livestock and equipment. The lush pine forest surrounding the farm overtook it.

The land remained in the Mahaffey family, ultimately coming under McCommon’s care in 1995, when he began managing it with a focus on timber production, conservation and wildlife management. When the economy crashed in 2008, taking the timber market with it, McCommon turned to his ancestor’s livelihood. Knowing the land had never been exposed to chemical

(left to right) **Three generations of McCommons Taylor, Evan and Sandra work together to raise heritage breed Pineywoods cattle and Red Wattle hogs on their family’s land just outside of Shreveport in Princeton. Each weekend they bring their grass fed beef, pasture raised pork and an assortment of eggs laid by their hens to the Shreveport Farmer’s Market.**



fertilizers nor pesticides he began clearing some of the forest to create a Savanna pasture.

“Savanna means ‘widely spaced trees,’” he said. “While a forest is dark and closed, a savanna has multiple layers — forest, land and open water — and diverse species thrive.”

He started planting organic vegetables in 2012, adding more

varieties and new species each season. Today he raises heritage breeds of pastured hogs, chickens, goats and cattle using modern technology and the wisdom and sensibilities of the past to produce healthy, delicious 100 percent chemical-free foods while sustainably regenerating his family’s land and nourishing his community. Animal waste is worked back into the system to nourish growing vegetables and water is provided via a pond water irrigation system, resulting in zero waste. Herbicides are avoided by employing hand tools and a small tractor.

McCommon regularly partners with area chefs and other culinarians on events to build community and awareness. The Seasons & Traditions dinner series, a collaborative farm-to-table affair hosted on the farm by McCommon and Chef Hardette Harris, creator of the Official Meal of North Louisiana and the “Us Up North” tour and culinary experience, is now in its fourth year. The Piney Woods Supper Club is in its second year. He started the series of roving dinners with Chef Holly and Derek Schreiber of Saint Terre to feature an ever-changing roster of Louisiana chefs using Mahaffey products.

**Mahaffey Family Farms, 440 Mahaffey Rd., Princeton, 318-949-6249, mahaffeyfarms.com.**



## CHILLED PURPLE HULL PEAS SMOKED PORK

with sunny yard egg and Cherokee purple tomato salad

### CHILLED PURPLE HULL PEAS & PORK

Place **1 pound smoked pork neck bones** or hocks in a Dutch oven. Add **salt to taste** and enough water to cover. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer until the meat is falling from the bones, at least one hour. Strain the meat and the bones from the cooking liquid. Reserve the liquid.

When the meat is cool enough to handle, remove the meat from the bones, discard the bones, shred the meat, and set it aside to cool.

Add **1 quart shelled purple hull peas (rinsed)**, **6 leeks (white and green parts, washed and chopped—may substitute 3 medium onions, chopped)**, **3 cloves garlic (chopped)**, **4 organic carrots (peeled and chopped)**, **1 cup chopped celery**, **½ cup mint, salt and pepper to taste**, and a **dash of cayenne** to the reserved cooking liquid. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium and cook until peas are tender but not mushy, about 30 minutes.

Strain the vegetables from the cooking liquid and discard the liquid. Combine the peas with the reserved meat and chill until ready to serve.

### CHEROKEE PURPLE TOMATO SALAD

Combine **2 large heirloom Cherokee purple tomatoes (diced)**, **2 garden fresh cucumbers (peeled, seeded and diced)**, **2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**, **1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar** and **salt and pepper to taste**.

### TO SERVE

Add **¼ cup mint** to the pea mixture and toss to incorporate. Divide the pea salad among six chilled salad plates. Divide the Cherokee purple tomato salad atop each of the plates. Top each portion with a **fried egg, sunny side up**. Serve at once.

Serves 6

# BLESSED ARE THE MEAT MAKERS

**TO SIT IN THE TINY, CRAMPED OFFICE AT** Bourgeois Meat Market is to experience the physical manifestation of the cliché of south Louisiana masculinity. A deer head is mounted high on the wall, below it a picture of Beau Bourgeois, 30, with the felled deer. Next to it is a picture of Lester “Paw-Paw” Bourgeois, 93, holding up a prized catch on a fishing boat. There’s a reverently framed picture of the Madonna and child, numerous bottles of assorted cooking spices, a couple of bottles of vodka and you can hear Lynyrd Skynyrd singing “Simple Man” from the radio in the kitchen where employees work with efficiency and an air of contentment.

The Bourgeois family has been making “Miracles in Meat” since 1891 when Valerie Jean-Batiste Bourgeois began slaughtering single pigs or cows and peddling the fresh cuts by horse and carriage to those living along the edges of bayous Terrebonne and Lafourche. With

**The Bourgeois family butchers Beau, 30, Lester, 93, and Donald, 55, carry on the traditions started by Valerie Jean-Batiste Bourgeois in 1891. (top to bottom) Oxtail, boudin and smoked beef jerky are just some of the many meat products they offer.**



the advent of refrigeration, he opened a storefront in the 1920s and began making the smoked sausage, hoghead cheese and boudin that earned him a loyal patronage.

When his son, Lester, returned from service in WWII he took over the business, moving the market and slaughterhouse across the street. Of Lester’s seven children, it was his son Donald, now 55, who took over the business. Now Donald’s son, Beau, 30, is heading day-to-day operations, freeing up his dad and Paw Paw to go fishing whenever they like.

Each generation has its own legacy within the heritage business. Donald, known for his creativity in the kitchen, is the genius behind the market’s famous smoked beef jerky, of which they sell thousands of pounds each week, shipping it all over the world. Something magical

happened when he opened up a casing of boudin, folded the contents into a neat package within a flour tortilla, then toasted it. The resulting Boudin Burrito is now the area’s most popular grab-and-go lunch, served hot from a glass case on the counter near the cash register. His turkey cheese, a riff on the hog variety but made with dark turkey meat, is sought after by squeamish eaters and his mustard-based TTS (Totally Top Secret) sauce could probably make an old sweat sock palatable.

As the business moves into Beau’s computer-savvy hands his legacy will be expansion. A second market will open in nearby Gray in 2019 or 2020. “Just to take some of the pressure off of this place,” he says. “Sometimes it’s hard to keep up.”

As recently as the 1970s there were numerous butcher shops dotting the immediate area, now only Bourgeois’ remains. Beau attributes the business’ longevity and its status as a national landmark to his family’s devotion to turning out top-quality products and adhering to strict customer service policies.

The market prepares only enough products to serve a select number of customers each day. If they run out they make more, ensuring meats are always fresh.

“It’s our products and it’s our family,” Beau says. “We’re good people, we care and we’re friendly. And that just keeps them coming back.”

**Bourgeois Meat Market, 543 W Main St., Schriever, 985-447-7128, [bourgeoismeatmarket.com](http://bourgeoismeatmarket.com)**



## MOCK TURTLE SOUP

With **1 cup all-purpose flour** and **1 cup oil**, make a medium roux the color of peanut butter in a large Dutch oven set over medium heat. Add **3 onions, (chopped)**, **1 bunch celery (chopped)**, and **1 bell pepper (chopped)** to the roux to stop the color from deepening. Stir well. Add **3 cloves garlic (chopped)**, reduce the heat to medium-low and cook until the vegetables have softened, about 45 minutes.

Add **6 pounds oxtails (cut up)**, **half of a sliced lemon (thinly sliced into - to ¼-inch rounds)**, **3 bay leaves** and **one 10-ounce can of Ro-tel Diced Original Tomatoes and Green Chiles** or **1½ cups chopped fresh tomatoes**. Add enough water to cover, about **1½ quarts**. Cover the pot and simmer until the oxtails are tender, about 2½ hours.

Add **half of a sliced lemon (thinly sliced into - to ¼-inch rounds)**, and continue to simmer until the meat is falling off the bone. If desired, use tongs or a slotted spoon to remove the bones from the soup. Add water as necessary to achieve desired thickness. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Add **½ cup chopped green onions** and **¼ cup chopped parsley** and continue cooking over low heat until the flavors have married, about 7 minutes. Remove the pot from the heat.

Cut **6 hard-cooked eggs (peeled)** in half lengthwise and add them to the pot. Stir gently. Cover and let sit for 10 minutes before serving.

Serves 6 to 8

# GULF COAST BOUNTY

## DINNER AT THE MOSQUITO SUPPER CLUB

begins with a warning. Once her guests are seated, Chef Melissa Martin, elegant and cosseted in an apron, sweeps into the room and claps loudly, leveling her steel blue gaze upon the assemblage.

"Ya'll! Ya'll listen. There are a couple of rules, the most important is no clapping. I hate it. You know that really icky feeling you get when someone sings you Happy Birthday? If you clap I am coming to your house and singing you Happy Birthday. Don't do it."

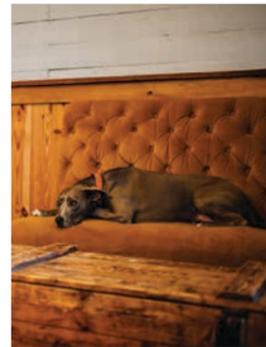
The other rule is no one is to monopolize the stack of records nor the record player in the corner.

"Not everyone wants to listen to something like 'Thriller' all night long. Ya'll share."

With that, she sweeps back into the kitchen to turn out a meal that will change according to the season and what is available.

Guests are seated communally. Over the course of the evening, a deeply personal bounty pours forth from the kitchen with most items arriving family-style on platters. There are impossibly light, yeasty "lagniappe" rolls served with dishes of creamy butter enhanced thickly with Poirier's cane syrup; porcelain tureens filled with briny shrimp and okra gumbo; crisp fried oysters alongside luscious potato salad; a marriage of vine ripened tomatoes, cucumbers and purple pole beans with an acerbic bite signaling their very, very recent departure from the vine; pan-fried lump crab cakes bound with

**Chef Melissa Martin (right), originally from Chauvin, cooks her family's recipes at her weekly Mosquito Supper Club in New Orleans. Martin also offers a private immersive dining experience aboard her small cypress houseboat in the Atchafalaya Basin.** On the boat or at the club, diners are introduced, through stories, to the people who shaped Martin's cuisine.



shrimp paste rather than bread; and blackberry dumplings with bowls of ice cream made with Pop Rouge soda. As glorious as this sounds, it was another item, not listed on the evening's set menu that defined the experience: every 20 minutes or so someone, often Martin herself, would arrive from the kitchen bearing a platter of enormous, fried soft-

shelled shrimp, a delicacy rarely seen in a restaurant setting. These were doled out, one by one, with tongs.

There's only so much people can reasonably be expected to willingly share.

The abundance of those soft-shelled shrimp are a clear indication of Martin's close ties to the seafood-gathering community — those shrimp were caught by her cousin. She says the dinners she hosts in her small, experimental space just outside of Central City are about telling the story of the shrimpers, oyster fishermen, crabbers and farmers that define her native Cajun cuisine and the life she lived growing up on Bayou Petite Calliou in Chauvin, a place that will soon disappear due to coastal erosion. Her recipes are those she learned at the knees of her mother, aunts and grandmother while enjoying a childhood on the Gulf within an extended family that made its living and took its sustenance from the bounty of the waters.

**Martin, 39, hosts reservation-only dinners in New Orleans most Thursday and Friday nights, September through May. She hosts intimate dinners and luncheons on her houseboat, located in the Atchafalaya Basin in Henderson.**



## CLASSIC CAJUN STUFFED CRABS

In a food processor, pulse **1½ pounds wild Gulf shrimp** (boiled, peeled and deveined) until they are ground into a sticky paste; set aside.

Add **2 tablespoons unsalted butter** to a large skillet over medium heat. Add **2 large yellow onions (diced)** and sauté until soft and translucent, about 10 minutes. Add **1 small bell pepper (diced)**, **1 large stalk celery (diced)**, and **6 cloves minced garlic (about ¼ cup)** and sauté until soft, 10 to 15 minutes.

Add **1 cup heavy cream**, reduce heat to low, and continue cooking until liquid is reduced by almost three quarters, 10-15 minutes. Remove mixture from heat, add reserved ground shrimp, and stir to combine; allow to cool.

In a large bowl, combine the cooled shrimp mixture, **2 pounds fresh lump crabmeat** (carefully picked over for shells and cartilage), **1 tablespoon salt**, **¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper**, **¼ teaspoon cayenne (or more to taste)** and **1 tablespoon Louisiana brand hot sauce**. Add a generous squeeze of **lemon juice**, then gently fold in **1 bunch scallions (green and white parts, finely chopped)** and **1 bunch flat-leaf parsley (leaves only, finely chopped—reserve 1 tablespoon for garnish)**. Cover with plastic wrap; refrigerate for several hours or overnight so that flavors can marry.

Taste the shrimp-crab mixture. Adjust the seasonings, adding lemon juice, as desired.

Stuff the mixture into **12 cleaned blue crab shells (if available) or form into 12 cakes**; lightly dust each shell or cake with **2 cups cornmeal** and set aside.

Add **1 tablespoon of vegetable oil** to a large skillet, preferably cast iron, and heat until the oil sizzles when a pinch of cornmeal is tossed in. Working in batches and adding more oil as needed, fry the stuffed crabs, meat side down, or the cakes until golden brown, flipping halfway through, 8 to 10 minutes in all. Add a touch of butter to each. Garnish with **reserved parsley** and serve immediately with **hot, cooked, popcorn rice** (Martin likes Baker Farms Gourmet Popcorn Rice, available at campbellfarms.com) with **pats of butter**.

Makes 12 stuffed crabs or crab cakes (plan to serve two per person as an entree)

# TRIED AND TRUE TRADITIONS

**MATTHEW MORELAND WANTED IN. SINCE 2005** the New Orleans-based general practice attorney had watched his best friend, Jarred Zeringue, either create or invest in successful businesses.

His chance finally came in 2015 when Zeringue approached his old friend about going in on Wayne Jacob's Smokehouse & Restaurant, a heritage business ready for a fresh start.

"I was finally able to get on the right boat," Moreland, 45, says.

Founded in 1950 by Nolan Jacob, the smokehouse produced artisan-smoked meats and fresh sausage that they ultimately shipped worldwide while maintaining a restaurant serving traditional Cajun and Creole dishes made with products from the smokehouse. Zeringue's family had shopped at the smokehouse for generations.

Upon assuming ownership of the business, Moreland and Zeringue, who serves as executive chef of the restaurant, took a minimally-invasive approach. They closed for only two days so as not to disrupt the habits of the community it served, instead sneaking in after hours to paint and make physical improvements to the restaurant. They also retained all of the employees who

**Matthew Moreland and chef Jarred Zeringue purchased the Wayne Jacob's Smokehouse & Restaurant in 2015. They are preserving the original Jacob's flavors while adding their personal touch to the menu, building and backyard where they keep chickens and have planted fruit trees.**



wanted to stay on, many of whom were the previous owner's family members.

Zeringue, 37, a serial restaurant entrepreneur and chef who also owns EAT!, Vacherie and Cafe Conti restaurants in the French Quarter, turned to his family farm upbringing in Vacherie and his grandmother

Winnie's recipe files as sources for the menu enhancements at the smokehouse's restaurant.

The restaurant is open only for weekday lunch and a Sunday brunch that showcases Bloody Marys made with in-house smoked tomatoes, onions and garlic. Deviled eggs are topped with tiny slivers of house-smoked bacon, rounds of roasted andouille sausage "chips" are served with Creole mustard, smoked tasso enhances creamy macaroni and cheese and the dessert list is comprised entirely of his grandmother's scratch-made treats. Banana Cream Cheese or Chocolate Chip Buttermilk pie, anyone?

Lining the restaurant's shelves are products from Zeringue's Circle Z Foods line of house-made vinegars, condiments, pepper jelly, smoked salts, salsas and roasted fruit butters, all presented in elegant, minimalist packaging. There are cartons of fresh yard eggs for sale from the variety of chickens, both common and exotic, that now live in the backyard, merrily feeding off of peppers and leftover donuts from a

shop down the street. The result is ultra-rich deep golden yolks with a slight peppery kick. Moreland and Zeringue have planted numerous fruit and nut-bearing trees and vines including muscadine, Moreland paper-shell pecan (Moreland's grandfather patented the variety, a result of grafting a paper shell and a candy pecan root stock together), avocado, fig and olive. Lines of numerous varieties of citrus trees, including a pink lemonade variety with vibrant blush-colored flesh, hold the promise of a lovely allée when they mature. The wealth from the garden will be used in the restaurant and in the Circle Z Foods line.

The friends are also investors in Two Run Farms and built a smokehouse at the Mississippi facility that will be used to increase Wayne Jacob's smoked meat production for commercial distribution to upscale supermarkets. The products will be free of fillers, preservatives, nitrates and gluten.

**Wayne Jacob's Smokehouse & Restaurant,  
769 A West 5th St., LaPlace, 985-652-9990, [wjsmokehouse.com](http://wjsmokehouse.com)**



## WINNIE'S DEVIL'S FOOD CAKE

with blonde fudge frosting

### DEVIL'S FOOD CAKE

Preheat an oven to 350 F. Grease and flour two round 9-inch cake pans. Set aside.

Sift 3 cups all purpose flour and 3 teaspoons baking powder together. Set aside.

Cream 2 sticks salted butter (softened) and 2 cups sugar together. Add 4 eggs one at a time, beating thoroughly to incorporate. Add flour and 1 cup whole milk alternately, beating until thoroughly incorporated. Add 2 teaspoons vanilla and 1 teaspoon best-quality cocoa powder, blending thoroughly to incorporate.

Scrape the batter into the prepared cake pans. Bake until a cake tester or knife blade comes out clean, about 30 minutes.

Cool the cakes for 20 minutes then invert onto a wire rack and cool completely.

### BLONDE FUDGE FROSTING

Combine 2 cups sugar, 1 cup evaporated milk and 1 stick salted butter in a saucepot over medium heat and cook stirring, until the mixture reaches the hard ball stage (250-265 F). Remove the mixture from the heat and beat by hand with a whisk until the mixture begins to thicken. Spread on the cake at once.

Serves 8