Several weeks ago I was dining with friends at an old-line Creole restaurant in New Orleans. The guests at the adjacent table had ordered Café Brulôt, and as the waiter carefully peeled the lemon and orange and studded the rinds with cloves, he recounted “the origin” of the drink. When he began talking about the role that sometime-pirate and Battle of New Orleans hero Jean Lafitte played in Café Brulôt’s creation (an assertion that is more legend than fact), I rolled my eyes. But when the waiter then alluded to the contributions of Marie Laveau, the legendary Voodoo Priestess, I nearly choked on my Sazerac. And then I got annoyed. For as any New Orleanian can tell you, the truths of New Orleans are always much more interesting than any of the fictions attributed to it. The contributors to New Orleans Cuisine hold to this belief as well, and most definitively apply it when seeking the many truths behind the evolution of fourteen of the city’s iconic dishes.

The book is grounded in the idea that in order to truly understand a place one must understand the people who live there, and the best way of doing so is by exploring how they acquired their food and how they prepare it. Editor and contributor Susan Tucker’s introductory chapter takes us chronologically through the culinary development of New Orleans. She pays particular attention to the evolution of the procurement of foodstuffs through the port, markets, and street vendors, as well as what was available to catch or kill in the Bayou St. John or Lake Pontchatrain.

Tucker notes, “Creole cooking survived because its founding characteristics were built around adaptations and blendings of many cultures…African adaptability and French thriftiness” (p.16). One of the constants in many of these food stories is the ability to elevate leftovers and less-desired ingredients to new culinary heights. Several chapters trace how dishes created from common ingredients slowly moved from the home table into the more rarefied world of the restaurant. This transition can be seen in Grillades, originally made with cheaper cuts of meat, and Red Beans and Rice, which utilized Sunday’s hambone. But the dish that most epitomizes this thriftiness is Bread Pudding, a dessert that began as a means to use leftover bread but by the 1930s was regularly seen on local restaurant menus.

Each of the following fourteen chapters explores the development of an iconic dish of New Orleans, in the process examining the place of one or more ingredients in the city’s culinary repertoire. The story of each dish also contains the larger story of the people who lived in the city: Native Americans, French colonials, enslaved Africans and Free People of Color, refugees from the slave revolt in St. Domingue (now Haiti), Spaniards, Sicilians, Germans, Croats, and scores of others.

Each chapter’s main dish is often used as a jumping-off point to discuss the importance of related dishes and people in the city’s food story. For example, in Susan Tucker’s Bread Pudding chapter, we also get short histories of pralines, Bananas Foster, and doberge cake. Tucker’s Daube Glacée chapter tells the story of New Orleans butchers, while Sharon Stallworth Nossiter’s Shrimp Remoulade chapter informs us about New Orleans shrimpers. Michael Mizell Nelson’s extensive chapter on French Bread also chronicles the development of, and especially the naming of, the po’boy, a story that comes out of the streetcar conductors’ strike of 1929.

Every chapter contains at least one representative recipe from historical texts, as well as recipe adaptations by the New Orleans Culinary History Collective, to which each contributor belongs. The chapters are well footnoted, and there is an extensive bibliography for readers who wish to learn more about any particular topic.

The best part of this book is that few of the dishes come with definitive stories. Instead, as Karen Trahan Leatham and Sharon Stallworth Nossiter assert in their chapter on Red Beans and Rice, most Creole dishes are a “happy product of a number of influences” (p.132). If the uninformed waiter had read the chapter on Café Brulôt by Nossiter, he would have discovered the rich legacy of the city’s relationship with coffee, both as a commodity and as a stimulant. And although the chapter has little to say about the origins of the beverage, the coffee tales are fascinating and would have given those curious diners a richer and truer understanding of New Orleans’ history. And that, I think, coupled with the flaming brandy, would have been more than enough entertainment.

—Elizabeth Pearce, Southern Food and Beverage Museum

Measured Meals: Nutrition in America
Jessica J. Mudry
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Given the prominence of caloric monitoring in American society today, Jessica J. Mudry’s Measured Meals is an