

# The Women Pushing Cajun Cuisine Forward



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There is something that edges toward magic when Melissa Martin leans over her grandmother's Magnalite pot filled with an oyster soup, knowing she nailed the cooked-down tomatoes using the recipe of the woman who originally owned it. "I lift the pot cover, and I'm like, holy shit, you know?" Martin said. "There's ghosts in the room."

Women in south Louisiana have conjured this magic for hundreds of years. Using seafood and sausages usually procured by the men in their family, they became the keepers of [Cajun recipes](#), passing them down from grandmother to mother to daughter as part of the steady rhythm of a cuisine deeply tied to the land and water that birthed it. But in an oft-repeated habit within an industry plagued by under-representation of women and people of color, it's long been men like Emeril Lagasse or Paul Prudhomme who have stood in the national spotlight, creating a one-sided understanding of a complex cultural heritage.

That is finally, slowly changing. In south Louisiana, where Frenchmen and -women once settled after being driven by the English out of Canada's Acadia, Cajun women have spent centuries feeding their families and teaching new generations to do the same. But until now, few women got the opportunity to take on leadership roles in restaurants and on the national stage.

Martin included her grandmother's oyster soup recipe in [Mosquito Supper Club](#), a cookbook named for her New Orleans restaurant, where she serves set tasting menus of Cajun cuisine constructed with locally-sourced seafood and produce. The book is a love letter to the Cajun women who raised her in Chauvin, Louisiana, and who continue to educate her on the traditions of the bayou. In a community so unique, storytelling comes easy, so the entire project, she said, was about dispelling myths about its cultural diversity. "The myth of Cajun is huge, monumental," she said. "If you ask anyone, who's a Cajun cook from Louisiana? It's going to be these men."

That is why it is impossible to tell the story of Cajun cuisine without Commander's Palace. For decades, the New Orleans landmark grew its reputation under the watchful eye of [Ella Brennan](#), who died in 2018. It was Brennan who hired Prudhomme, and he began adding to the rich Creole flavors of New Orleans the simpler, seasonal Cajun cooking he learned from his mother in Opelousas, Louisiana.

"The gumbo I did at Commander's was a roux gumbo. To my knowledge, it never had been before," Prudhomme once told Brett Anderson of [The Times-Picayune](#). "It was down-and-dirty Cajun. It was what Mama used to do."

The result, Brennan told Anderson, was a playful tug-of-war: "Paul was trying to make us into Cajuns, and we were trying to make him into a Creole."

Later, Lagasse, who was born in Massachusetts, succeeded Prudhomme as executive chef, eventually leaving the restaurant and landing in the national spotlight with his Food Network show, popularizing the catchphrase "Bam! Kick it up a notch!" and opening a string of restaurants nationwide. Though Lagasse's cooking continued to mix Cajun and Creole, it is largely his legacy that lives on in the public imagination as what is considered Cajun. But this fall, Commander's Palace's co-proprietors Ti Martin and Lally Brennan appointed the restaurant's first Louisiana-born executive chef since Prudhomme — and its first female executive chef: Meg Bickford.

"We're thrilled that it matters to people," Martin said. "She just happens to be the right person and have the qualities we need." Regardless, the choice will give Bickford the opportunity to help define a new future for this New Orleans restaurant that has played such a large role in defining what it means to cook Cajun food.

"We're always going to stay rooted to New Orleans, but our cuisine of Cajun and Creole is so broad in its influences," said Bickford, who can cite Cajun heritage of her own on her mother's side. "I'm ecstatic about exploring those cultures and mining the depths of what created Cajun and Creole cuisine."

What's also exciting for Bickford is setting an example for her own daughter, a 3-year-old with whom Bickford looks forward to dancing off the day's worries when she gets home every night from the Commander's Palace kitchen. Like many in south Louisiana, Bickford comes from a family where everyone cooks, and she'd put up her mother's roast beef po-boy against any other in town. That kind of pride is one she looks forward to her own daughter having, too, but as the executive chef of one of the city's premier restaurants.

"I'm not going to be there all the time," Bickford said. "The work ethic and the understanding of how amazing it is to actually love what you do and being true to yourself and all those wonderful things — that's my goal to instill in her, and she can do whatever she wants."

For Martin, the pathway to experimentation has been a slow but steady one. It took her perfecting her family's cooking before feeling confident enough to explore new directions in her own kitchen. That means, maybe, a mignonette served with oysters instead of a cocktail sauce, or a tamarind aioli alongside her mother's shrimp boulettes for an event with the Senegalese chef Serigne Mbaye of Dakar NOLA, or even heirloom tomatoes paired with lemon and olive oil.

"Olive oil — that's an evolution," Martin said. "I never used olive oil before the pandemic."

These small changes, however, are only possible because she finally feels like she perfected the basics. "I think about a time in the future when (my mom is) not going to be here," Martin said. "I'm one of six kids. I think about my siblings, and I think about being able to turn on the stove and make this gumbo, and my siblings being able to eat it and go, 'Oh, *that's* Mom.'"