

GRACRUMS



EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT
ACADIANA'S FAVORITE LOCAL SNACK

BY CHERÉ COEN PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA ESSEX BRADLEY



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THE CAJUN BOUCHERIE DATES BACK CENTURIES, a communal hog butchering where careful attempts were made to use every inch of the animal to adequately feed the coterie. Usually held in cold weather months, the boucherie produced items for backbone stew, sausage such as andouille and boudin, ham hocks, bacon and pork roasts, among other pork products.

Even the skin of the pig was used. Called grattons in French, or by the more popular name of crackling or cracklin', South Louisiana residents drop the pig skin with fat and sometimes meat attached into vats of hog lard. The frying time varies

per cook but most know cracklings are done when they pop and form "eyes" and float to the surface. Some cooks pull the cracklings from the fat and allow them to cool before deep-frying them a second time at a higher temperature. Once doused with seasoning, the final product becomes a crispy, tasty snack.

Cracklings are cooked throughout the South, but the fatty pork nibble is especially popular in Acadiana. Fresh cracklings under heated lamps or those packaged to go can be found in both meat markets and grocery stores and at your local convenience shops or gas stations.

Don's chicken cracklins

"Crackling gets under your skin," wrote George Graham in his cookbook *Acadiana Table: Cajun and Creole Home Cooking from the Heart of Louisiana*. "It burrows deep into your psyche and finds a portal lobe to a sensory connection you never knew existed. In the real sense of the word, it's addictive. The fact that most every little store around Acadiana sells pork crackling at the register bodes well for how far this porky addiction has spread." In that spirit, we huddled with University of Louisiana at Lafayette history professor and Cajun cuisine expert Robert Carrier to bring you this guide to Acadiana's favorite snack.



THE PROCESS

BOUCHERIES STILL EXIST, BUT FOR THE EVERYDAY COOK CREATING CRACKLINGS CAN BE A TOUGH — AND HEAT INTENSIVE — JOB

ROCKY SONNIER, WHO RUNS BAYOU CABINS in Breaux Bridge, creates batches of cracklings for his bed and breakfast visitors, serving them up for the first meal of the day. The former winner of numerous crackling cook-offs through the years, Sonnier begins with four gallons of hog lard and 75 pounds of pig skins, slicing the pork into long slabs and cooking them for an hour and 45 minutes in the boiling grease.

“When they start floating and blistering, what we call eyes emerging, we take them out,” Sonnier explained.

He then raises the grease to about 400 degrees and drops the cracklings back in for about a minute or two. In the second round they pop like popcorn, Sonnier said, and that means they’re done. Removed from the boiling fat with a slotted spoon, Sonnier places the cracklings on newspaper and seasons them with salt, red pepper and a little garlic.

Sonnier learned how to cook cracklings from his elders 35 years ago.

“In 1985, everyone had a different way of cooking them,” he said.



They also used cured ham skins.

“We cooked them [cured ham skins] for years and they were the best cracklings you would ever eat,” Sonnier said. “Now, everyone sells pork bellies.”

New Orleans-based Cochon restaurant owner and James Beard Award-winning Chef Donald Link, who hails from southwest Louisiana, prefers cracklings made from a pig’s back fat.

“The skin cracks when fried, leaving a juicy pocket of pork fat underneath that

squirts in your mouth when you bite into it,” Link wrote in his cookbook, “Real Cajun.” “But these days cracklings are mostly made from the pork belly, which is actually more flavorful (and a bit less fatty) because they still have a big fatty chunk of meat attached under the skin.”

Graham suggests that it’s all about acquiring “the right amount of skin, fat and meat” from a good butcher who will cut the fat into strips. (Note: Cooking cracklings is not advisable for the average

“The skin cracks when fried, leaving a juicy pocket of pork fat underneath that squirts in your mouth when you bite into it”

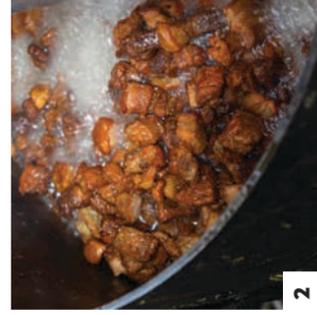
home chef.) Large pots, preferable black iron, are required for boiling the lard, and the popping grease and overwhelming aroma of pig skin cooking make this endeavor more appropriate for an outdoor affair. The process can be so hot and dirty, TV personality Mike Rowe visited Bayou Cabins to cook cracklings with Rocky Sonnier’s son Baylon Sonnier and his godson Eli Breaux for an episode of Discovery Channel’s “Dirty Jobs.” “The trio got both dirty and greasy.



1

Cut up pork belly.

Pork belly consisting of skin, fat or meat may be cut into little squares, although some cut pork into long slices and throw them in the grease.



2

First fry low.

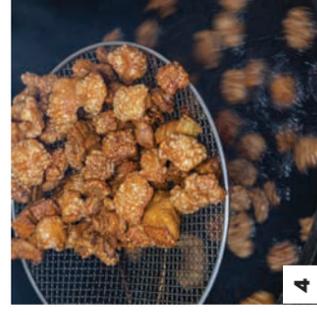
Deep fry cracklings in hot lard or grease until they begin to float on top and produce what Cajuns and Creoles call “eyes” or blisters.



3

Drain.

Scoop the cracklings from the hot grease with a slotted spoon, then place them on newspaper or paper towels to drain off the excess grease.



4

Next fry high.

Raise the temperature of the grease and drop the cooled cracklings in for a second time but only for a minute or two, until they pop like popcorn.



5

Drain and season.

Scoop out the cracklings with a slotted spoon and drain them a second time on paper, then add salt and pepper or a favorite seasoning. Enjoy!



WHAT MAKES CRACKLINGS SO GOOD?

The key to producing tasty cracklings starts with the frying. Leave the cracklings in lard too long and they’ll turn dark brown and burn. The fat should remain soft and chewy while the outer skin is crispy when all is said and done.

“I look for the softness and the hardness,” said Desiree Ardoin, the spokesperson for the annual Port Barre Cracklin Festival. “There’s a happy medium in there.”

Seasoning also plays a role. Most contestants in the festival’s cook-off season their cracklings with salt

and pepper, but many have used vinegar, cayenne and their own seasoning blends, Ardoin explained.

“It just depends on what the judge’s taste buds are and what the judges are looking for,” Ardoin said of the winners’ final products.

HOW THEY MAKE THEM THINGS

We’re not showing you this so you can try it at home, but for the sake of curiosity, here’s how the pros do it

THE SEARCH

CRACKLINGS CAN BE FOUND ALMOST ANYWHERE IN ACADIANA, AND USUALLY ARE SOLD AT THE SAME MARKETS THAT SPECIALIZE IN BOUDIN SAUSAGE



PORT BARRE'S CRACKLING FAME MAY HAVE begun with Adolph "The Boss" and Yvonne Bourque. In 1948, the couple began selling vegetables, meats and other food products from their one-bedroom house. Over time, the business grew, evolving into Bourque's Supermarket, which became well known for its specialty meats, boudin and pork cracklings, not to mention its famous jalapeno sausage and cheese bread.



Cracklings from Bourque's

Today, Bourque's is owned by third-generation family member Shannon Bourque, who still cooks up the store's cracklings using a 38-year-old recipe and a unique seasoning mix. Bourque's cracklings have nabbed first-, second- and third-place awards several times at the Port Barre Cracklin Festival.

Bourque chooses his cracklings from the belly of the pig, cooking up pieces of skin, fat and meat in hog lard into

almost three-inch cubes. After almost an hour in the heat, Bourque's cracklings emerge moist with a nice crust on top, Bourque said.

The supermarket cooks up cracklings daily in 30-gallon pots before the sun rises. They add their own Cajun spices to the mix and sell the fresh cracklings in the store throughout the day.

"I keep cooking mine fresh all day," he said. "To me, that's a big deal – freshness."

Bourque started working for the family business 30 years ago, straight out of college. This past January, he purchased the business and expanded into the Lafayette market, opening its latest location last August on Johnston Street.

Over in Scott, known as the "Boudin Capital of the World," cracklings may be just as popular. Both boudin and cracklings are top sellers at Don's Specialty Meats.

Don's has been cooking their cracklings "the old school way" since 1993. Owner Mark Cole explained how they start cooking pork skins at 2 a.m. daily,

then place the cooked product into a cooler. When it's time to sell, they drop the cooled pieces into 350-degree heat "to pop them" and then douse them with Don's seasoning to sell the finished product to the public fresh.

Don's offers pork skins four different ways: hog cracklings, chicken cracklings, pork rinds and crackling crumbs, which customers use in cooking dishes, such as cornbread. They ship their crackling variety nationwide with California one of the biggest markets, Cole said.

That's just two of the many establishments throughout Acadiana that cook and sell cracklings. But, don't bypass the smaller players. Sometimes a filling station or convenience store may serve up the tastiest Cajun snack.

vendors selling traditional pork food products.

The best day to attend the festivals is during the cook-offs, said Desiree Ardoin.

the spokesperson for the Port Barre Cracklin Festival.

For the Port Barre event, for instance, vendors and contestants alike will be stirring pots of goodness on the final day.

"Sunday is the best time to visit the festival because everyone will be cooking cracklings and everyone will be on top of their game," Ardoin said.

CRACKLIN FESTIVALS

Food is so celebrated in Louisiana that there is at least one festival per indigenous food. Naturally, two festivals honor cracklings in Louisiana: The three-day Port Barre Cracklin Festival, sponsored by the Port Barre Lions Club, is held every November, and for two days in April things get poppin' in Parks for the annual Parks Cracklin Cook-off.

Over in Basile, the Louisiana Swine Festival has been celebrating everything pig, which includes cracklings, since 1966. In addition to the pageant, greasy pig contest and boudin eating competition, there's a cook-off in four categories — pot, pit, Cajun microwave and cracklings.

In Mansura, the equally long-running Cochon de Lait Festival features

WHERE TO GET 'EM

Here's a sampler of South Louisiana establishments offering hot, fresh cracklings

B&O Kitchen

SULPHUR
337-625-4637

There's nothing like hot cracklings on a cold morning, fresh off the grease at B&O Kitchen. The establishment also produces wonderful sausage, hog's head cheese and boudin.

The Best Stop Supermarket

SCOTT 337-233-5805

For years, folks have been planning trips along Interstate 10 to include a pause at Best Stop in Scott. The supermarket started in 1986 and is known for its boudin, cracklings and specialty meats.

Bourgeois Meat Market

THIBODAUX
985-447-7128

This meat market takes the cake for history. Started in 1891, the market continues to sell its unique beef jerky, tasso, boudin and cracklings. They ship their cracklings too.

Bourque's

LAFAYETTE
AND PORT BARRE
337-224-9305 AND
337-585-6261

Bourque's love affair with cracklings hails back decades, which is why the establishment has won numerous awards at the annual Port Barre Cracklin Festival. Bourque's cooks its cracklings fresh daily.

Don's Specialty Meats

SCOTT
AND CARENCRO
337-234-2528

Every day at 2 a.m., employees arrive to cook cracklings. Once the market doors open, the cooled cracklings are dropped into a fresh pot of lard and served to the public.

Earl's Cajun Market

LAFAYETTE
337-237-5501

Visit for the plate lunch specials, their boudin and specialty meats, but don't leave without sampling Earl's tasty cracklings. They ship as well.

Famous Foods

LAKE CHARLES
337-439-7000

We love Famous Foods for the barbecue and plate lunch specials but the cracklings, cooked up fresh from the back kitchen, are a winner as well.

Rabideaux's Sausage Kitchen

IOWA

The sights and smells of fried foods, specialty meats and, of course, cracklings will greet diners when they enter Rabideaux's and spot the many items inside. Plate lunches are served weekly.

The Sausage Link

SULPHUR
337-528-6900

This family-owned meat market accompanies LeBieu's Landing restaurant in Sulphur, but while diners may choose the restaurant at night, folks visit the market in the early mornings for hot boudin and cracklings.

THE MENU

WHILE MOST PEOPLE ARE ACCUSTOMED TO ENJOYING CRACKLINGS AS A STANDALONE TREAT OR PERHAPS IN CORNBREAD, MORE AND MORE CHEFS ARE INCORPORATING IT INTO DISHES

SANJAY MAHARAJ LEFT NEW YORK TO OPEN a restaurant with his partner, Kevin Robin, an Arnaudville native. Robin's family owns Russell's Catering in the heart of town, so Robin was no stranger to Cajun cuisine. Maharaj, on the other hand, was in for an eye-opener.

For one thing, he had never sampled cracklings before, but over time learned to love the crunchy pork snack. Which is why Arnaudville's Little Big Cup restaurant serves up a crackling-crust mac and cheese burger. The cheese patties are deep fried with the crackling outer layer, then placed on top of a 100-percent beef, flame-grilled burger served with onion fries. The crackling concoction is also offered as mac and cheese ball for appetizers.

"We wanted to put a mac and cheese burger on the menu but make it local," Maharaj explained. "We had to make it

A CRACKLINGS PRIMER

Many people confuse cracklings with pork rinds, a similar pork snack, so here are a few definitions to clarify terms

Pork Rind

When butchering pigs, the skin — known as pork rind — may be fried quickly in lard and eaten. These puffy, curly pork rinds are usually sold in a bag and appear as light as popcorn.

Cracklings/ Cracklins

If a layer of fat and/or meat is included in a cut of pork skin and deep fried, it is considered cracklings. These are usually seasoned after being fried.

Fatback

The pork meat from the back of a pig.



Chicharrónes

A similar version of pork rinds that's popular in Mexico, but it can also refer to cracklings, usually consisting of fried pork belly.

DID YOU KNOW?

5 facts about cracklins

1

They may contain no carbs due to its protein but pork crackling is high in fats and sodium. It's a good idea to eat cracklings in moderation.

2

For lagniappe, peel and cut yams into half-inch slices and fry in the crackling lard. Sprinkle with cinnamon after cooked, then serve.

3

Acadiana-born, New Orleans Chef Donald Link serves cracklings on top of grits and pork roasts but also mixed into cornbread batter.

4

In England, they cook up a similar dish to our pork rinds called pork scratchings, which are made from shank rind and cooked only once.

5

Louisians aren't the only crackling lovers. Mexicans love pork rinds, known as chicharrón, which may also be made from chicken, mutton or beef.