

# BLACK BEAN CASSEROLE, NOODLES, AND HONEY

OKRA AND GUMBO—BATTLESHIP GRAY AND ICKY FISH —  
LAWLESSNESS—LOCAL BEER—A ROUGH SALOON NEXT DOOR—THE  
HOT CLUB OF NEW ORLEANS—THE HEAVIEST POUR ON FRENCHMAN  
STREET—RACHEL'S MUFFELETТА—A ROUX—CRAWDADS—THE  
RECIPE— KATRINA—I WALK THROUGH THE RUINS—HONEY—  
PELLAGRA—PLUGGED URETHRA—ADJUSTING THE RECIPE—  
BRAZILIAN BEEF—FEEDING THE BIRDS

I brought the recipe for black bean casserole back with me from New Orleans just three months after my dog Noodles died and a couple of weeks before Katrina smashed into the city. I had looked in my journal and found that I hadn't visited my sister Sally there in four years, and so I called and told her I was flying down.

Now, to me, New Orleans is a city of food as much as it is a city of jazz. The young Louisianan in the plane seat next to me said, "Ya'll lookin' forward to gettin' back home?" He was speaking to the people across from us as he and I had got odd, aft-facing seats and were flying backwards with no choice but to stare at these people as we flew and, of course, them at us.

They told him that they were.

"I just want to get some gumbo," he went on.

"Okra is what makes gumbo gumbo, isn't it?" I

asked him, for I'd heard that this was so but wasn't really sure and felt I had been afforded here the

179

opportunity find out at last. I knew my niece loved the stuff.

"I don't know what's in it," he said with a smile. "I just like it."

Sally lived in Lakeview, a fairly nice, middle class neighborhood. She had a small house there, which she loved, with a decent back yard, and she lived alone, two of her kids being successfully employed and the other, my niece, away at college.

Now, I was born in the south, and I feel even today that my life really began when we moved west in 1958 to the clean, unspoiled desert of Arizona. So I didn't used to like the fact that my sister and my niece and nephews lived in New Orleans. The city was rife with crime and corruption and despite its culture and rusticity was rather unattractive. The place seemed to have a dreary, hosed-out appearance and what's more, there didn't appear to be an easy escape from it. A fishing trip I took once out on the nearby ocean convinced me that the color "battleship gray" had been invented on the Gulf Coast, and I found that dredging around with an oversized hook in those shallow, oily waters for "reds" was marginally fun as a one-time thing, but not much more. And I wouldn't eat one of those icky fishes if you paid me.

I remember once watching a bunch of workmen trying to direct traffic in New Orleans, and I said to my nephew, "Those idiots are directing cars into each other. Someone's gonna crash. You ought to call the cops."

"They wouldn't come," he told me.

My other nephew, a jazz guitarist, came home late one night from a gig, and a drunk ran a red light and

180

totaled the family car. By the time the cops arrived on the scene, the driver was cold sober.

But it is not just the establishment that has a lawless quality; it is the mindset of the people as well. A high school graduation ceremonies note sent home to my sister read, "A limited amount of beer will be served to the graduates."

There's truly a different culture in New Orleans from anywhere else I've been in America, and as I said, I didn't used to like the idea of their living there. I began to change my mind, however, when I saw the convenience of my sister's neighborhood. The veterinarian was two houses down, next to which was an Irish pub named Parlay's, which was next to a coffee house, which was next to the bank, which was next to the hair cutter's. The supermarket was right across the street. She had endless little pubs within easy striking distance and there was live music in them half of the time. The beer you get in a local saloon in Arizona is what my irreverent sister refers to as "panther piss," but New Orleans has its own signature brew called Abita, and it comes in several styles, one of which is a wonderfully hoppy concoction that is a joy to drink. Such local flavor is missing where I live. There are good brew houses in places like Phoenix, but their offerings are not available in every single pub and restaurant in the city, and po'boy sandwiches stuffed full of shrimp or oysters are not standard fare either, so despite their Mexican restaurants, cities like Phoenix still seem to lack a culinary identity.

Sally didn't go into Parlay's because the joint seemed too rough for her, and in fact about a week

181

before I flew down, somebody stabbed a fellow patron in there and the poor man crawled out and died on "the neutral ground," which is what New Orleanians call the grassy area that separates the two lanes of any divided roadway. I went in and had a beer, but the pub was no good at all to Sally; I didn't say her neighborhood was perfect—just convenient.

As for my nieces and nephews, it didn't do them any harm to have grown up playing music in the funky coffee houses and bars that one finds everywhere in New Orleans, and the awful Louisianan public schools were a blessing in disguise: it was a foregone conclusion that they would be sent instead to excellent private ones, where all three of them turned into rocket scientists, one going on to Yale, one to the prestigious University of North Texas, and one to Oberlin with a nice scholarship just because they liked the way she sang.

On this visit, I went down to the French Quarter to watch my nephew, Davy, play one of his last gigs in the popular band "the Hot Club of New Orleans." Davy had just got married to a Brazilian girl named Angela, and they lived in his house with their little dog, Linda. I was given the dog to hold in the bar because Angela had to work, and they didn't like to leave the dog in the house alone.

Linda yapped nearly constantly through the show, and I got some sideways glances from the tourists and locals at the bar. I kept saying, "It's the guitar player's dog!" But I don't think anyone heard. Linda, however, wasn't the only distraction. Her barking was drowned out by a Dixieland jazz band that stormed into the bar,

182

bass drum pounding in the lead and trombones and trumpets blaring out the ultimate New Orleans cliché, "When the Saints Come Marching In" at the decibel level of a major earthquake. Davy and the other "Hot Club" musicians just kept playing, and when the marching band left, someone said, "Take it home, babe," and they closed their song as if nothing had happened.

John Coleman, the fiftyish clarinet player, got the microphone and said, "We'll be taking a ten-minute break, ladies and gentlemen. In the meantime, I suggest you sample some of the top shelf liquor in this fine establishment. Crystal will be your bartender. She has the heaviest pour on Frenchman Street, and I know you'll appreciate that when she makes one of those top dollar call drinks taste positively affordable."

Coleman would know. He was a notorious lush. But that wasn't going to get him fired. These jazz bands never work the crowd. Showmanship would be considered gauche in such a venue, and so the rummy clarinet player could sit in his chair completely toasted and sleep while the rest of the band played. When it was time for him to solo, he'd stir, come awake, pick up that licorice stick, and blow it like nothing you ever heard. Drunk or sober, he was simply fabulous.

Now for a year or so, I had been watching Rachel Ray's show "Forty Dollars a Day" in which she is given 40 bucks and visits an interesting city to see how well she can eat on that much money. Well, it just so happened that one of the shows was filmed in New Orleans, and I watched it and had my sister take me to the place where Rachel had eaten something called a

183

muffeletta. A muffeletta is a very large, round salami sandwich with home baked bread and an oil and vinegar, chopped olive dressing. The thing is huge and, therefore, somewhat pricy, and while Rachel had been able to cut a deal with them for the sake of the show and get them to serve her a half a muffeletta at half the price, they insisted that I purchase a whole one. I asked them if I was getting the same sandwich that Rachel Ray bought, and they said rather proudly, "Yes, sir you are."

I bought a beer and was advised by the restaurant that if I wanted to drink it on the street, I had to put it in a brown paper bag, this in order to pull the wool over the eyes of the naive New Orleans police, I supposed. I went out and chomped on the sandwich and drank the beer on the same cement steps by the Mississippi where Rachel had eaten on the TV show. I couldn't finish the muffeletta and winded up lugging it around with me for a few days before it was all gone, and in the end I must admit that I was rather glad to have finally finished it.

One night Sally showed me how to make a roux. She was getting things ready for dinner guests and the roux was in preparation for the crawdad dish she was going to serve. That seemed to be another example of the different culture in the city. I remember once when I was invited to a friend's house for dinner, his mom was quick to say, "Oh, we're having waffles." (You know, just in case I didn't like them.) In New Orleans, however, you don't even think to tell the guests they'll be eating mudbugs on a bed of rice. You just invite them over and don't say a thing. They'll eat the crawdads all right—and cry for more!

184

The next night she showed me how to make black bean casserole. I liked it, so I had her write up the recipe.

## BLACK BEAN CASSEROLE

2 cloves garlic  
2 tbs olive oil  
1 pound ground turkey  
1 16-ounce can tomato sauce  
2 heaping teaspoons chili powder  
2 heaping teaspoons cumin  
1 small can corn drained  
1 can black beans drained  
1 can green chiles  
8 ounces of shredded longhorn cheddar

Cook garlic in oil.

Add the ground turkey and brown it up.

Add tomato sauce.

Mix in chili powder and cumin

Mix in the corn, black beans and green chiles

Cook together fifteen minutes.

Now lay flour tortillas in a casserole dish and then layer in the mixture of meat and then cheese and then tortillas and mixture and tortillas and cheese, until the dish is full.

Bake at 350° covered until bubbly and yummy! Serve.

Sally's close friend Catherine was kind enough to take both of us to the airport. Sally had decided to visit

185

Arizona, and she and I flew there together and toured the state for a week or so. Then I drove her to Sky Harbor Airport for the flight back to Louisiana.

On August 27, 2005 she called to wish me happy birthday, and I said, "Hey, there's a huge hurricane headed at you!"

"I know," she said. "I'm leaving now for Baton Rouge. I hate this!"

I watched the news reports and watched the storm smash into the city. It was a national disaster.

The family got word that Sally had made it to Baton Rouge and Davy had escaped to Mississippi with his guitar, his dog, and his new bride. We couldn't contact them for a couple of weeks because communications were down. Katherine stayed in town because she didn't want to leave all of her cats, and there was no word at all from her for some time. Sally finally learned that gunmen were walking down Katherine's street blowing the locks off the doors, and just when they reached her place, a coast guard helicopter sent down a spotlight and plucked her off of the balcony of her three-story walk-up.

Sally's house was under 8 feet of water for two weeks; Davy's had no water damage.

When the town dried out, I flew back to walk through the ruins of what had once been Sally's house,

186

and she and I drove through the endless miles of ghostly neighborhoods with the unmown lawns, the dead trees, the abandoned cars, and the ever present yellow water lines on the walls of every house.

Afterwards, back in Arizona, I remembered the black bean casserole and started to make it nearly every week. I remembered how my dog Noodles had loved to eat any spicy dish, and so I let another dog, Honey, have some. Honey is my brother's cocker spaniel and when construction started on his new swimming pool, it was decided that Honey would live with me. She liked the black bean casserole and soon refused to eat her dog food, choosing instead to wait me out until I finally gave in and she got the people food. Because of the dog, I had to have the casserole handy every day of the week. She would eat fully half of every batch I made.

Honey was Noodles' nemesis. I once brought Noodles over to my brother's and Honey attacked her. Noodles was a Chihuahua/terrier mix and no match for the much larger and stronger cocker. Noodles withstood the attack pretty well, but did not survive her three-year fight against Cushing's disease and died on April 21, 2005 at the age of 15.

Before Honey came to live with me, she had always been relegated to my brother's back yard summer and winter. Now, with Noodles gone and the summer blazing hot, Honey could squeeze in and out of my house at will through the undersized doggy door and sleep in the house in air-conditioned comfort.

The black bean casserole called for flour tortillas, but I am fond of corn tortillas. I have heard that the mixture of corn and beans produces a very strong

187

protein, and this is perhaps the reason why tamale pie and other bean dishes taste so good with cornbread and why succotash is a popular dish. Sometimes the taste buds automatically recognize the taste of nutrition. I remember studying the Hopi Indians and learning how they put ashes in their cornmeal before cooking it. The alkali ashes allow the body to absorb vitamin B and prevent pellagra, but the Hopis who invented this recipe didn't know that—they just knew that it tasted better that way. When my brother mentioned that Honey liked corn chips, I had still another reason to replace the flour tortillas with corn ones. I also doubled the amount of canned corn and used ground beef because I felt the flavor of turkey didn't stand up to the cumin and chili very well.

It began to become a hassle to prepare the casserole so often, and so I tried to wean Honey back to dog food. I would take pupperoni dog treats and stick them into the dog food like sweet waffle cones in some doggy parfait. It didn't work very well. She ate the pupperoni but held out for the casserole.

I worried a little that Honey's diet was getting unhealthy. I knew that once I had taken to feeding Noodles jerky treats every day and one night

she couldn't urinate because a bladder stone was lodged in her urethra—a stone I later learned might have been formed by the high ash content of the treats. It was a Sunday night and the vet down the road wasn't available and Noodles suffered all night at the brink of getting toxic peritonitis until I brought her into the vet's and she passed the stone on the floor in a pool of urine and relief.

188

The vet said that Noodles would have to eat Science Diet for the rest of her life. I tried that for a while, and Noodles didn't like it much, so it wasn't long before I put her back on regular dog food—but with no treats at all.

I took other liberties with Sally's recipe. I began to tire of baking the casserole when all I really had to do was put it in the dish hot, and the cheese that I layered in would melt just as well as it would in the oven. I also gave up layering the tortillas. It was easier to cut the torts into triangles and stir them in. As the dish sat, the tortillas would float in the mixture to find a kind of horizontal equilibrium on their own, and when you cut a slice of the casserole, the cross section revealed a neat stratification.

There were two other changes. The cumin and chili powder obliterated the taste of even the garlic, so I left both the garlic and the green chiles out of the recipe. I told Sally, and she said that if only for the extra nutrition I should leave those things in, but I was skeptical. In addition, I didn't want to bother to brown up the ground beef. I wanted a time-saving alternative to having to cook the beef, and I knew of an easy solution: I could get a can of pre-cooked Brazilian parboiled beef and use that. The Brazilian beef, however, presented a problem that was very real to me.

A little more than a year before, I took Noodles in for a check-up, and the vet noticed that she had gained weight. I had switched to Mighty Dog, which Noodles liked better than other brands of dog food. The vet

told me to put her on Science Diet and she would live longer. Reluctantly I did, and Noodles hated it. In a

189

couple of weeks she wouldn't eat at all, so I brought her her favorite food: Brazilian parboiled beef. She wouldn't touch it. Noodles was having kidney failure brought on by Cushing's disease and lack of appetite was its tell-tale symptom.

The vet embarked on a treatment of dialysis that involved a saline drip that was designed to cleanse the blood through the kidneys by the sheer attrition of constant, unremitting hydration. Noodles stayed in a cage at the vet's with an IV for three terrible days, and on the third, I was directed to bring Noodles' favorite food to see if she was better and would eat it. When I arrived, I found her in an absolutely ghastly condition and knew that she would never eat again. After we put her to sleep, I buried her in the back yard and threw the can of beef in the trash.

It took more than a year for me to finally use Brazilian beef again, but I finally added it to the recipe. Honey loved it, and I found that I was able to eat it too, but still not without a pang brought on by the memory of how Noodles died.

On the morning after I added the Brazilian beef to the casserole, I went out into the desert back yard and got the pooper scooper. There in the yard, I saw Honey's stool stuffed fat with the extra corn I had put in the recipe, and it brought to mind the time I had seen Noodles' stool similarly filled with the milo maize which I had left out on the lawn for the Inca doves back before the desert landscaping when the yard was cool and green with grass. And I couldn't help but remember how I had thought the milo might do her harm and how for years afterwards I had given up feeding the birds.

190