

Taste of Crescent City History

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mtravis@tulane.edu

Nailing down the best recipe for an iconic dish is like determining which sliver in the spectrum of a rainbow to name “red” or “blue.” The differences in both hue and taste are subtle. And yet, exploring the history of how the subtle tastes of an iconic dish come together can add richness and flavor to our understanding of the past.



A curator of books and records at Tulane, Susan Tucker edited and wrote essays for a new book on the history of New Orleans food. (Photos by Paula Burch-Celentano)

That's what Susan Tucker and a half dozen writers did in developing *New Orleans Cuisine: Fourteen Signature Dishes and Their Histories* (University Press of Mississippi, 2009).

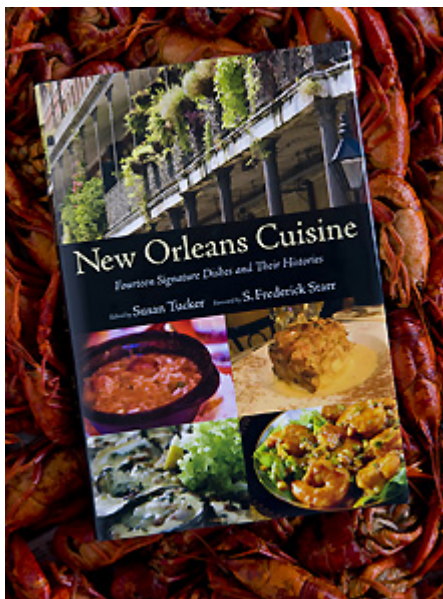
The book is a hybrid scholarly study of the history of food in New Orleans, mixed with a few recipes. It developed from a project of the New Orleans Culinary History Group.

Tucker is a co-founder of the group, and she's also curator of books and records at the [Newcomb College Center for Research on Women](#). She contributed essays and

edited the book.

She spoke at a [Tulane Alumni Lifelong Learning](#) event in May at the Lavin-Bernick Center, describing the process for choosing the recipes published in the book.

After the Culinary History Group settled on the 14 signature dishes ? Sazerac cocktail, French bread, shrimp remoulade, oysters Rockefeller, daube glacee, turtle soup, gumbo, trout amandine, red beans and rice, mirliton and shrimp, Creole tomato salad, Creole cream cheese, bread pudding and caf   brulot ? they then gathered over several months to taste seven or eight versions of every dish, prepared by the group members.



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“The rule was that you had to follow the recipes exactly as they were printed in the old cookbooks,” says Tucker.

The tasters filled out forms in which they rated the dishes' texture, appearance and taste. They also were asked questions about their memories of what the dish should taste like.

“So much of food is about memory,” says Tucker.

In addition to the signature dishes, the group also studied the history of related dishes. In the essay on bread pudding, for example, there is an exploration of the history of other desserts in New Orleans. There's also information on the manufacturing of sugar in the state of Louisiana.

New Orleans Cuisine documents the city's romance with food, with a range of stories, from the invention of the Sazerac cocktail to the legend of the poor boy loaf and the means in which coffee was shipped through the port.

Food is an intrinsic ingredient in a culture, says Tucker, but it is ephemeral. What's eaten today is gone tomorrow. Except in memory ? and books.