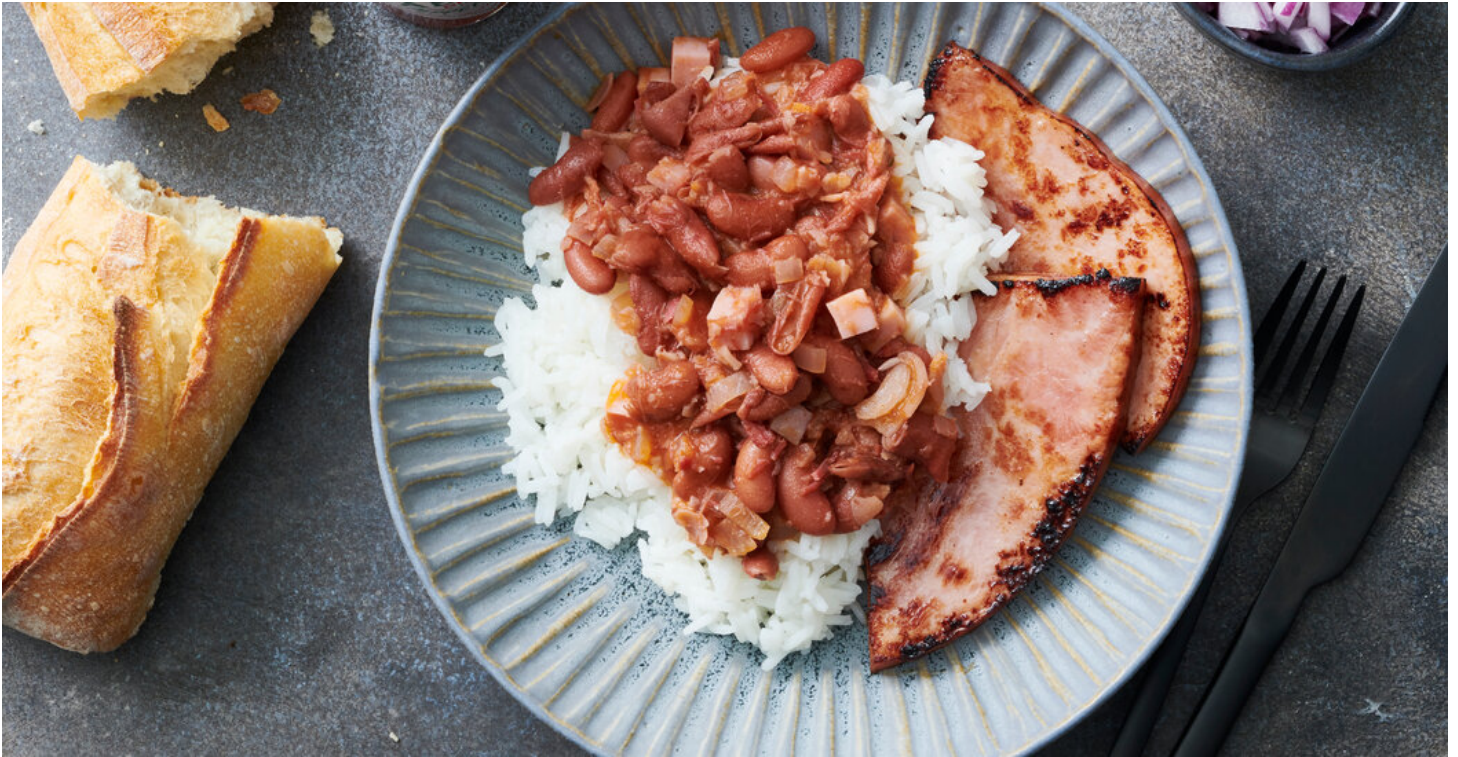


Red Beans and Rice Feed New Orleans' Soul

Kayla Stewart :: 3/13/2023



NEW ORLEANS — In this storied Louisiana city, where shrimp étouffée, gumbo and po' boys loom large, red beans and rice stand above.

“I don't think New Orleans would be the city that it is if we didn't have not only rich traditions and history, but also red beans and rice,” said Freddie King III, a city councilman.

The dish's popularity is well documented: The jazz musician and New Orleans native Louis Armstrong was such a fan that he was known to sign his letters “Red Beans and Ricely Yours, Louis Armstrong.” And, at [Dooky Chase's](#) in the city's Tremé neighborhood, where the culinary matriarch Leah Chase cooked for local politicians, civil rights leaders and former presidents, red beans and rice have been an integral part of the menu since the restaurant's inception in 1941. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was known to meet with organizers over the meal.

Recipe: [Louis Armstrong's Red Beans and Rice](#)

“If the red beans and rice were not ready, we would be in trouble,” said Stella Chase Reese, Ms. Chase’s daughter, adding, “We could not open our doors without having red beans and rice.”

While the dish’s origins are murky, a common theory has emerged among scholars. After the Haitian Revolution ended in 1804, thousands of white and free people of color from Haiti sought refuge in New Orleans and Cuba, bringing with them enslaved Africans, as well as Caribbean staples, like red beans and rice.

The food scholar and historian Lolis Eric Elie said the dish’s Haitian influences are too obvious to ignore.

“Red beans are the staple beans of Haiti and in New Orleans and in the part of Cuba where the Haitians settled,” Mr. Elie said.

In New Orleans, the dish — traditionally enjoyed on Mondays, when families would simmer a pot as they did laundry — became integral to Louisianian Creole cuisine, as home cooks and chefs infused the dish with cayenne, smoked andouille sausage and the culinary Holy Trinity of onions, celery and bell pepper.

Innumerable iterations exist. Some cooks add ham, while others opt for a vegan preparation. Jalapeños are a regular occurrence in Texas. [Ketchup](#) and mustard are even found in variations across the South.

But central to a perfect pot of red beans and rice, however, is the bean itself. For years, chefs and home cooks have soaked the beans overnight — “my mother said you can’t rush good food!” Ms. Reese said — and cooked them until warm red in color and soft, yet slightly firm, in texture for a deeply comforting bite. A good pot should be creamy, not soupy.

In fact, Ms. Reese says, it’s the right kidney bean paired with the right chef that makes a bowl of red beans and rice one to remember.

“Now, the flavoring?” she said. “That’s the chef’s secret.”

For many New Orleanians, like Vance Vaucresson, a sausage manufacturer who co-owns [Vaucresson’s Creole Cafe & Deli](#), there are no red beans without [Camellia](#). The company celebrates 100 years in business this year, and, though it now sells 19 varieties of beans, peas and lentils, red kidney beans remain its — and New Orleans’ — pride and joy.

“They are not the only game in town, it’s just that they’re our game,” Mr. Vaucresson said. “We are very much loyalists here in this state.”

Camellia’s earliest iteration, L.H. Hayward and Company, opened in 1923, on Poydras Street and South Front Street, just along the Mississippi River. It was established by Lucius Hamilton Hayward Jr., the grandson of an Englishman from the West Indies who worked in agriculture and mercantile. In the 1940s, a son, William Gordon Hayward, began packing red beans and branded the company for his wife’s favorite flower: the camellia.

For years, Camellia was the main packager of the dried red kidney beans that became the foundation of red beans and rice cooked across the city. (Though Louisiana competitors like Blue Runner Foods also sell red kidney beans, most locals remain loyal to Camellia.) At the factory, employees, many of whom have worked for the company for decades, manage an elaborate process that sorts, cleans and packages nearly 100,000 pounds of beans a day.

Though the beans are grown and harvested elsewhere — Colorado, Nebraska and Minnesota, where the climates are conducive to growth — the company retains strong ties to New Orleans: In 1974, the Haywards moved the business to its current location, in Harahan, a suburb. And the business has maintained enduring relationships with noted city restaurants, such as Brennan's, Napoleon House and Dooky Chase's.

Today, the love for the beans extends well beyond the plate. The [Krewe of Red Beans](#), a community group, has marched in a bean parade during "Lundi Gras," or Fat Monday, for 14 years. The krewe members wear meticulous costumes emblazoned with hundreds of beans.

Hoping to spur interest in the dish among a younger generation, Mr. King, the council member, is working with several schools to show a documentary on the dish's history. And Camellia is providing red beans and rice at some schools on Mondays, in the same district where Mr. Hayward started his business a century ago.

"We all know it strongly, but does the next generation understand the importance of it, of that ritual?" Mr. King said. "We want our kids to understand and take pride in a dish that is ours."