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and in the shimmering light I had the momentary impression that I was bobbing atop a gargantuan bowl of gumbo.

I've spent years crisscrossing the continent in search of places where the land says loud and clear what to eat and the locals listen. I've smoked salmon over alder-wood fires in the Yukon Delta of Alaska and pressed wild apples into tingly cider with my Vermont neighbors, but I keep getting drawn back to Acadiana—the 22-parish, bayou-riddled region that stretches from just outside of New Orleans more than 200 miles west to the Texas border and south to the Gulf Coast—because nowhere else are the food, the place and the people so inseparable.

Cajun food is all about using what you've got and being joyful about it. That joyful part is a good thing, because the Cajuns—French settlers who arrived in the area in the 1700s after being kicked out of Canada's Maritime Provinces by the British—didn't have a whole lot. Everywhere they looked in south Louisiana, they saw water. The marshes were full of alligators, frogs and ducks, the bayous filled with shrimp and crabs, and the estuaries lined

in other cooking," says the boisterous Lafayette chef Pat Mould. "There is a big misconception that it is all about spice. It's about flavor first, then the spice." "Flavor first" is an excellent description of Cajun cooking techniques like making a *roux*—cooking flour in fat until it turns brown and chocolaty, which is what gives gumbo its nutty underpinning—and like *étouffée*, which means "smothered" and involves slow-cooking onions, green peppers and celery in a covered pot to lay down that foundation of flavor.

"And often Cajun cooking is all in one pot," says chef Alex Patout, who grew up in New Iberia, in the heart of Cajun country. Think gumbo or jambalaya all cooked in the famous Cajun "black pot"—the cast-iron cauldron that was often all the home cook had. "It's an impoverished cuisine," Patout says. That's part of what differentiated it from Creole cooking, which took cues from Parisian cuisine and favored multiple courses and elaborate spices.

In contrast, Cajun cooks kept it simple. "Cayenne, black and white pepper are the core spices," says Patout. "I didn't even know what thyme or oregano were growing up." Today, thanks to the



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with miles of oyster reefs. Those all became the Cajun pantry. Instead of flour, they learned from the American Indians of the Gulf Coast to thicken their stews with *filé*, ground sassafras leaves. The Indians also taught them about corn, and then, in the 1900s, they discovered rice, the ideal grain for their wet world. Those semi-flooded rice fields doubled as crawfish ponds in the off-season, adding another pillar to America's greatest indigenous cuisine.

What makes it great? I've asked myself this as I've sat in a shack along Bayou Lafourche, shucking my way through a bushel of oysters; and I've asked myself this as I've sat beneath the moss-draped oaks of Avery Island, the soft air and cicadas lulling me into a Southern stupor, and tasted the thick, rich, crab-infused seafood gumbo of the late, great Eula Mae Doré. "She's one of the treasures of Avery Island," says Paul McIlhenny, whose great-grandfather invented Tabasco sauce. "She is part of the *terroir* of this place."

What I've realized is that when your pantry is limited, you learn tricks to make whatever you cook taste extra good. "The essence of our cuisine is built on a depth of flavor you rarely find

blackened-redfish craze spawned by chef Paul Prudhomme in the '80s, Cajun seasoning, which usually adds thyme, garlic and onion powders to that mix, is ubiquitous. But historically cooks left the addition of hot sauce up to diners. The region has had a hot-pepper-sauce habit since the mid-1800s when Edmund McIlhenny planted tabasco peppers on Avery Island, aged his pepper mash in white oak whiskey barrels and mixed it with salt mined from beneath the island. Today you won't find a lunch counter in Acadiana that doesn't hold a bottle of Tabasco sauce, still made using the same original formula McIlhenny perfected.

And that's the kind of thing that keeps drawing me back to bayou country. Because when I'm there, whether it's at a crab boil in Terrebonne Parish or a crawfish stand deep in the Atchafalaya Swamp, I know I can turn off Google Earth and toss my GPS in the bayou. I don't need 'em. To understand exactly where I am, all I have to do is close my eyes and taste.

Rowan Jacobsen's latest book is *Shadows on the Gulf*.