

Behind the Green Flap

Getting the food ready for Jazz Fest is a process almost as lengthy as giving birth.

It's hot and you're hungry. A five-minute wait for a cochon de lait po-boy or a bowl of crawfish Monica can seem like an hour when the band you want to hear is playing. When you reach the front of the line, it's a relief that the person working the window can hand you a plate of food just seconds after taking your cash. Jazz Fest vendors dish up food faster than the quickest short order cooks in the country. Getting 200 dishes onto the Fair Grounds for the two weekends of the festival, however, takes eight months of planning and work.

In September, food director Michelle Nugent decides which vendors to invite back, although it's rare that a vendor is not asked to return. "Most of them have been with us for quite some time," she says. "Some of them are celebrating their 30th anniversary this year." If a vendor of an important dish can't come back, Nugent starts searching for a replacement.

Vendors used to audition for the festival. Moncef Sbaa of Jamila's, which sells lamb tagine, merguez sausage and Tunisian salad, remembers trying out for a spot seven years ago. "They had a committee, like 15 to 20 people, to taste the food and grade the food," he says. Today, the festival has grown so large that Nugent is more likely to recruit vendors with experience working large events.

Occasionally, Nugent seeks out a vendor who makes a unique dish. "They found me," says Linda Green, who is well-known at the city's second line parades for her ya ka mein, noodles in a salty beef broth topped with a slice of hardboiled egg. Green had never cooked on the scale required by the festival before becoming a vendor in 2005, but she got plenty of support. "The vendors help each other, maybe recommend someone who is doing something similar," Nugent says. "We work really closely with them, and they're allowed to call anytime night or day."

Vance Vaucresson never had to audition. His family, which has made sausages since 1899, started selling hot sausage sandwiches at the first Jazz Fest in 1970. Vaucresson's dad, Robert "Sonny" Vaucresson, owned Café Creole in the French Quarter. "My dad was the first man of color to have a business on Bourbon Street in the current era," Vaucresson says. He says that one day in the late 1960s,

George Wein hatched the idea for Jazz Fest during an impromptu meeting at Café Creole. Wein in turn asked the Vaucressons to sell their hot sausages at the new festival.

In December, Nugent confirms who will attend. Around Mardi Gras, she meets with each of the more than 60 vendors. "We go through everything from start to finish," she says, "from what their menu is, how much they're going to charge, how much electricity they need, whether they need water in their booth and how much refrigeration storage they need."

By that time, vendors are rounding up workers and ordering supplies. Many vendors use the same crew each year. Wanda Walker, whose Love at First Bite catering company makes the cochon de lait po-boy, uses a crew of 20 that hails from as far away as California. She also tries to lock in a price on 6,000 pounds of pork before the summer barbecue season drives up the cost.

As the festival approaches, some smaller vendors start cooking weeks ahead of time. Sbaa of Jamila's starts making his merguez sausages six weeks before the festival. He borrows large walk-in freezers around town to store the food. For other larger vendors, the volume at Jazz Fest is not a problem. "For us, it's actually a pretty small run," says Pierre Hilzlim, who sells crawfish Monica. "We make food for restaurants all over the United States. A vessel in this plant does a 3,000-pound batch of sauce." It takes him four hours to make enough sauce for the entire festival.

On festival days, the vendors start cooking early. Seven 48-foot refrigerator trailers hold their supplies. A field kitchen in each food area supplies hot water. Each booth gets at least 6,000 watts of electricity. Some vendors, like Linda Green, borrow a kitchen under the grandstands. "It's about six or seven of us in that kitchen," she says. "But believe it or not, everybody gets along good because everybody respects each other." Others cook everything inside their booths. Panorama Foods, the crawfish bread vendor, arrives with a dozen convection ovens.

At the end of the day, long after the last band plays, the food vendors clean their booths until late at night and get ready for another day of Jazz Fest.

THE QUEEN RETURNS TO HER KITCHEN

For the first time since Katrina, Leah Chase, 84, will serve her gumbo des herbes at Dooky Chase for Holy Thursday. This year, though, the local tradition will be a private event to thank the more than 300 people who helped restore the historic Tremé restaurant. The week after Easter, Dooky Chase finally opens to the public.

Restoring Dooky Chase after Katrina heavily flooded the building took longer than anyone expected. According to Poppy Tooker, local culinary activist, the old building started as a small sandwich shop and was expanded over the years. When the building was gutted, pre-existing termite damage and sewer problems were discovered. "The big problem occurred when they were led to believe that they would get a Small Business Administration loan," Tooker says. When the loan fell through, Starbucks and the NAACP stepped in with a \$175,000 grant to complete the work.

The restaurant looks the same as before. Only the paint colors have been changed to match the stained glass windows, which all survived the flood. "Everything," Tooker says, "is spic, span, beautiful, fresh and new."

OTHER NEWS

Last issue, we reported on the plans for Scott Boswell's new restaurant, Hoshi. He plans to have it open by the end of May....The new Divina Gelateria serves up sophisticated gelato and fine espresso on Magazine Street....Dan Stein, who used to work the cheese counter at Martin's Uptown, opened Stein's Market and Deli, a Jewish deli, in the Lower Garden District....Santa Fe in the Marigny has closed.

FINAL THOUGHTS

1) Let's hope Angelo Brocato can return to Jazz Fest next year. 2) Why is there only one place to buy decent beer at the festival?

Angelo Brocato: 214 N. Carrollton, 486-0078
Dooky Chase: 2301 Orleans Ave.

Hoshi: 217 Camp St.

La Divina Gelateria: 3005 Magazine St., 342-2634
Stein's Market and Deli: 2207 Magazine St., 527-0771

