

NOTES FROM A MAKER

CREOLE CREAM CHEESE

BY HELEN MITTERNIGHT



came through with that recipe, and suddenly, the Crescent City Farmer's Market had a new product.

Thanks to a story the *Times-Picayune* ran that summer about the reintroduction of creole cream cheese, deliveries were soon so in demand that the laying hens at the farm were being picked off by coyotes, taking advantage of the Mauthe's daily absences. The pace was frantic.

And then Hurricane Katrina hit. "Afterward, we were milking the cows we had left, but we couldn't meet our obligations," Mauthe says quietly. "Jamie and I both took off-farm jobs. That was something I had never done

When New Orleans got creole cream cheese back, one family rode a bus across town to grab some for their grandmother, who cried because she hadn't tasted it for twenty years. That's the power of this particular cheese, a food whose fortunes mirror those of New Orleans.

"It was just unreal," recalls Kenny Mauthe of Mauthe's Progress Milk Barn in McComb, Mississippi. "I never realized until then how important this cheese was to the people of New Orleans. It's a staple in their lives."

But try finding anyone outside of New Orleans who has heard of it.

The cheese predates refrigeration, when Creoles walked up and down the French Quarter, selling the soft curd that results from hanging soured skim milk in a pillowcase from a tree. The end product, sitting in a bath of rich cream, is like a love child born from a ménage à trois involving greek yogurt, cottage cheese, and crème fraîche. It is tart, smooth, and has the mouthfeel of heavy cream.

In New Orleans, the Mauthe family is synonymous with creole cream cheese. Kenny Mauthe's great-grandfather came to New Orleans' lower Ninth Ward from France and started a dairy farm. His son Henry eventually took over, and by the

1950s, Mauthe's father, Henry Mauthe Jr, was running the farm and delivering milk and cream cheese door-to-door. But when Mauthe was young, his father moved the family to Folsom, Louisiana. Dairy pasteurization laws there made it more trouble than it was worth to produce creole cream cheese, so Mauthe had never eaten it.

Mauthe and his wife, Jamie, bought their own farm in McComb in 1984 and raised four children there. Mauthe began to bottle his own milk in 2001, and soon thereafter happened to be at the Crescent City Farmers Market when Poppy Tooker, founder of the Slow Food New Orleans chapter, was demonstrating how to make creole cream cheese. After one taste, Mauthe was convinced, but he would have to find a new recipe to abide by modern dairy regulations. A dairy science source at Louisiana State University

in my entire life."

By 2009, the Mauthes were determined to get back to their beloved farm life and began renovating their barn. In May 2010, they bottled their first post-Katrina milk and started making creole cream cheese again. The herd has been rebuilt to fifty milking cows—primarily Jerseys, which produce the richest milk. The cows rarely eat hay; Mauthe plants seasonal grasses such as protein-rich rye so the cows can eat grass year-round. The result, Mauthe says, is rich milk that New Orleans baristas vie for, claiming Mauthe's milk goes on top of lattes like wet paint.

Mauthe says creole cream cheese can be used in place of ricotta in lasagna, and his daughter Sarah makes creamy cheesecakes from the tart cheese. A local company freezes it to make creole cream cheese popsicles. Devotees such as chefs John Besh and Susan Spicer have helped promote the cheese by using it in ice cream and red velvet cake. New Orleans locals can get Mauthe's creole cream cheese at several local supermarkets, and Langenstein's will ship it outside of Louisiana (langensteins.com). Since Katrina, the city's culinary world has not only been resurrected, but reinvigorated—and creole cream cheese is bringing back a bit of old New Orleans to the revitalized food scene.



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