



JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017

Alabama

JOURNEY

THE MAGAZINE FOR AAA MEMBERS

RULE THE ROOST

It's fowl play during Louisiana's annual chicken run

PLUS: VALENTINE'S DAY SWEET SPOTS | ROOT BEER ROUNDUP
DOWNHOMEWITH: THE BAND PERRY

FLOCK TOGETHER

A rural Louisiana tradition invites participants to work for their gumbo

BY CYNTHIA J. DRAKE ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY YVETTE CARDOZO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

It's the morning of Fat Tuesday, and we have a chicken problem. Our group has arrived in the small community of Iowa (pronounced "Eye-o-way"), Louisiana, for the Courir de Mardi Gras, known in local parlance as the Chicken Run. But the stars of the show—the chickens—have yet to arrive. They were trucked to Soileau, a few towns over, by mistake.

Organizer Berline Bellard, muttering under her breath, makes a few calls and paces. Finally, a cage full of roosters arrives with minutes to spare. Bellard gives the signal. Trucks towing colorful parade floats tricked out with festive banners, beverage coolers, and yes, even portable toilets take their places in the lineup. Parade runner Cynthia Victorian leads the group in a prayer, and away we go.





Chickens and children rule the roost during rural Louisiana's annual Courir de Mardi Gras.

...the yard
...the chicken. There's
...the chicken. There's
...the chicken. There's



A colorful parade (top) gets festivities rolling in Iowa, Louisiana, where Chicken Run captain Rodney Victorian (opposite page) displays a prize bird that's ready to make a dash for it.

GUMBO, ONE STEP AT A TIME

The Chicken Run proceeds as such: The captain blows his whistle to signal a stop at someone's house. He knocks on the door, solicits a contribution for gumbo—it could be some sausage, a few green onions, a bag of rice, a bit of parsley. In exchange, the procession pauses for an impromptu jam session on the donor's lawn. Accordions and scrub boards kick up a lively tune. People dance, the yellow, purple, and green fabric fringe shaking on their costumes.

During the stop, the captain also releases one of about 10 roosters into the air. Flapping wildly for a few moments of freedom, the rooster angles for an escape. A gaggle of children runs after it (which sometimes requires a lot of running, depending on the rooster's stamina and craftiness), finally catching the bird and returning it to its cage. In the past, a chicken would have been a valuable gumbo donation. These days, however, the activity is purely symbolic, and the chickens

grow fat and happy on someone's farm the rest of the year, alive to see their next Mardi Gras.

"It's just a tradition we try to keep going," says Rodney Victorian, Cynthia's husband and the Chicken Run captain. "We bring our grandkids, and it just lightens up our heart."

He stops the procession for neighbors who wheel their walkers to their front doors. "They just want to donate whatever they got," he says.

Courir de Mardi Gras is a rural Louisiana tradition with French Creole roots that was and is still celebrated in Soileau, Mamou, and other nearby towns. The parades in those towns often proceed on horseback.

Rodney's Aunt Mary Victorian, 81, remembers growing up in Soileau, picking feathers off the chickens to make gumbo at the end of Mardi Gras. She and her late husband, Griffin, along with fellow residents Willie Bushnell (Rodney's grandfather) and Rogers and Alberta Bellard, started the first Mardi Gras in Iowa in 1978. Their children continue the tradition as a way to strengthen their community and share their culture with others.

Gathering the gumbo ingredients has always been a metaphor for a community's strength. Because the residents often had little to begin with, the contributions from neighbors of whatever they had was what made the final product so good.

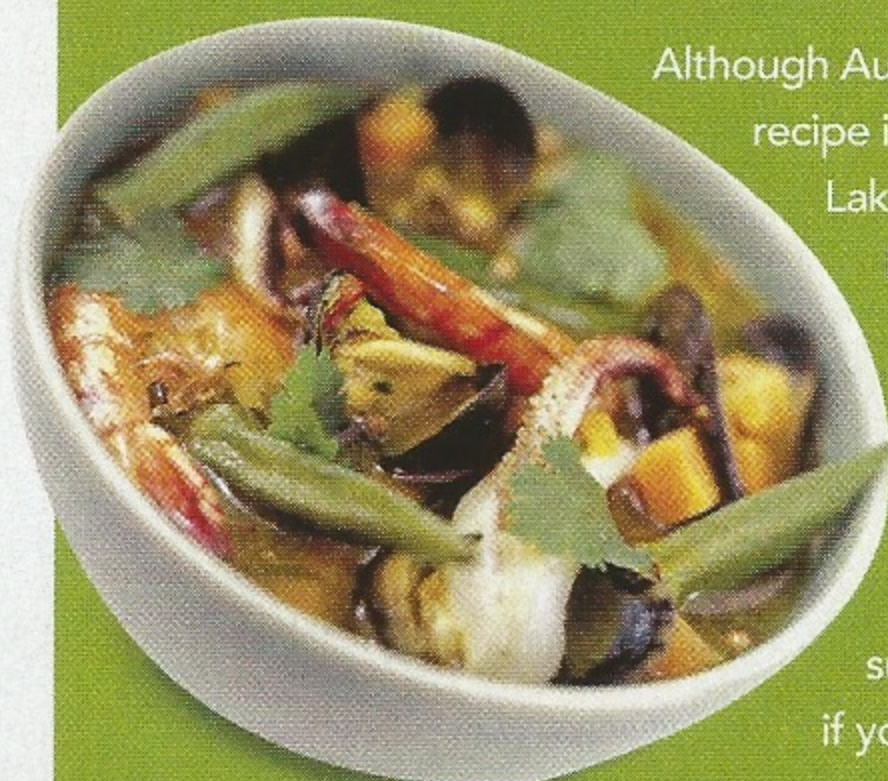
THAT FLOOR WAS HOT, BABY

Oh, and there is dancing.

Dancing in the streets, dancing in the yards, all fueled by some tailgate-style libation. There's dancing back at the community hall after the gumbo is served from 30-gallon pots. (It's Aunt

BOTTOM: BON APPETIT/LAMY STOCK PHOTO

NOW YOU'RE COOKING



Although Aunt Mary Victorian's gumbo recipe is a well-kept family secret, Lake Charles restaurant Pat's of Henderson (337-439-6618; patsofhenderson.com) shared its recipe. Gumbo is an improvisational dish based on ingredients you have available, so you can substitute sausage or chicken if you've got it.

INGREDIENTS:

1/2 cup roux*	1 cup shrimp
2 quarts water	1 cup crawfish
1/4 cup chopped celery	1 cup oysters
1/4 cup chopped bell pepper	2 tsp salt
1/4 cup chopped onions	1 tsp red pepper
1/2 clove chopped garlic	1/4 tsp black pepper
	Rice

DIRECTIONS:

Dissolve the roux in water over medium heat. Add chopped vegetables and cook over low heat for one hour. Add seafood and seasonings. Continue cooking for half an hour. Serve over cooked rice. Serves 8 to 10.

Mary's recipe, and you can still find her in the kitchen stirring it up—but don't bother asking her to share her secret.) Everyone dances together, from the very old to the very young.

"When we got done feeding everyone, that floor was hot, baby," Mary says, remembering the Mardi Gras of her youth. "At the time, it was real French music—it was the Creole, the accordion, and a scrub board, that's all."

Back then, musicians who would later go on to make names for themselves, such as the late zydeco musician Wilson Anthony "Boozoo" Chavis, played for free.

"Baby, we'd dance till 11, sometimes 12," Mary says. Midnight was the cutoff, of course—as the following day is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season, and, per Catholic tradition, the end of dancing for six weeks.

I walk down the road enjoying the sun, which is gently warming what started as a chilly February morning, and smile at the exuberance of the chicken-chasing kids. An older gentleman adorned with Mardi Gras beads asks me to dance. I don't know the steps, but it doesn't matter. We laugh.

What I find most remarkable about the Chicken Run—exploring a new cultural tradition and feeling welcome—is not remarkable at all to the Bellards and the Victorians.

"You might be strangers when you come, but when you leave, you feel like family," Cynthia says.

Rodney pipes up, "It's not about a dollar; it's about seeing people smiling."

Cynthia J. Drake is an Austin, Texas-based travel writer who never passes up an opportunity to dance.

• TRY A DRY ROUX

The Victorians sometimes work with a dry roux as the foundation of their famous gumbo. To make one, preheat the oven to 250 degrees. Sprinkle 2–6 cups of flour (depending on how much you need) on a stainless steel pan, stir it occasionally, and bake "until it turns that sandy color," says Cynthia Victorian. "You can make a good-size batch that way." You can use it dry in your gumbo, or mix in equal parts of heated cooking oil or water until smooth.

Courir de Mardi Gras organizer Kimmy Bellard adds this recommendation: "Put some French music on and drink some beer and start stirring."

WINGIN' IT

DO The **Iowa Chicken Run** is February 28. Doors open at 8 a.m., and the parade departs from the Knights of Columbus Hall (503 E. Highway 90) at 10 a.m. Admission is \$10 (\$5 for children ages 12 and younger) and includes the parade plus a gumbo meal at the hall. Iowa is located about 14 miles east of Lake Charles. For information, contact the Lake Charles/Southwest Louisiana Convention and Visitors Bureau. (337) 842-1875; visitlakecharles.org/swlamardigras.

STAY **L'Auberge Casino Resort** is decorated in a Texas Hill Country theme, with wood beams and large fireplaces throughout the main lobby and six on-site restaurants. Outside, float on the lazy river while sipping a beverage. Rates start at \$125. (866) 580-7444; lakecharles.com. A breakfast buffet and weekend evening casino shuttle is included with your stay at **Best Western Plus Prien Lake Inn and Suites**. Rates start at \$82. (337) 477-5900; bestwestern.com/plusprienlakeinnandsuites.

EAT Get your cracklins—original smoked or soft and spicy—at **Guillory's Famous Foods**, one of the stops along the Southwest Louisiana Boudin Trail. 1475 Gerstner Memorial Drive, Lake Charles. (337) 497-1477; guillorysfamousfoods.com. **1910 Restaurant and Wine Bar** is a great spot for a dinner date with fresh spins on Cajun favorites, such as gumbo croquettes, quail bombs (boneless quail with cream cheese and peppers, all wrapped in bacon), and shrimp and grits. 949 Ryan Street, Lake Charles. (337) 602-6278; 1910restaurant.com.

For information about TourBook guides and TripTik Travel Planners, visit a AAA branch or go to AAA.com/maps.

