Red Beans and Rebuilding: An Iconic Dish, Memory and Culture in New Orleans  
By David Beriss


Red Beans and Rice
Quarté red beans, quarté rice,
Little piece of salt meat to
make it taste nice, Lend
me the paper and tell me
the time, When papa
passes by he’ll pay you
the dime.

    New Orleans jump rope jingle (Bienvenue and Walker 2008: 205, citing
    John Churchill Chase’s book Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children
    … and Other Streets of New Orleans [1949] 2001: 225)

Honey, and I just love me some red beans. This is a red bean city
here. That’s it. If you don’t have no red beans you just out.

Willie Mae Seaton, owner of Willie Mae’s Scotch
House, New Orleans (Roahen 2006)

In late 2005, about a month after Hurricane Katrina’s floods devastated New Or-leans, I found myself wandering the aisles of an upscale grocery store in northern Virginia, thinking about what to make for dinner. We were still unable to return to New Orleans and I wanted to make a dish that would remind everyone of home. Red beans and rice, with some nice smoky sausage, seemed like just the thing to please adults and children alike. It was late afternoon and I did not have the three or four hours I needed to make the dish properly, but I figured that that would not be a problem. In New Orleans, when you need to make red beans at the last min-ute, you heat up a can or two of Blue Runner Red Beans, make some rice, sauté your sausage, and you have dinner. Blue Runner is a convincing alternative to the slow-cooked dish most people prefer and, in any case, the company is local, based in Gonzales, Louisiana, about halfway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Everyone falls back on it from time to time. I searched the store for Blue Runner beans. Or any prepared beans that would do the job. No luck. Nor would I have
any luck in other stores over the next few months. Blue Runner, it turns out, is not distributed nationally.

It was then that I began to understand the extent to which red beans and rice, a seemingly mundane weekly dish, is a distinctive local tradition. It does not seem like much, after all. Just beans, pork, some spices, some vegetables, slow-cooked and served with rice. Unlike seafood gumbo, shrimp remoulade, or pecan-crusted drum, red beans and rice is not likely to inspire a tourist to write home or a food critic to praise the city as a culinary destination. It is not on the menu in many of the fancier local restaurants. It is, however, arguably one of the core dishes New Orleanians are likely to identify as a sign of home. Neighborhood restaurants often serve it, especially as a Monday lunch special (see Figure 13.1). It is frequently made as staff lunch or dinner in the upscale places. School cafeterias serve it on Mondays, accompanied by corn bread. Families eat it at home on Mondays too.

In the weeks and months following the hurricane and floods, some of New Orleans’s most famous chefs set up outside their shuttered restaurants and prepared large quantities of red beans and rice for first responders, journalists, and the few remaining locals. The national and local media recounted stories about exiled New Orleans residents who sought to recapture a bit of home by making the iconic dish, only to discover that many of the ingredients they commonly used—brands of beans, pickled pork—were not easily available in other states. Pundits concerned about

![Figure 13.1](image-url) Monday red beans, rice, and sausage at Mandina’s Restaurant, New Orleans. Photo by the author.
the city’s future speculated about whether or not the neighborhood restaurants that kept red beans on their menus would ever be rebuilt. In planning meetings, political events, and art installations, red beans and rice became a metaphor for home and an index of the city’s ability to sustain a distinctive culture. Three years after the disaster, the return of restaurant reviews to the city’s daily paper, graded by red beans rather than stars, was widely noted as a sign that New Orleans was definitively on the road to recovery (Anderson 2008; Severson 2008). In their post-Katrina exile, red beans and rice was apparently the dish people missed the most, but it also became a kind of explicit symbol of New Orleans distinctiveness and authenticity (Fitzmorris 2010: 161; Bienvenue and Walker 2008: 205; Roahen 2008: 255).

This chapter explores the reasons why that symbol resonates so strongly in the city. Beyond the deaths and the physical destruction—it is worth recalling that more than one thousand people died and 80 percent of the city flooded, much of it sitting in toxic waters for nearly three weeks—there was a deep concern that the cultural fabric of New Orleans could not recover and debate over whether or not the city was worth reviving. American political leaders openly questioned whether rebuilding made sense. Some of the arguments against New Orleans were framed in pragmatic terms, with critics asserting (erroneously) that the city was mostly below sea level and thus indefensible against floods. Others took a kind of neoliberal approach, suggesting that the city and its population had long lost the ability to compete in the rough-and-tumble world of the free market. The city’s residents were perceived to be poor, dependent on welfare, and unproductive. Images and rumors from the disaster zone suggested a city in chaos and insurrection. New Orleans seemed, in its destruction, positively un-American.

As they watched this debate unfold, local journalists, activists, and elected officials tried to respond to the critics. The city, they pointed out, was not the victim of a “natural” disaster, but had been devastated by the failure of federally built and maintained flood control systems. The city’s economy, they claimed, was not only competitive in particular areas, like the port, oil services, and tourism, it played an essential role in the U.S. economy. They admitted that the city did suffer from a wide range of social problems, including high levels of poverty, elevated crime rates, and a poorly performing public education system. These were problems, they pointed out, that existed in many American cities.

However, the core arguments made in favor of New Orleans focused on cultural issues and suggested a complex relationship between the city and the rest of the country. The “Creole vernacular holy trinity” of music, architecture, and food described by Nick Spitzer (2006: 310) was invoked to legitimize the city’s culture as something distinct from, yet also essential to, American identity. Although steeped in poverty, this was the culture that had given birth to jazz. It was the home of particular forms of African American art and performance, from second line parades to Mardi Gras Indians (Breunlin and Regis 2006). New Orleans was a city where Creole craftsmen still worked to produce architectural masterpieces. A large (and still
growing) literature appeared defending the city’s culture and arguing about its place in the larger American context (Piazza 2005; Abrahams et al. 2006; Chin Music Press 2006; McNulty 2008; Baum 2009; Rose 2005; among many others). Some leaders insisted that this culture represented a valuable national asset that should not be squandered. Others claimed New Orleans constituted a living cultural critique of America’s fast-paced, homogenizing consumerist society. Whichever view one took—and many people took both—the relationship between New Orleans and the United States seemed surprisingly unclear.

In what follows, I examine how food, in general, and red beans and rice, in particular, is used to think through the relationship between New Orleans and (the rest of) the United States. This begins with demands for recognition of the city’s distinctive culture and, as I have argued elsewhere, for control over legitimate representations and authorized representatives of that culture (*reference removed for Coe Prize entry). Ideas about culture and about who may represent it have long provided an important set of symbolic tools for thinking about a wide variety of issues in New Orleans, including ethnicity and race, class conflicts, and even the spatial organization of the city (Breunlin and Regis 2006; Campanella 2008; Gotham 2007; Hirsch and Logsdon 1992). In New Orleans, as elsewhere, people self-consciously draw on culture and history to claim distinctiveness and as a way of controlling how they relate to groups with competitive claims or to the state (Adams 2006; Armstrong-Fumero 2009; Dávila 2004; Saada- Ophir 2006). Anthropologists have called attention to the way in which groups increasingly use culture as a marketable asset, sometimes going so far as to assert that without self-conscious cultural marketing, some identities may in fact cease to exist (Bunten 2008; Cameron 2008; Castañeda 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; see also Preston-Werner this volume). This is true in New Orleans as well, where efforts to persuade locals of the distinctiveness of the city and of the need to market it as unique have a long history, drawing on slogans like “New Orleans—America’s Most Interesting City” as early as the 1920s (Gotham 2007; Stanonis 2006). In the wake of the 2005 disaster, confronted with an apparently hostile neoliberal policy context that threatened to undermine the city’s very existence, claims about culture and about how to promote it became especially urgent (Lipsitz 2006). Determining the nature of the relationship between the United States and New Orleans seemed like a critical matter. Is New Orleans the home of America’s “Creole soul” (Abrahams et al. 2006) or is it, as journalist Dan Baum has claimed, “a city-sized act of civil disobedience” (2009: xiii)?

While post-Katrina analyses of the city’s cultural relationship with the United States have focused on many different aspects of local culture, few have taken a culinary perspective. This seems odd, given the long-standing role food has played in defining the city (Beriss 2007; Stanonis 2009). Certainly, the relationship between cuisine, place, and cultural identity has been explored by scholars (see Appadurai 1988; Avieli 2005; Bell and Valentine 1997; Caldwell 2002; Penfold 2002; Pilcher 1996; Sutton 2001; Wilk 2006, along with the other chapters in this volume for
Food has been an important part of many instances of cultural commodification, ranging from beer in postsocialist Georgia (Manning and Uplisashvili 2007) and wine in Languedoc (Barthel-Bouchier and Clough 2005), to foie gras and lardo di Colonnata within the European Union (DeSoucy 2010; Leitch 2003). Each of these cases highlights efforts to use food to define group identity, determine whose use of the food can be authorized as authentic, and assert control over its representation. Further, in each of these cases, food is used to stand for the relationship between one group (a city, region, or country) and some larger dominant institution (see also Caldwell 2004; Roseman 2004; Wilk 2006). In what follows, I show how red beans and rice, and cuisine more generally, has provided key symbols for working out the relationship—essential soul or cultural critique—between post-Katrina New Orleans and the rest of the United States.

**Practical Mythology**

It is difficult to untangle food from symbolism in New Orleans. Food has long played an important role in defining the city as a distinct place within the United States. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, the city had developed a reputation as a place where residents were unusually fond of food and where visitors could expect to eat exceptionally well. Anthony Stanonis (2009) has shown how the development of cookbooks starting at the end of the nineteenth century, efforts to promote the city to tourists, and the representation of the city’s cuisine in popular culture worked to associate New Orleans with a particularly well-developed culinary culture (cf. Tucker et al. 2009). As I have argued elsewhere (*reference removed for Coe prize entry*), food is a key symbol people in New Orleans deploy in efforts to sort out any number of social fractures, including class and race. One central element that makes food an effective symbol for New Orleanians is a sense that they all share in a common cuisine. The dishes many home cooks prepare resemble the food available in restaurants, even fine dining restaurants with world-class reputations. New Orleans eaters can be expected to be knowledgeable about the food they find in local restaurants, and chefs are well aware that they are cooking for a public that is likely to know how to make a roux and to have very distinct ideas about what gumbo ought to look like. This certainly distinguishes New Orleans from much of the rest of the United States, where restaurants are increasingly unlikely to have any connection to local foodways (Dirks 2011). Since the 1970s, many chefs in American fine dining restaurants have promoted the use of seasonal and local ingredients, a movement that has since expanded into markets and home kitchens around the country. New Orleans is no stranger to this movement. However, when chefs and food activists in New Orleans promote local and seasonal foods, they most often do so by linking those foods to the city’s history and people. Being a “locavore” in New Orleans requires a knowledge of the city’s identity and history, as well as an understanding of seasons and ingredients. Food provides New
Orleanians with a very powerful set of symbols with which to sort out their differences with each other and with the rest of the country.

Red beans and rice are central to both the practice and mythology of New Orleans cuisine. Red beans are hard to avoid if you live in New Orleans. It is rare to attend a party that does not feature red beans and rice, either warming on the stove or simmering in a crockpot. Similarly, massive quantities of red beans are consumed around Mardi Gras, when attendance at parades makes it difficult to find time for daily cooking. Above all, red beans and rice is a weekly ritual, most often consumed on Mondays. Neighborhood restaurants that run it as a weekly special are most likely to do so on that day of the week, accompanied by sausages, fried veal cutlets, or fried pork chops. It is often the main course in school cafeterias on Mondays, accompanied by corn bread. Home cooks are likely to make it on Mondays as well. The main story invoked to explain this tradition focuses on the idea that Monday was, before the advent of washing machines, washing day. Red beans could be left to simmer for long hours mostly unattended, while the washing was completed. This is the story you will most often hear from locals. It appears in cookbooks with nearly every recipe for red beans and rice, as well as in memoirs, biographies, and even novels (see Leatham and Nossiter 2009; Roahen 2008; Collin and Collin 1987 for examples).

A second part of the story invokes the frequent use of a cracked hambone in the red beans. Said to come from the Sunday ham, the hambone provides flavoring and, as the marrow leaks into the beans, a certain unctuousness. The need to use the Sunday hambone could also explain the Monday red bean tradition. Of course, the two explanations are not mutually exclusive. Local grocery stores set aside hambones to sell to people without a leftover from Sunday. But not everyone participates in the hambone tradition, turning instead to smoked ham hocks, tasso (a seasoned smoked pork shoulder), boiled ham or, especially, “pickle meat,” or pickled pork. All of these can be found in the same section of local grocery stores as the hambone, along with the other ingredients commonly used in the dish. All can be used to season the red beans, and some cooks use more than one in their recipe. Food writer John Thorne (1996: 291) condemns those who attempt this as “a case of wanting to be everyone’s friend and ending up no one’s.”

The beans are apparently ordinary red kidney beans. I say “apparently” because virtually everyone in New Orleans uses Camellia brand red beans (see Figure 13.2), which are packaged by L. H. Hayward and Company in Harahan, a suburb of New Orleans. One source claims that Camellia beans carry 90 percent of the regional market for red beans, which seems quite reasonable (Leatham and Nossiter 2009: 138), since it is rare to see any other brand on store shelves. As many exiled New Orleanians discovered and lamented after Katrina, Camellia is not national—it is mostly available in Louisiana and Mississippi—but the beans can be ordered online. Although I did not attempt to use other beans while in exile, I should note that one local red beans evangelist, food writer Pableaux Johnson, has been quoted dismissing the very idea that Camellia beans are distinctive (Roahen 2008: 246).
Worse, when Sara Roahen, another local food writer, called up the company to see what distinguished its beans from others, she was told they are just ordinary kidney beans (Roahen 2008: 246).

Virtually every recipe for red beans and rice begins with the Creole mirepoix—it is called the “holy trinity” in New Orleans—of diced onion, celery, and bell peppers. This trinity provides the flavor background for many New Orleans dishes. The trinity is sautéed, sometimes nearly carmelized, in some kind of fat (oil, butter, or bacon fat) before the addition of meat, beans, garlic—the pope of Creole cuisine—and water. Bay leaves, cayenne pepper, salt, black pepper, and thyme are common additional spices. The whole thing is left to cook slowly for hours, until the beans more or less collapse and the entire dish becomes more creamy than soupy. The process is often encouraged by squashing some of the beans along the side of the pot and stirring them back in.

The history of the dish is open to debate. The kidney bean is an original product of the Americas, adopted by Europeans by the seventeenth or eighteenth century and used in any number of dishes that somewhat resemble the dish consumed today in New Orleans (Albala 2007). The combination of beans cooked with pork and

Figure 13.2 Camellia brand red beans dominate the New Orleans market. Photo by the author.
sausage can be found in France and in Spain, two of the countries that have contributed significantly to the population and culture of New Orleans. Rice is clearly of African origin and its cultivation and consumption accompanied the rise of slavery in the Americas (Carney 2001; Twitty this volume). The preparation of rice in Louisiana is thus rooted in African practices. Rice has been a major cash crop in Louisiana since the mid-nineteenth century. There are a number of rice dishes made in Louisiana that are clearly of African origin, including rice calas, a kind of rice fritter historically sold in the French market by itinerant African American women, and boiled rice accompanies many of the standard dishes served in New Orleans.

One distinctive characteristic of New Orleans rice and beans is that the two main components are cooked and served separately (even if eaters often mix them together on the plate). Some authors note that this manner of preparing the dish resembles practices in at least one region of Cuba, a region that was heavily populated by Haitians who had fled the revolution there (Leathem and Nossiter 2009: 137). Many of those same Haitians (both slaveowners and slaves) eventually came to New Orleans, contributing to the local cuisine and, perhaps, to the preferred way of preparing beans and rice (cf. Sublette 2008). This link is part of what defines New Orleans as a Creole city, as I discuss in the next section. It is unclear just how long it took for the dish to become established, but a familiar recipe does appear in one of the earliest New Orleans cookbooks, *The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book*, in 1901 (2002: 209), which also notes that “the Creoles hold that the boys and girls who are raised on beans and rice and beef will be among the strongest and sturdiest of people” (2002: 208). The *New Orleans City Guide*, published in 1938 by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Project Administration, also provides a recipe for red beans and rice, adding that the dish is “one of the most popular of all Creole cuisine” (2009: 171). Red beans and rice are understood to be a Creole dish, central to New Orleans cuisine and much less frequently consumed in the rest of south Louisiana or nearby Mississippi. Chef Paul Prudhomme, a Cajun from Opelousas, Louisiana, west of New Orleans, whose cooking brought a great deal of attention to the city in the mid-1970s, has noted that until he moved to the city, he was unaware that “red beans were a cultural phenomenon” (Leathem and Nossiter 2009: 130).²

The fact that the consumption of red beans and rice is a weekly ritual for many in New Orleans gives the dish unusual symbolic power. The mythology surrounding red beans and rice provides ample resources for those who would use it to make claims about the city and its culture. As a local dish, red beans and rice allows New Orleans residents to lay claim to cultural distinctiveness in an apparently homogenizing America. Along with other foods, the dish is often invoked as a sign of the city’s historical ties to the Caribbean and Central America and of an ongoing resistance to assimilation into the United States. The putative “slowness” of red beans and rice, requiring hours to prepare, is seen as a sign of the city’s resistance to the forces of neoliberalism. In a city sharply divided by class and ethnicity, red beans and rice is represented as a comfort food that crosses those lines. It is something that
nearly everyone can enjoy, both at home and in restaurants. From tourist propaganda to local cookbooks and even popular history, the discourse around red beans and rice has become strikingly unified, telling a story about what kind of city New Orleans might be (see Besh 2009; Collin and Collin 1987; Johnson 2005; Thorne 1996; Leatham and Nossiter 2009 for examples of this discourse).

**Creole City**

Most New Orleanians agree that the city is Creole, but whether or not that means the city is distinct from the rest of the United States or at the center of what defines the country as a whole is unclear. Nick Spitzer, anthropologist, folklorist, radio show host, and enthusiastic if often critical booster of the city, argues that New Orleans’s Creole nature makes it both American and the contrary: “The various people called ‘Creole’ and the notion of cultural creolization—making a new social group and cultural expressions from the co-mingling of earlier discreet traditions, in this case African, European and native American—is critical to arguing New Orleans’s distinctiveness in the United States and its connection to Afro-Latin aspects of the Caribbean” (2006: 310). Yet he goes on to argue that the processes that make New Orleans Creole are the same that have created American culture in general. What makes New Orleans “Creole soul” distinct within America, Spitzer claims, is that the city’s cultural creativity is based on a “cultural simmering of many tastes” and not on a “unidirectional assimilation” (2006: 310). Spitzer uses “tastes” here to refer to general preferences for music and architecture, but he provides a perfect jumping-off place for food as well.

Discussions of what constitutes New Orleans culture and cuisine usually start with the idea that it is the product of a mixture of techniques, ingredients, and recipes brought together by the diverse populations that make up the city. Native Americans, French and Spanish colonizers, African slaves, Germans, Italians, and Irish immigrants are usually cited as having contributed variously to making the city’s architecture, accent, tastes, and foods. The result is described as a gumbo, a mixture in which the different elements form a delicious ensemble while still remaining, at least in some instances, identifiable. Versions of this story can be found in most of the city’s cookbooks and tourist guidebooks, along with scholarly versions in the publications of historians and other social scientists (see Besh 2009; Collin and Collin 1987; Johnson 2005; and Lagasse and Bienvenu 1996 for examples of the former; Tucker et al. 2009 for the latter). The idea of waves of immigrants contributing to the greater whole as they assimilate is a common American idea. The claim, however, in New Orleans is that the mixture has created something distinct, both American and different. The society produced in this process is marked by the existence of a large population of free people of color and by a resistance to the sharp racial segregation that characterized much of the rest of the country. The resulting tension between
creolization and Americanization is one of the core elements in ideas of what makes New Orleans distinct within the United States (Hirsch and Logsdon 1992). This distinctiveness is what links New Orleans culture self-consciously back to the ancestors of the slaves and immigrants who make up the city today.

Most New Orleanians would also agree that the city has a cuisine of its own. This cuisine is rooted in the immigrant populations that have made up the city and is linked in explicit ways back to its places of origin in Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. This is obviously the case with some dishes, like gumbo, whose very name is related to a Bantu word for okra (itself a key ingredient in many versions of the dish). Yet the city’s cuisine is often cited as demonstrating that New Orleans is less an American city than the northernmost city in the Caribbean. The idea that New Orleans’s particular form of red beans and rice links it to Cuba and Haiti is well known. The mirliton, a squash popular in New Orleans cuisine, is rare elsewhere in the United States but common throughout the Caribbean and Central America (where it is called chayote, christophene, or chocho, among other things) (Harris 1989; Walker 2009). When people invoke the idea of a Creole city, these sorts of ties to the Caribbean are also what they have in mind.

New Orleans is a Creole city in part because a large segment of the population identifies and is identified as Creole. Definitions of who belongs in that category vary, from white descendants of French and Spanish settlers, to people of mixed African and European heritage (Dominguez 1997). The latter population is perhaps the most likely to be identified as Creole today. Creole soul cuisine—which is like soul or Southern cuisine elsewhere in the U.S. South but, as New Orleanians would note, more likely to include seafood and more assertively seasoned—is most often associated with restaurants owned and operated by Creoles of color, such as Leah Chase, owner of the very famous Dooky Chase restaurant. In 2006, the New York–based food writer Alan Richman pilloried New Orleans restaurants for not being more like New York restaurants. Richman specifically claimed that Creoles were themselves a myth, writing that “I have never met one and suspect they are a faerie folk, like leprechauns,” despite having interviewed Mrs. Chase himself. He added that he doubted that Creole cuisine still existed in New Orleans (Richman 2006: 297). As the angry response in the local media made clear, there was little doubt among people in New Orleans that Creoles continue to make up a significant part of the local population. Along with people, any number of local things take on the modifier Creole, including, of course, food. For example, Creole Italian cuisine is a local twist on the red gravy Italian food common in other parts of the United States and Creole tomatoes is the term used to refer to the large flavorful tomatoes that grow in the parishes along the Mississippi near New Orleans.

Most residents of New Orleans do not distinguish the cooking of Creole chefs like Mrs. Chase from other parts of the city’s cuisine. In fact, they consider that the city’s culinary culture forms a whole. There is a perception of continuity between the creative dishes put out by chefs with national reputations such as John Besh or Emeril Lagasse and the food cooked in homes throughout the city and region. Although the
dishes served in high-end restaurants may be more complicated than those made by home cooks, they often draw on the same seasonal and local produce and seafood. New Orleanians feel knowledgeable enough about that food, as many chefs have told me, to comment on what they are served by professionals. This is one reason why local food critic Tom Fitzmorris has been able to sustain a three-hour daily call-in show focused exclusively on food and restaurants on commercial radio for nearly twenty years in New Orleans.

Among the prized possessions many New Orleanians lost in Katrina’s floods were their recipe collections. Starting in 2005, the food editor of the Times-Picayune, the city’s daily newspaper, began using her weekly column, “Exchange Alley,” to publish requests for lost recipes and to print recipes submitted in response to those requests. In 2008, in collaboration with Marcella Bienvenu, another Times-Picayune food writer, she published “Cooking up a Storm: Recipes Lost and Found from the Times-Picayune of New Orleans.” The first recipe submitted for the collection was for red beans and rice (Bienvenu and Walker 2008: 205). Radio personality and food writer Tom Fitzmorris wrote in a recent food-focused autobiography that in his own post-Katrina exile “no dish had been on my mind more than red beans, the traditional New Orleans lunch special. My mother made it every Monday, no matter what, when we were growing up. No dish would say ‘I’m home!’ more convincingly than that one. I had an actual hunger for it. I have eaten more red beans and rice in the four years since Katrina than I did in the previous thirty combined” (2010: 161). The dish itself was essential. But the dish evoked, for these writers and for many others, the entire Creole cuisine of New Orleans.

Slow City

In September 2007, Commentary magazine published an essay declaring New Orleans dead as a major American city. The author, Ben Toledano, a native New Orleanian and son of one of the city’s elite families, wrote that “although the funeral was not conducted until Katrina struck, the death took place several decades ago” (2007: 27). The cause of death, as Toledano saw it, was rooted in the city’s origins under French and Spanish colonial rule. He argued that for the last few hundred years, the city’s elites were devoted to inherited privilege rather than to enterprise. Industry and talent were not rewarded. The “American” elites that joined the city in the post–Civil War era adopted that ethic of inheritance, symbolized by membership in the city’s elite Mardi Gras clubs. When black politicians succeeded in taking over the city in the late 1970s, they continued the same tradition, one marked, according to Toledano, by a small social and economic oligarchy, virtually no middle class, and a majority of deeply poor, uneducated people. Katrina’s floods, he claimed, had simply made all of this more obvious than ever. People who wanted to succeed, to achieve the American dream—have safe streets, good schools, and honest, efficient civil servants—would have to live elsewhere. They would have to give up “exotic
cuisine and all that jazz,” but it would be worth it (2007: 32). They would have to choose between being American or being New Orleanian.

The critique was not original, having been made many times in the last century, but perhaps more frequently since Katrina. Ironically, the idea that the city lives according to a different rhythm and with a different style has been an essential part of marketing strategies developed by tourism officials since the 1920s. City leaders, as both Anthony Stanonis (2006) and Kevin Fox Gotham (2007) have pointed out, have long tried to show that New Orleans was both a thoroughly modern metropolis, with an efficient Americanized business ethic and, at the same time, a vacation destination where one might escape the hustle and bustle of modern American life. Representing the city as a place where visitors can experience cultural authenticity—contrasted, for example, with the artificial environments of Disneyland—has required city business leaders and officials to work hard at creating and maintaining a “brand” that distinguishes New Orleans from other destinations (Gotham 2007: 135). After Katrina, efforts to lure visitors back to New Orleans used themes and slogans such as “Still America’s Most Romantic, Walkable, Historic City,” “Authentic and Real: Like No Other Place,” and “Fall in Love with New Orleans All over Again” (cited in Gotham 2007: 140). In fact, the “exotic cuisine and all that jazz” is at the core of the narratives used by tourism officials to promote New Orleans as a distinctive place.1

Asserting that life in New Orleans is qualitatively different from life in the rest of the United States is not just a marketing strategy developed for tourists. Some city activists and intellectuals argue for making these lifestyle differences the basis for a critique of modern American life. In his “New Orleans Manifesto” (distributed during Mardi Gras 2003, but republished in a post-Katrina collection), Charles Cannon states that New Orleans should be proud of being a slow city and that “we need to convert the slow pace of our daily routines—our eating, transportation practices, pointless street conversation with strangers—from a perceived weakness into ideology” (2006b: 141). In Why New Orleans Matters, an ode to New Orleans published shortly after the flood, author Tom Piazza argued that the city’s culture represents a kind of spirituality that the rest of America ought to honor. Contrasted with the “Calvinist religion of judgment and renunciation of New England,” New Orleans rituals form a culture that celebrates sensuality through “sound, movement, and communal cuisine” (2005: 35). In another brief post-Katrina book, a group of scholars called the city a “land of dreams” (referring to the lyrics of the “Basin Street Blues”), a “symbol of cultural freedoms” and, referring to the city’s different pace, distinctive cuisine, architecture, music, and rituals, a “democratically diverse, creative, and romantically reactionary distillation of the American soul” (Abrahams et al. 2006: 10).

Red beans and rice and the slowness of the city’s food more generally play a key role in the assertion of New Orleans as a kind of living cultural critique of America. Long before Katrina, Walker Percy observed that “I attach more than passing significance to the circumstance that a man who stops for a bite in Birmingham, Detroit or Queens, spends as little time eating as possible and comes out feeling poisoned,
evil-tempered, and generally ill-disposed toward his fellowman; and that the same man can go around the corner in New Orleans, take his family and spend two hours with his bouillabaisse or crawfish bisque (which took two days to fix)” (1991: 20). Cannon’s New Orleans manifesto, cited above, was published in a collective publication entitled *Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?* (Chin Music Press 2006). The collection includes essays, stories, and poems by current and past residents of the city, all meant to plead the case for the significance of New Orleans culture for the rest of the United States. There is an essay that argues for the centrality of New Orleans foodways (Wolnik 2006). There are also several recipes, including, of course, one for red beans and rice (Cannon 2006a: 118). Writers tend to represent the manner in which New Orleanians approach food as something fundamental to the city’s culture and also central to what makes the city different from the rest of the country. Piazza, noting the significance of red beans and rice as a washing-day tradition, adds, in a long passage devoted to the relationship between New Orleans food and culture, that food in New Orleans is “rarely a means to an end . . . it is an end in itself, and one in which the participants are emotionally invested . . . it is the passionate, grateful, sacramental relationship of a kind of nonsectarian communion” (2005: 22).

Shortly after the 2005 floods, at the annual Southern Foodways Alliance meeting in Oxford, Mississippi, a panel convened to discuss the consequences of the disaster for New Orleans culinary culture. The panelists, which included both local and national food writers and thinkers, were convinced that the high-end restaurants would survive. But they were concerned that neighborhood grocery stores and plate lunch restaurants—the very places where you can get red beans on a Monday, located in the most badly damaged neighborhoods—might never return. New Orleans had long been a city of neighborhoods and of neighborhood grocery stores and restaurants. Although the corner store with its plate lunches was already in sharp decline before the floods, a surprising number have in fact returned in the post-Katrina era. According to Tom Fitzmorris, who has been tracking the number of restaurants in the city for years, there are actually more restaurants in the city today—including neighborhood plate lunch and po’boy restaurants—than there were before August 2005 (Fitzmorris 2010: 213). This is especially surprising in a context in which independent restaurants (the term is used to refer to nonchain restaurants) have declined nationally (Brandau 2010). It is precisely the local independent restaurants that have thrived in post-Katrina New Orleans, serving their slow-cooked New Orleans dishes.

When I make red beans and rice, I need three to four hours, not including the overnight soaking of the beans. There are ways to speed up the process, of course. Some resort to premade brands, others are known to use pressure cookers. But generally, people who want red beans and rice at home make it in the traditional manner. The fact that local grocery stores usually gather the necessary ingredients together near each other for shoppers’ convenience shows that there is a significant public engaged in this act of slowness. The cultural critics, who see the making of this slow
dish as an act of defiance toward the speeded-up life promoted in the rest of America, and the city’s tourism officials, who see this and other dishes as useful symbols for attracting visitors seeking a temporary escape from their daily lives, agree on the importance of slowness as a symbol. Earlier in this chapter I quoted journalist Dan Baum’s claim that “in the context of the techno-driven, profit-crazy, hyperefficient self-image of the United States, New Orleans is a city-sized act of civil disobedience” (2009: xiii). Perhaps making red beans in New Orleans is an act of defiance. But it might simply be a way to temporarily escape the pressures of contemporary American life. One of the current (as of early 2011) slogans used by tourism officials suggests as much: “It’s New Orleans: You’re different here.”

Chocolate City

In the weeks and months following Katrina, the city was increasingly framed by an American discourse that focused on race and class. Images in the news and commentary focused on black victims of the floods, turning New Orleans, in the view of many, from majority black to entirely black. Similarly, the city’s middle classes vanished from view and representations of New Orleans suggested that the population had been overwhelmingly poverty-stricken. New Orleans was either becoming a poster child for all American urban ills or it had been transformed into a domestic version of Haiti (Masquelier 2006). Not everyone thought it was worth saving such a city, but some who did insisted that it would have to become whiter and more middle class than they presumed it had been. Reacting to this kind of critique, early in 2006, Mayor Ray Nagin gave a Martin Luther King Day speech in which he asserted that New Orleans “should be chocolate,” adding “I don’t care what people are saying Uptown or wherever they are. This city will be chocolate at the end of the day. This city will be a majority African-American city. It’s the way God wants it to be” (Pope 2006).

Contrary to the idea of a Creole city (see above), the mayor’s comment seemed like a stark insertion of American racial ideology into the political and cultural life of New Orleans. This was not the first time the city was confronted with this ideology. Since the end of the Civil War, New Orleans has walked a fine line between the binary poles of American racial politics and categories and complex realities of race and class that have developed out of the city’s colonial history (Hirsch and Logsdon 1992). As a self-consciously Creole city, in which at least some of the population has been historically defined as existing somewhere outside of (or perhaps between) American racial categorizations, New Orleans has long stood out in the U.S. South—and perhaps in the country as a whole—for defying American racial codes. At the same time, the city was an historic center for the slave trade and was legally segregated like the rest of the South for decades after the Civil War. Thus, even self-defined Creoles were—and remain today—also black, following the American idea that any African ancestry (the “one drop” rule, according to which one drop of African blood
is all it takes) makes a person black and subject to Jim Crow discrimination. One of the central tensions in the city’s political and social life since at least the Civil War has been between this American racial binary and the more complex Creole calculus of identity and culture. In the wake of the 2005 disaster, the city’s presumed blackness, whether viewed as problematic or positive, seemed to radically simplify that history, fitting postdisaster New Orleans wholly into the American mold.

Historians, anthropologists, and cultural critics have long argued that one of the keys to New Orleans creative culture has been its ability to blur lines of race and ethnicity that are more sharply drawn elsewhere in America. Locals claim that this is especially evident in the city’s cuisine. I have heard Tom Fitzmorris (who is white) tell of visiting black restaurants in the Tremé neighborhood and discovering the red beans and rice that most resembled his mother’s homemade version (cf. Fitzmorris 2010: 27). In fact, it is not at all uncommon for white writers to discover black restaurants in New Orleans and find the food exceptionally good. The most famous of these was Buster Holmes’s restaurant in the French Quarter, which closed in the early 1990s. Holmes was specifically known for making excellent red beans and rice. Reviewing it in 1973, Richard Collin noted that “this is a popular place for poor blacks, poor whites, poor artists, poor French Quarter residents, and lovers of good beans” (1973: 145). Describing soul food in general, Collin, who was perhaps the city’s first professional food critic, observed that “most New Orleans blacks have grown up on the same food as other Orleanians” (1973: 143).

At the same time, the fact that the food is the same but that restaurants might nevertheless still be defined as black (or white) suggests that the history of segregation is still alive in New Orleans and that the lines, although blurrier and more easily crossed than in other American cities, nevertheless exist. New Orleans restaurants are, as I have noted, staffed by many skilled African American cooks, but very few of them have become media stars. Before Katrina, Austin Leslie had significant success, first cooking at Chez Helene and later in other restaurants, before dying tragically during the evacuation. In the aftermath of the floods, Ken Smith, who eventually left the profession to become a priest, was recognized nationally for his cooking. However, neither of them ever received the recognition that has made someone like Emeril a household name.

If restaurants run by African Americans have received recognition, it often seems as if it is more for contributions to history and community than for the excellence of their food. Dooky Chase, owned and run by Leah Chase, has long been recognized for serving as a social center for the Creole community in New Orleans. Located in the Tremé neighborhood, Chase’s restaurant was a central gathering place for families at a time when Jim Crow laws kept people of color out of other restaurants in New Orleans. In addition, Dooky Chase was open to groups organizing during the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Leah Chase’s commitment to the community is well recognized and, at least locally, the restaurant is also appreciated for its classic Creole soul cuisine. Similarly, Willie Mae Seaton’s restaurant, Willie Mae’s Scotch House, has long been recognized as an important neighborhood
gathering spot in Tremé. Famous for the eclectic customer base and for fried chicken, Seaton won a James Beard award in 2005, but as an “American Classic” rather than as a high-powered chef. She was 89 at the time and nearing the end of her career.

Following Katrina’s floods, the return of restaurants all over the city was celebrated. Each restaurant that opened represented a new space where returning residents could seek each other out, hear stories, and exchange information. The reopening of high-end restaurants also signaled the revival of the city’s economy. Each one was a business that managed to find workers (who were thus back in the city) and customers. The return of some restaurants, anchored in historic neighborhoods, signaled the revival of those neighborhoods or, at least, the belief that the community would rebuild. The return of many neighborhood restaurants was celebrated and noted in the press, but the rebuilding of Dooky Chase and Willie Mae’s struck a deeper chord than most. Both were preceded by months of events that included fundraisers, often hosted by some of the city’s most famous restaurateurs, that could help finance the rebuilding. Each was owned by a dynamic elderly lady who seemed to embody an important element of the city’s history and culture. People from different ethnic and class backgrounds worked hard—in the case of Willie Mae’s, the rebuilding effort was completed mostly by volunteers over the course of eighteen months (York 2006). Like Willie Mae’s customer base, the volunteers, led by John Currence, a native New Orleanian and chef/owner of restaurants in Oxford, Mississippi, were both white and black and crossed class and neighborhood lines in order to accomplish the task of rebuilding the restaurant.

In a sharp critique of Toledano’s obituary for New Orleans, Charles Cannon argues that Toledano focuses too much attention on the city’s elite and thus loses sight of some of the central elements that make New Orleans not only distinct, but distinctly and interestingly alive. In particular, Toledano misses “the great contribution of New Orleans civilization to the world: a culture created largely by and for poor and working people … street music, street dancing, red beans, po’boys, public celebrations with free entertainment,” all of which contribute to a rich social fabric that defies race and class in ways not found elsewhere in the United States (Cannon 2008: 90). This culture is a product of immigrants from many origins and of the descendants of slaves and of free people of color. Everyone eats red beans and rice. As Willie Mae Seaton said in the interview cited at the head of this chapter, “This is a red bean city here. That’s it. If you don’t have no red beans you just out” (Roahen 2006).

Conclusion: Rethinking America

After Hurricane Katrina and the federal floods nearly ruined the city, New Orleanians learned a few things they may not have seriously considered previously. They discovered that their cuisine really was different. In fact, reproducing it while in evacuation was often an insurmountable problem. This was true even of a dish as elementary as red beans and rice. If this did not lead them to question whether or not their home
city was actually part of the United States, the debates about the city that followed the floods certainly demonstrated that other Americans were not convinced. In the wake of the disaster, a combination of neoliberal ideology and racial politics raised the question of whether or not New Orleans really deserved to exist. The city, with its strange culture and distressing problems, seemed to resemble a foreign country.

None of this was new. Rather, the disaster forced people to confront the relationship between New Orleans and America and made some of the terms of that relationship explicit. The notion that New Orleans was a Creole city, with a distinct population mixture and history had long made the city both an example of the processes that define the United States and an example of a Caribbean culture on the banks of the Mississippi. The city’s celebrated slowness can be understood as either a failure to embrace the high-speed lifestyle necessary to achieve the American dream or as a critique of that dream itself. Like most American cities, New Orleans has been deeply shaped by the work and imaginations of people of African descent. But New Orleans has been more ready to acknowledge that fact, something that may mark the city as not quite American.

Walker Percy once observed that New Orleans “is a most peculiar concoction of exotic and American ingredients, a gumbo of stray chunks of the South, of Latin and Negro oddments, German and Irish morsels, all swimming in a fairly standard American soup” (1991: 12). Food has long been at the center of the way people think and talk about what makes New Orleans distinct. It is central to determining the manner in which the city relates to the rest of the United States. Red beans and rice is one of the main dishes that people think of when they consider what makes New Orleans different. One of the city’s most famous sons, jazz great Louis Armstrong, was so devoted to the dish that he signed his correspondence “red beans and ricely yours.” Restaurant critic Gene Bourg established the use of red beans, rather than stars, to indicate the quality of restaurants he reviewed in the *Times-Picayune* in 1985. This is still the metric used by the newspaper’s critic today. In fact, the return of those red bean–graded reviews to the paper in 2008, as I noted above, was widely remarked upon nationally (Severson 2008). You can purchase red bean jewelry in fancy local shops and a red bean–themed shirt is one of the signature souvenirs available at the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. You can attend a red bean–themed parade during Mardi Gras (see Figure 13.3). This is indeed a red bean city. Whether or not it is an American city remains open for debate.

**Red Beans and Rice**

(adapted and inspired by Collin and Collin 1987; Lagasse and Bienvenu 1996; and Besh 2009)

Serves 8–10, assuming you serve some corn bread on the side

1 cup chopped onions
1 cup chopped red bell pepper
1 cup chopped celery
1 teaspoon salt (or more to taste)
1/2 teaspoon cayenne
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon thyme
3–4 bay leaves
1 lb. boiled ham, cut into cubes, or 2 smoked ham hocks (leave whole)
1 lb. andouille or other smoked sausage
1 lb. dried red beans, soaked overnight and drained
3 tablespoons chopped garlic
8–10 cups water
Enough boiled rice for everyone (see below for recipe)

Heat the oil in a large heavy dutch oven (cast iron is best) over medium high heat. Sauté onions, bell peppers, celery, salt, cayenne, black pepper, and thyme for 4 or 5 minutes, until softened. Add bay leaves and meat and sauté for another 5 or so minutes. Add beans, garlic, and enough water to cover everything in the pot (usually about 6 or 7 cups at this point). Turn up the heat and bring
the pot to a boil. Then reduce the heat to medium and let cook, uncovered, for about 2 hours. Stir from time to time and add water if the mixture gets too dry. After 2 hours, use a spoon to smash about half the beans against the side of the pot. Then continue cooking for another 1½ hours, until the mixture reaches a creamy, soft texture, but don’t let it get too thick. Add more water if necessary. Remove the bay leaves and serve with rice, corn bread, and maybe a nice salad.

**Boiled rice**

Serves 8–10.

2 cups rice  
3½ cups water  
Salt  
1 tablespoon butter (optional)

Put all the ingredients in a pot, bring to a boil and let boil for 2 minutes. Reduce heat to simmer and cover. Simmer for 20 minutes. Remove from heat and let sit for 5 or 6 minutes. Serve with red beans.

**Notes**

1. There are many representations of New Orleans that include food as a central element. Some of the more well known ones include Frances Parkinson Keyes’s novel *Dinner at Antoine’s* (1948) and John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), and the short-lived CBS television series *Frank’s Place* (HBO’s more recent *Tremé* also features a great deal of New Orleans food).

2. As a Cajun, Prudhomme is part of a population that is historically based in the rural areas of southern Louisiana. Cajuns are generally defined as descendants of French Canadians who were deported from the Canadian maritime provinces and who migrated to Louisiana in the eighteenth century. Creoles can be variously defined as white descendants of Europeans or people of mixed European and African heritage (Dominguez 1997), including descendants of migrants from Haiti following the revolution there in the early nineteenth century, and are
generally considered to be an urban population, based in New Orleans. Although both populations are originally francophone, a great deal distinguishes them, including cuisine. That said, migration into the city and the work of chefs like Prudhomme have, since the 1970s, contributed to a certain amount of hybridization between Cajun and Creole cooking.

3. See Bruner 1994 for a useful and comparable discussion of the ways tourism officials and other promoters of culture and history deal with the issue of authenticity.

References


