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**LOUISIANA**

**Traveling the boudin trails**

By **HARRY SHATTUCK**  
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JOAN SHATTUCK

David Choate, boudin master for NuNu's groceries in Youngsville and Milton, La., south of Lafayette, displays the three first-place trophies NuNu's received in the fourth annual Boudin Cook-Off last October.

LAKE CHARLES, **La.** — What do you call a pairing of boudin and **Dr Pepper**?

**Cajun** breakfast.

Lane Sonnier, who owns Sonnier's Sausage & Boudin in Lake Charles, laughs when I share that story relayed to me two days earlier in Lafayette.

"It's true," Sonnier says, "except on Saturdays, when breakfast is boudin and Budweiser."

Sonnier speaks from experience, given that he was hand-cranking boudin at age 12. "My right arm got so big from the cranking that people called me Half-a-Popeye," quips Sonnier, now 43.

I'm exploring the boudin trails of southern Louisiana, and with every stop I'm gaining a deeper appreciation for this fun-loving region's food, culture, history and captivating personalities. The Southwest Louisiana Boudin Trail is centered in Lake Charles, two-and-a-half hours from Houston. The Cajun Boudin Trail spotlights places in and around Lafayette, another hour to the east.

Competing boudin trails. Only in Louisiana.

During my four-day "research project," I've paused for sustenance at 13 establishments recommended in trail brochures and on corresponding online sites. I've savored boudin at grocery delis, at a gas station, at old-fashioned meat markets, restaurants, diners and in the front seat of our car. I've feasted on boudin links, boudin balls, boudin burgers and boudin pistolettes (stuffed, fried bread). Mild, medium and spicy. Steamed and smoked.

In many homes, boudin - pronounced boo-dan - is more revered than crawfish, with recipes passed along for generations. David Choate, award-winning boudin master for NuNu's groceries in Youngsville and Milton, La., south of Lafayette, applies perspective: "It's part of you. It's something your great-grandparents did."

For traditional Cajun boudin, rice is mixed with finely ground pork, liver, green onion and whatever other herbs, spices and peppers evolve from the imagination or family tree. (In Lake Charles, liver is usually excluded.) These ingredients are squeezed into a **sausage casing** and served hot on butcher-block paper, utensil-free and messy enough that extra napkins are a necessity, especially when we chow down in parking lots. Alternatively, boudin is removed from the casing and shaped into balls.

Not that every devotee eats on the go. "You'll find boudin served at high-end weddings, on silver plates along with filet mignon," says Bob Carriker - aka the Godfather of Boudin. This designation recognizes Carriker's creation of boudinlink.com, a comprehensive resource with reviews of more than 120 establishments; his coordination of an annual Boudin Cook-Off that attracted 4,000 revelers to downtown Lafayette in October; and his leadership with the Cajun Boudin Trail.

All this while balancing his day job as chairman of the Department of History and Geography at the **University of Louisiana-Lafayette**, where he answers to Dr. Carriker.

Carriker grew up in Spokane, Wash., and never tasted boudin before moving to Lafayette 12 years ago. Why this fascination with sausage and rice? It's more logical than you may imagine: In academia, Carriker's passions are history and culture, and the connection becomes clear as I interact with locals.

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Resources

**IF YOU GO**

Planning a trip

- **Getting started:** Consult boudinlink.com for reviews - and grades - of places that make and sell boudin, including establishments on the Cajun Boudin Trail and Southwest Louisiana Boudin Trail. The site provides maps, recipes and a boudin discussion forum. Also recommended is southernboudintrail.com.
- **Trail overviews:** Access cajunboudintrail.com, lafayettetravel.com and visitlakecharles.org. Print brochures are available.
- **Cook-off:** See boudincookoff.com for information about Lafayette's annual boudin festival. The 2011 event will be in October.
- **Off the trail:** Check out lafayettetravel.com and visitlakecharles.org for details about festivals, attractions, dining and lodging. Also valuable is creolenaturetrail.org.
- **Where to stay:** Most major motel chains are represented in the 70-mile corridor from Lake Charles to Lafayette. L'Auberge du Lac Casino Resort, off Loop 210, is the

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largest and classiest lodging in Lake Charles. See [Idlcasino.com](#). We enjoyed the Carriage House Suites in the upscale River Ranch development south of downtown Lafayette. It's hard to find - use GPS or MapQuest - but the 21 one- and two-bedroom suites are spacious and fancy enough to lure the stars of *Secretariat* during the movie's filming nearby. See [thecarriagehousesuites.com](#).

• **Souvenir:** Order a "Boo-Dat" T-shirt at [boudat.com](#).

- **H.S.**

have to bring your own deer," Carriker says. Boudin inventions introduced at the cook-off include boudin bread pudding, boudin egg rolls and boudin-stuffed red peppers with grilled onions. In Duson, near Lafayette, Mike's Country Corner prepares pecan-crust boudin pie. Saturday favorites at Johnson's Boucaniere's in Lafayette include a grilled-cheese sandwich stuffed with boudin crumbles and doused with house-made barbecue sauce.

Tiny Prudhomme's House of Meats, next door to Poopsie's Donuts in Broussard, south of Lafayette, is half the size of a standard **McDonald's**. But Tiny, whose great-uncle is celebrated Cajun **chef Paul** Prudhomme, ships boudin all over the nation. "And I'll cater events as far as the road takes me and as far as your pocketbook takes you," he says.

Wallace Johnson crafted his first boudin link almost seven decades ago. "I've made enough links that if you stretch them out, they'd go all the way around the world," says Johnson, who at 84 oversees Johnson's Boucaniere with his daughter and son-in-law, Lori and Greg Walls.

Sonnier and his wife, Laurie, opened their shop last year in a downscale Lake Charles residential neighborhood. It's essentially a butchery, meat locker and service counter with limited parking and no interior seating, but Sonnier says, "Some mornings we'll have 25 people in here and another 18 or 20 outside - not bad for a little bitty store."

"I've had to go out in the parking lot and direct traffic at 6 o'clock in the morning," Sonnier says. "Someone told me, 'You need to call the police for help.' I looked outside and saw six police cars parked. And everyone was eating our boudin."

As we chat, a man from Tomball says hello. A former Louisianan, he makes "boudin runs" every month. "We get a lot of customers from Houston," Sonnier says. "My brother has cancer, and he goes to M.D. Anderson hospital. He's doing well; his last treatment is in two weeks. He started taking boudin to the nurses, and now the doctors make requests. He loads the car with boudin every time he has a treatment."

Sonnier already anticipates expansion, and others are benefiting from this boudin craze: Walls' two-year plan for Johnson's Boucaniere includes a larger restaurant (patio seating is available now) and a dance hall to promote local musicians. Don's Specialty Meats, whose original shop in Carencro still thrives, occupies prime real estate beside Interstate 10 in Scott, west of Lafayette. NuNu's plans a third outlet.

Ask five boudin specialists the key to success, and chances are you'll get five answers: seasoning, consistency, texture, meat-to-rice ratio and faithfulness to the recipe. Just don't expect to learn the ingredients; they're closely guarded secrets. Choate, a three-time winner in the 2010 cook-off, prepares 3,000 pounds of boudin every week at NuNu's because he's the only person who knows the recipe.

Boudin trailblazers shouldn't expect luxury. My favorite smoked boudin links are from two of the least-fancy shops: the Best Stop, a compact convenience store in Scott, and Sonnier's Sausage & Boudin. Almost no places have a wait staff; you'll order and pay at a counter. Fewer than half offer indoor seating. Most open by 6 a.m. - Cajun breakfast, remember? - but are dark for dinner.

But the experience is easy on the budget; I paid as little as \$2 per link and 50 cents for a boudin ball. Boudin by the pound costs about \$3.25.

Now, I know what you're thinking as you ponder an excursion: What if a traveler doesn't like boudin? No worries. Menus also feature barbecue, fried chicken, Tex-Mex and shrimp po-boys.

*Harry Shattuck is the former travel editor of the Houston Chronicle.*

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