



Killer Rubboard

January 16, 2007. Volume 1, Issue 2.

ISSUE 2: Sometimes You Need To Dance

EDITOR'S NOTES: *In this issue of **Killer Rubboard**, we remember that New Orleans and Southern Louisiana is a place rich in history and traditions and something special, but also poor in so many ways. Sometimes, when you don't have much, celebration comes in small doses and means more.*

-- Aileen McInnis, Editor

Featured Writing

Nikki's Dress

By Katie McInnis-Dittrich, Boston, Massachusetts

Katie McInnis-Dittrich (absolutely related to editor Aileen) lives in Boston, MA because she is too much of a weather wimp to live in Alaska and doesn't want to live in New York but wants to be close. She teaches at the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work, enjoys sailing on the Charles River and is nurturing a budding career as an esteemed watercolor artist (ok, not past the vegetable stage yet).

"Where did you get this?" I said with shock, eyeing a gold sequined gown amidst the tattered old cotton dresses and ragged sweaters in the big cardboard box that served as her closet. The whole thing smelled musty and dusty and just plain old.

"It's not mine, it's Nikki's," Lily mumbled, choking on her response. "She wore it when she was Zulu Queen five years ago. She was mighty fine. She looked like an African queen."

Lily started to cry, softly and silently. Lily was 61 years old and looked 100. She was a proud but worn-out old woman whose body had been battered by the birth of eight children (only two of whom were still alive) and the toll of hard

domestic servitude to an Uptown family, with low pay and long hours. I suspected she had been slapped around for a lifetime by lovers and boyfriends. She didn't bring it up and I didn't ask.

"I wish I could have buried her in it but you know..." she blurted out.

Yes, I knew. Nikki, Lily's daughter, was murdered by her pimp three years ago and by the time anyone noticed she was gone, reported it to the New Orleans police and the body was found, there wasn't enough of her left for the sartorial splendor of the gold sequined gown. Even in the Pre-Katrina years, New Orleans was not easy on the living or the dead. How could the Queen of the Zulu Krewe go from gold sequins to a body bag in three years? From a brief shining moment to ...

Lily was my client when I was a social work student at Tulane University 30 years ago and worked in the St. Thomas and Central City Housing Projects in New Orleans. Lily taught me a lot about social work and being old and how the streets claim the young and innocent. She also taught me how to eat a king cake without swallowing the plastic baby (but not before I had ripped up the inside of my mouth and chipped a tooth). And how to tell if it was worth smacking a little kid for a pair of cheap beads thrown off a float (very specific criteria). And how to ease a rum hangover (so we didn't know how bad the hangover would be when we drank all night at Pat O'Brien's and a kind stranger paid the \$90 bar bill). And why cross-dressers have a strange opening in the back of their gorgeous gowns for the French Quarter Parade (ok, I figured that out by myself). I am not sure what, if anything, I could teach her.

"Lily, would it be better if we boxed up Nikki's dress and put it away?" I asked one day. "Better yet, do you want me to try to sell it at one of the consignment shops in the quarter? It probably could get some great money. Or contact the Zulu Krewe and see if they want it for some museum or something?"

I was painfully aware of how difficult it was for Lily to survive on a small general assistance check and a handful of food stamps. It is my greatest asset as a social worker to suggest a million ways to take care of people and then get angry when someone refuses to take my advice. Nikki's dress reminded me of the excess and debauchery of Mardi Gras that seemed to ignore the city's other painful problems, especially the poverty, drug abuse, and crime issues I saw every day in the projects. On this particular day, I had stepped on some crushed beads with one foot and a discarded hypodermic needle with the other. The millions spent on floats and balls seemed to be a flagrant and flippant message from the haves to the have-nots. The cost of liquor consumed on any given float far exceeded the yearly income of much of New Orleans' poor.

Don't get me wrong. I had a fabulous time at Mardi Gras as a student and several times since. It's just that after all the hoopla is over, Mardi Gras feels like the post-fight Lola in Barry Manilow's song *Copa Cabana*. Jim Metcalf, the late Louisiana poet and journalist, referred to New Orleans as an "aging whore, a tired and fading beauty but with a suggestion of its past finery." No one who sticks around after Mardi Gras would wonder how he came up with that metaphor.

"Girl, what ever are you saying? I ain't sad about that dress." She responded with absolute confusion in her eyes.

"Why do you want to take it away from me?"

"I don't want to take it away from you. I just thought it might be less painful for you if it wasn't always there to look at, reminding you of Nikki's death. Grief can be very painful and encumbering; robbing us of the energy we need for other things." I blurted out. *Geez, did I ever really talk like that?*

"It don't remind me of Nikki's passing." Lily stated with a big smile on her face. "It reminds me of a day when Nikki was more beautiful than any girl in the parade; when there were no devil boyfriends or drugs or whorin'. When I'm cryin', I ain't sad."

For a moment, (and only a moment, mind you), I was silent. Didn't she see the tragedy of a young, beautiful woman decked in the splendor of the glitz and glamour of Mardi Gras one minute and dead from the drugs, violence, and poverty that is New Orleans much of the year the next? She must have read the look on my face.

"Carnival was a good time when Nikki was queen. But it is a good time all the time. People are happy. People ain't happy much here anymore," she said. "It's the only time when other troubles don't seem to be so bad."

"But don't you get angry when the city seems to find the money for extra police on duty to protect the tourists but not for decent housing? Doesn't all the excess of glitz make you crazy when it is hard to find money for medicine? Don't you hate all the tourists coming into town in-costume to get drunk and get crazy, then leave?" I stammered in disbelief. I was at my best fighting social injustice and inequality. After all that is why I was going into social work.

"They ain't costumes. They are masquerades. Costumes make you look like somebody or something else but you are still you. Masquerades let you look and be someone else even for a few hours. Pitiful people can be pretty. Old people can be young. Even that old Miss Elway with all them burn marks on her face from her old man can be beautiful. Ain't no medicine can make you feel that good." The defiance in her voice was clear. "And we are all happy when the tourists leave and the extra police as well. All the police really do is keep 'us' away from 'them.' And they all be too busy to cruise the projects looking for some kid to beat up and arrest."

She was angry. Her eyes were burning with the hatred I saw too often when the black-white issue in New Orleans came up. She continued. "You know how the Bible says that in heaven there won't be no cripples or crooks or cryin'? Ain't none of that during Carnival either. Ok, maybe some crooks still working but black ain't black, poor ain't poor, old ain't old. It gives me a glimpse of heaven. And there ain't nobody walking down the street looking at me and others in the project thinking how sad we are and trying to fix us."



I am not sure she intended that last comment for me as the do-good social worker but I got the message. Of course by now, I was sure I had rendered permanent damage to the "therapeutic relationship" with Lily and she would never let me in her apartment again. I was about ready to cast off graduate school and go back to the idea of being a travel agent.

"You don't know no better, you're a Yankee. You all have some crazy ideas." She smiled at me with a kind, knowing look-I swear it was pity or at least that is how I remember it. She reached under her bed and brought out a box, tattered and dusty. It was a spectacular Mardi Gras mask adorned with gold sequins and green, yellow, and purple

feathers. She put it on. She was beautiful. She lay down on the bed and asked me to leave her alone for awhile. I quietly left her apartment, humbled as well as humiliated.

I would see Lily many more times after that day and the conversation was never mentioned again. I didn't leave social work. Lily never got well and died some years later of natural causes: old and tired. And I found out later Nikki was never queen of the Zulu Krewe. I shudder to think what Nikki really got that dress for but it doesn't matter-didn't matter then, doesn't matter now. Lily believed what she needed to believe.

But she taught me a lot about social work and being old that I still teach my own students these years later. And she taught me why I should not hate Mardi Gras because of its garish, manic chaos that feels tawdry and sparkly and fake. And why an old woman kept a gold sequined dress to remind her of the splendor of Mardi Gras. And why old, poor, and sick people probably love Mardi Gras the best of all. A brief shining moment...

© 2007 Katie McInnis-Dittrich

Bayou Bourbon (and Beer)

By Ken Waldman

Ken Waldman is a writer, poet and fiddler who lives in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, much of the year when he is not traveling and performing. But he also called Alaska his home for many years and has written a great tune called "A Week In Eek." More information about Ken and his performances can be found at his website at www.kenwaldman.com



Bayou Bourbon (and Beer)

My man's working
and I'm tired of my life
washing and folding
everybody's laundry.
Hey now. Give me a bourbon,
a beer, an accordion player
who plays my music:
that wild-ass zydeco.
I want a good time here tonight.
I want to do more than iron
some man's pants.

© 1995 Ken Waldman

First You Make A Roux...

Musings on Food and Cooking and Seasoning



By Aileen McInnis

Getting Closer to Black: Making the Perfect Roux

Roux is the basic ingredient in much of traditional Cajun and Creole cooking. So making a roux should be the simplest thing in the world. One New Orleans cookbook states the recipe in its totality like this: *Make a roux with equal parts oil and flour to desired color.*

That is the standard. Fifty-fifty proportions of oil and flour. Cook until it is the color you want it. Don't burn it.

And that is where the agreement ends.

Do you mean vegetable oil? Lard? Butter? What is the best color for your roux? Cooked on the stovetop or in the oven? Stir constantly or consistently? High heat for a short amount of time or low heat for a long time? Creole or Cajun cooking? You are not supposed to burn it, but how can you tell you've burned something or not when you cooking it to an almost black color? Do you get a better roux if you put just a little bit more flour than oil? And can a roux made without butter or oil or made in the microwave really be called a roux?

I love to quiz people about their roux and gumbos. If a cook considers his or her gumbo to be good (and every cook who spends the hours it takes to make a gumbo does), then I know he or she is certain to have a strong opinion about the right way and the wrong way to make a roux.

You don't eat roux by itself. Roux is a base to which you add ingredients and is used in all kinds of cooking, all around the world. (My Wisconsin mother remarked, "That's how you make a white sauce!") Louisiana cooking uses a darker roux for the nutty, kick-ass flavor that makes a gumbo really taste like a gumbo, or gives an etouff   a distinctively earthy flavor. "First you make a roux..." has prefaced so many recipes in Louisiana cooking that it has become a clich  . "How does a Cajun make love?" the joke goes. "First, he makes a roux...."

Words describing roux often follow a mixture of color and food: *white, blond, peanut butter, pecan, milk chocolate, fudge, bittersweet chocolate, mahogany, red black, noir*. Each step down the color continuum brings you nearer to the "Holy Grail"---the Black Roux. Closer to black. Closer to perfection. Closer to disaster.

Making roux as a base for sauces, gravies and gumbo goes back centuries in the south. Traditional roux is made by very slow cooking. Chef Paul Prudhomme says his mother used to make a roux for gumbo that cooked for several hours. Most contemporary cooks use higher heat and constant stirring to get a very good roux in a shorter amount of time. Butter based roux needs to be stirred at low to medium heat and are often used for etouff  es. To make a butter based roux to create a dark gumbo, you settle in and make a commitment to stirring long and slow. Vegetable and peanut oil can withstand higher heat, so a good dark roux can be made in a shorter amount of time. But alas, this process is not for the faint of heart. When referring to making a dark roux over high heat, most cookbooks use the instruction (I quote) "Stir like hell!"

Paul Prudhomme devotes four pages in [Chef Paul Prudhomme's Louisiana Kitchen](#) of how to make a good roux and includes an additional two full color pages with comparison photographs of the different stages of roux. The color photos are a great guide. Illustration **2a** is your light brown Roux uses for light sauces and gravies. It's almost yellow, and sometimes is called *Blond Roux*. **2b** is your *Medium Brown* roux-the color of a rich peanut butter. **2c** is *Dark Red Brown* and here we are getting into gumbo territory. And **2d**, well, it's *Black Roux* and is "used when you want stronger flavor than dark red brown roux. ...It's takes practice to make a black roux without burning it but it s really the right color roux for a gumbo."

Cook it until it is black but don't burn it. It is the First Commandment of this intense little Gumbo-Cooking-Cult.

On the point of avoiding burning your roux, Chuck Taggart of [The Gumbo Pages](#) writes "Use your eyes and nose; if it's gone over to being burned you can smell it. It's like the difference between really dark toast and burnt toast. You also have to take it off the heat slightly before the roux gets to the color you want, because the residual heat in the pan (particularly if it's cast iron) will continue to cook the roux....."

I came to gumbo later in life and I took my first recipes off **The Gumbo Pages**. Being from the Midwest, I was at first extremely intimidated by roux, so I started out making a 20 minute roux over medium heat and it turned out the color of peanut butter. My gumbo tasted pretty good and I was hooked. I turned up heat and the next few times cooked a nice looking roux the color of milk chocolate and the gumbo was even better.

I have now worked my way up to a cast iron skillet, and make a 60 minute plus red black roux just a shade darker than the Hershey's Cocoa container which I put out on the counter as a guide. It's between **Colorplates 2c** and **2d** in the Paul Prudhomme cookbook "Louisiana Kitchen" and that's what I like the best. Next time, I'm switching over from using a regular whisk to using an old fashioned gravy whisk, the kind my mom used to make chicken gravy and that I've just recently rediscovered, though some cooks prefer a spatula. I use oil, not butter. I am not at roux perfection yet each new roux as a chance to push it a little farther, and get closer to black. Without burning it, of course.

The gold standard for gumbo in Alaska seems to be the Double Musky in Girdwood whose chefs learned in the restaurant of Paul Prudhomme of Cajun Louisiana fame. Double Musky gumbo is about as dark as a gumbo can get and almost a bit grainy. The Double Musky uses a butter based roux and developed its recipe working with some of Paul Prudhomme's chefs who make roux the way Chef's mother used to make it. The roux cooks for about 30 minutes until its color reaches a dark nutty brown. Then the cook tosses in a cup of shrimp shells and at that point, the roux start turning darker quickly. The roux is stirred until black. "Don't burn it," Bob Persons, owner of the Double Musky, has been quoted. "or you'll just have to throw it out and start over."

The darker the roux, the less thickening agent it has, so a good dark gumbo is usually quite thin. A lighter, peanut butter colored gumbo comes from a lighter roux and tends be thicker. The Bourbon Street Diner in Wasilla used a lighter colored roux for their gumbo and it is very thick. Some people scoff at thick gumbo and call it "nothing but gravy," but heck, it is still awfully darn good gravy.

The Kincaid Grill in Anchorage makes their roux in a 500 degree oven, using a shallow pan and stirring occasionally. It takes about 45 minutes and isn't as labor intensive as the stove top variety. The oven technique was learned and used by an employee named Roberto, who later opened his own place called The Gumbo House on Ninth and F Street. When asked about his roux, though, he smiles and swears he learned how to make a roux from his Mexican grandmother.

Now Steve McCasland, chief brewer at the Homer Brewery who is well known for his halibut and shrimp gumbo, swears by the slow and steady approach. He is a butter-based-roux man and sets aside a whole morning when he is cooking his roux. He takes his roux and his gumbo very seriously. That brings us to another lesson I have learned. If someone is cooking gumbo and invites you over for a bowl, *always* say yes. Anything that takes that much time to make is going to be worth every spoonful.

Roux is an event from beginning to end. You set aside time and effort to make a good roux. Like setting out on the spiritual journey, you hope to push your roux making skills just a step and an insight further each time you make it. Stirring 500 to 600 degree cooking oil holds an element of danger. Prudhomme's people call their black roux "Cajun napalm" to remind themselves to be respectful of its lethality. Many a cook wears his scars from a splattered roux-in-the-making with a twisted sense of pride, but they are scars nonetheless.

I love the rhythm, the mystery and the challenge of making a roux. It starts out slow and pokey until it reaches critical mass, then it jumps from Prudhomme's Illustration **2a** into **2b**. It lingers in that Color Plate for awhile, until you get distracted or think you are stirring it too quickly and not letting it cook. Then it shifts into high gear and turns darker quickly, maybe too quickly. Just at the point where it transitions into the **2d** Color Plate Illustration (*oh, Holy Grail!*), the one labeled **Black Roux**, the phone rings. It never, never fails. Whatever you do, don't answer it. Again, consult the Gumbo pages, "Roux must be stirred constantly to avoid burning. Constantly means not stopping to answer the phone, let the cat in, or flip the LP record over, and if you've got to go the bathroom ... hold it in or hand off your whisk or roux paddle to someone else. If you see black specks in your roux, you've burned it; throw it out and start over."

At the point you have reached your comfortable level of perfection, throw in the Trinity (celery, onions, green peppers) to stop the cooking. Now you are no longer making roux. You've moved onto gumbo. Or etouffée. Or something else equally delicious. Which is a whole 'nother story for another time.

Until then, here is a roux based recipe to pique your interest and your appetite. And if you choose to take the challenge and try to make a roux, may your path continually take you closer to black. Closer to perfection. Without burning it, of course. (Amen.)

RECIPE FOR CRAWFISH ETOUFFÉE (GIVEN AT END)

Krewe Du Review



Eating Establishment Reviews
By Steve Montooth & Christy Williams

January 16, 2006.

Mumbo Gumbo

2446 East Tudor Road
Anchorage, AK 770-4996

OVERALL RATING:



It was another cold, clear Anchorage day and two of the Krewe du Roux (Aileen and I) were on a quest for the perfect bowl of gumbo. First we stopped into a tiny café we had heard about, "Fire and Ice". It is a festive little place, with artistic renditions of alligators and other Louisiana-themed things. What a disappointment when they told us that they only make gumbo on weekdays. They had po' boys on their menu but we were really in the mood for gumbo, so we traveled on.



Undaunted in our search for gumbo, we drove to Mumbo Gumbo. I'd ordered their gumbo to take out several times before, but today we were going to take in the full experience. The menu spells out their motto, "Feel the Mojo". We intended to check it out.

We zoomed into the place less than an hour before closing (2 o'clock on Saturdays), but we were greeted warmly. We were also greeted by a toddler, a little girl who waved and smiled at us. She was there with her mother, clearly a friend of the employees, and looked like she had been enjoying her lunch. A circle of crumbs ringed the floor around her high chair, and the waitress looked perfectly comfortable with this.

The restaurant was fairly quiet, but the one waitress was busy serving another couple and told us to pick whichever table we liked. The restaurant is pretty and cheerful-small, nice wooden tables (with table clothes), flowered wallpaper and décor reminiscent of a "country living" magazine. An unusual touch is the teddy bears tucked here and there through the restaurant. All of the staff wore kerchiefs on their heads, just as pictured on the menu. The restaurant's chef, Pamela Dakota Grant, describes their cooking style as "Gullah", a tradition from the lowcountry region along the Atlantic coast, which includes South Carolina and Georgia. The restaurant's atmosphere felt a bit like Porgy and Bess meets Martha Stewart: a great menu of Southern faire in a cheerful, pleasant setting.

When our waitress was free to serve us, she came to our table, pulled out a chair and sat down and visited with us a bit. She told us about the menu and chatted about the busy morning they had had. The restaurant serves a Southern breakfast on Saturdays-grits, bacon, sausage, eggs and buttermilk biscuits. It was a cold day and they had had lots of takers. She cheerfully wrote down our orders and took them to the cook. A window into the kitchen from the dining room allows diners to watch the action.

Aileen and I both chose to try the Gumbo Ya-Ya, gumbo with shrimp. Our orders came fairly quickly-a nice sized bowl of rich brown gumbo topped with white rice. It was served with a side of potato salad and a good- sized slice of corn bread. The broth was dark, rich, soup-like and spicy...no need for extra seasoning. It had a generous serving of perfectly cooked whole shrimp, chunks of chicken and andouille sausage and plenty of okra, peppers, tomatoes, and celery. The taste was different than most Louisiana gumbos as it was tomato-based, more in the Creole cooking tradition. It was tasty, satisfying and warmed us up.

The side of potato salad was a treat-another Southern comfort food. It tastes just like the salad my mother makes-potatoes, a little celery, mayonnaise, mustard, and a little sweet pickle relish. The corn bread was warm, crumbly and good. It was a perfect lunch---portion-wise and a good combination of flavors.

Our friendly waitress came by, took our plates and asked if we wanted coffee (café au lait). We did, and appreciated that even though the restaurant had closed its doors, they were not rushing us out. The coffee was really good, as she had promised. As we left the little girl in the high chair waved us goodbye. We left full, happy and relaxed. Good "mojo" in my book.



Food



Atmosphere



Lagniappe: *This restaurant really does provide a little something "extra". Friendly service, the kerchiefs, a peaceful, pleasant atmosphere and the cutest ladies room we'd seen in any restaurant reviewed so far!*

N/A. **Mardi Gras Spirit:** This is a gumbo restaurant, but it is not in the Louisiana tradition. They would get high marks for "Gullah" spirit.

ABOUT THE REVIEWERS: *Steve Montooth and Christy Williams are members of the Anchorage-based Krewe du Roux and know a good gumbo when they taste one.*

Links & Lagniappe

January 16, 2007. ISSUE 2: Sometimes You Need To Dance

Chef Paul Prudhomme's Louisiana Kitchen by Paul Prudhomme, William and Morrow Company, New York, 1984.

The Gumbo Pages (<http://www.gumbopages.com>) with Author Chuck Taggart. *A website chockful of history, recipes, ideas, jottings and other links.*

More about the writings and travels of Ken Waldman can be found at www.kenwaldman.com

Recipe

CRAWFISH ETOUFFÉE *Recipe from Chef Paul Prudhomme's Louisiana Kitchen* Makes 8 Servings

INGREDIENTS:

Seasoning mix includes following starred ingredients:

- * 2 teaspoons salt
- * 2 teaspoons ground red pepper (preferably cayenne)
- * 1 teaspoon white pepper
- * 1 teaspoon black pepper
- * 1 teaspoon dried sweet basil leaves
- * ½ teaspoon dried thyme leaves

¼ cup chopped onions

¼ cup chopped celery

¼ cup chopped green bell peppers

7 tablespoons vegetable oil

¾ cup all purpose flour

3 cups seafood stock

½ pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter

2 pounds peeled crawfish tails or medium shrimp

1 cup very finely chopped green onions

4 cups hot cooked rice

RECIPE:

Thoroughly combine the seasoning mix ingredients in a small bowl and set aside. In a separate bowl, combine the onions, celery and bell peppers.

In a large heavy skillet (preferably cast iron), heat the oil over high heat until it begins to smoke, about 4 minutes. With a long handled metal whisk, gradually mix in the flour, stirring until smooth. Continue cooking, whisking constantly, until roux is dark red-brown about 30 to 45 minutes (be careful not to let it scorch in the pan or splash on your skin). Remove from heat and immediately stir in the vegetables and 1 tablespoon of the seasoning mix with a wooden spoon; continue stirring until coated, about 5 minutes.

In a 2-quart saucepan, bring 2 cups of the stock to a boil over high heat. Gradually, add the roux and whisk until thoroughly dissolved. Reduce heat to low and cook until flour taste is gone, about 2 minutes, whisking almost constantly. Remove from heat and set aside.

In a 4-quart saucepan melt 1 stick of the butter over medium heat. Stir in the crawfish or shrimp and the green onions; sauté about 1 minute, stirring almost constantly. Add the remaining stick of butter, the roux mixture and the remaining 1-cup of stock. Cook until butter melts and is mixed into the sauce, about 4 to 6 minutes, constantly shaking the pan in a back and forth motion (versus stirring). Add the remaining seasoning mix, stir well and remove from heat. Serve immediately. To serve, mound ½ cup rice on heated plate. Surround the rice with ¾ cup of the etouffee.