

Family Meal: New Orleans

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Leah Chase: The Creole queen of New Orleans

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(CNN) — If anyone knows the power of food to change communities, it's Leah Chase.

Her longstanding Dooky Chase's Restaurant is widely known as the heart of New Orleans, an institution that served as a center point for social justice during the civil rights movement and a pillar of the arts, rightfully earning her the title of "Queen of Creole Cuisine."

Born and raised in Louisiana during the tense segregation of the Jim Crow era, Chase found her calling while working as a server in New Orleans' French Quarter in the early '40s.

After marrying local jazz musician Edgar "Dooky" Chase Jr. in 1946, the couple took over his father's bustling sandwich shop in the predominantly black neighborhood of Treme, transforming it into an elegant sit-down Creole restaurant and African American art gallery – something virtually unheard of during a time of rare black-owned businesses.

Chase drew upon her childhood in Madisonville, Louisiana, and the years she spent as a server in New Orleans to reshape the restaurant.

Her family was poor, but on Sundays the finery came out and chicken – a rarity during the week – was served.

"On Sunday, we did have a white tablecloth and napkins, and we had that fried chicken and the baked macaroni, so Sunday was what you looked forward to," Chase recalls.

She wanted to bring those traditions to Dooky Chase's as well as some of the customs she observed in French Quarter restaurants.

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There would be no ketchup bottles on the table. "When I came I said, 'No, we gonna do like we do on the other side of town. We gonna change things.' That took a lot of doing, but we did it and I insist on service," says Chase.

She also embraced her French Creole roots, carrying on her grandmother's commitment to gumbo.

"I came to New Orleans and I saw what my grandma, always, always your dinner started with gumbo. You never had dinner that didn't start with gumbo," Chase says.





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Being a black female chef has not been easy for Chase. “You come in in this world, you have to act like a woman, but you have to think like a man,” she says.

“You gotta think like a man and work like a dog, and you still have to remember that you’re a woman.”

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The restaurant weathered the 1960s, becoming one of the only public places acceptable for races to mix while strategizing the civil rights movement, including black voter registration, NAACP meetings and other political gatherings.

Activists had a safe haven in Dooky Chase’s.

“Nobody bothered them once they were in here. The police never, ever bothered us here,” says Chase. “So they would meet and they would plan to go out, do what they had to do, come back – all over a bowl of gumbo and some fried chicken.”

To this day, political officials, celebrities and people who just love to travel continue to roll through the doors. Chase has cooked for everyone from Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama to novelist James Baldwin, composer Quincy Jones and legendary musician Ray Charles.

And the Queen continues to earn accolades, including recognition from the James Beard Foundation, NAACP and Southern Foodways Alliance. There’s a permanent gallery named after her at the Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans.

Chase is a true ambassador for the city and a believer in its remarkable resilience.

“You keep working and you never, never give up,” Chase says. “And that’s the one thing about people in New Orleans – you can’t break them easily. They will not break. They will keep coming at you and coming up better every time.”

[Dooky Chase’s Restaurant](#), 2301 Orleans Avenue, New Orleans LA 70119; 504.821.0600. The restaurant is open Tuesday through Friday for lunch and Friday evenings for dinner.
