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From the swamp floor pantry

Chef John Folse's childhood in the swamps of Louisiana prepared him to use all of the best in his restaurants.

by Jill Seiler

Growing up the son of a French-speaking fur trapper in the swamps of Louisiana was the best education Chef John Folse could have asked for. Isolated from grocery stores and surrounded by what his father called “the swamp floor pantry,” the boy learned how to cook at the apron strings of grandmas, grandpas and Cajun trappers. He also picked up a canon law that would influence the rest of his life.

“There was a code the trappers had, that whatever you caught and took the furs and skins to sell, you ate,” Folse says. “You respected the animal.”

Whether rabbit, raccoon, mink or something with a bit more teeth like an alligator, he learned to use every piece of each animal, and that all meat was good.

“You just had to know how to cook it,” Folse explains.

He began his culinary career at Howard Johnson's Restaurant in Baton Rouge in 1970. Eight years later, he was opening his own restaurant in Donaldsonville, La., called Lafitte's Landing. The years came on as the young chef and budding entrepreneur developed a food-manufacturing company, publishing division and the White Oak Plantation catering facility near Baton Rouge.

Through Chef John Folse & Company, the man has spread his philosophy on cooking and life around the world. As host of the PBS cooking show, “A Taste of Louisiana,” he shares his knowledge and love of Louisiana culture.

Folse introduced Louisiana cuisine to international audiences from Japan to Hong Kong and China, from Russia to Paris and has even cooked for Pope John Paul II. The Louisiana Legislature named him “Culinary Ambassador to the World,” for those efforts and more. It's not all live performance of course. Chef John is the author of the 900-page “Encyclopedia of Cajun and Creole Cuisine,” used by culinary schools all over the world.

“My goal the day I die is that I would have done my best to bring our story to the rest of the world,” Folse says. “I want to have done all I possibly could to love and appreciate the place I came from, and to have told our story to everyone I possibly could.”

He's doing that by teaching a class on the history of Cajun and Creole Cuisine at the Chef John Folse Culinary Institute at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, La. It's one of the only four-year culinary arts, bachelor of science degree programs at a U.S. public university, where more than 400 students study classical cooking and regional cuisine.

“At some point, I came to realize just how special the language and the music, the cooking and the stories we tell are and that we should tell it to the world,” Folse says.

His passion for respecting animals that provide meat for the kitchen shows in efforts to share his Louisiana upbringing with other chefs and butchers at his annual Boucherie, the last Saturday in February. A hundred dedicated devotees and novices from across the country come to Folse's plantation for a day of education.

All learn how to humanely harvest a pig and use each and every piece of the animal for food. The day concludes with 4-H members telling how they raise their project animals.

Not only is Folse passionate about Louisiana cuisine, he is also passionate about high-quality beef and has been using *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand cuts in his restaurants, television series and business for 15 years. The chef explains he stays with CAB because he recognizes his values in the brand. By marketing the whole carcass to chefs, CAB increases the value of lesser-used cuts.

“I'm excited to find lesser-used cuts in fine dining, like char ribs from the chuck. I can add all kinds of herbs and flavors to it and the customers love it,” Folse says. “CAB is going to guarantee me a good cut of meat.”

He appreciates that CAB understands most chefs have to use more than the high-quality and well-known primal cuts. Folse appreciates it enough to send many of his staff culinarians to CAB headquarters in Wooster, Ohio, to learn new ways to utilize cuts like the shank, skirt steak, flank steak and tri-tip. That elevates menus and ultimately the customer's experience.

Seeing the wider use of every piece of the animal recalls Folse's upbringing in the swamplands.

“My chefs know what they can do with a great CAB tenderloin. But CAB reminds them that an animal has more parts than a filet mignon,” he says.

Besides backing up the swamp pantry code, Folse says CAB adds value to his restaurants by virtue of brand name recognition by his clientele.

“When the first guy knocked on my door and said he wanted to introduce me to CAB, I think you can tell that I took notice,” the chef says.

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Caption information: Photo 2—Folse cuts into a rib primal at the CAB Culinary Center in 2018. Photo 3—Folse captures video of his staff Chef Jeremy Langlois, working at CAB Culinary Center. Photo 4—Folse and Langlois in the White Oak Plantation kitchen. Photo 5: Bourbon-cured charcuterie from the round was one option explored during the visit to CAB.