

Sugar is king in La.

- By CAROL ANNE BLITZER AND TOMMY SIMMONS
- Advocate food writers
- Published: Oct 29, 2009
- The Association of Food Journalists annual conference was held in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Oct. 7-10. Last week's Food section covered the New Orleans program, today the Food staff spotlights the group's Sugar Day Oct. 9 field trip to Baton Rouge.



Joel Hebert, farm manager at the Sugar Research Station in St. Gabriel, peels fresh sugar cane for the food journalists to taste.

Members of the Association of Food Journalists learned about sugar “from the ground to the table, the good and the bad” on a daylong field trip, “All About Sugar, Sugar,” sponsored by The Advocate on Oct. 9.

Presentations and food for the event spotlighted the story of sugar in Louisiana and its significance and future role to the state and the national economy.

The day began with a breakfast of churros (cinnamon-and-sugar-dusted twist-shaped doughnuts) and milk punch provided by restaurateurs Kenny LaCour, Kim Kringlie and Bob Iacovone, co-owners of Rambla, the hot tapas-style restaurant located in New Orleans' International House Hotel.

After that, conference participants boarded a bus to drive to the LSU Sugar Research Station in St. Gabriel. Charley Richard, executive publisher of the Sugar Journal and Louisiana Cookin' magazine and managing director of the Sugar Processing Research Institute in New Orleans, gave an overview of Louisiana sugar production during the trip.

According to Richard, sugar cane may have first been planted in Louisiana during the late 1600s by the French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville; however, there are no records of successful cane production until 1751 when Jesuit missionaries planted sugar cane on a plot of land located in what is now the middle of downtown New Orleans, right off Canal Street. The plantings survived, and by the late 1750s, there was a sugar mill operating on Esplanade Avenue.

The early cane varieties were susceptible to frosts, so the first sugar cane crops in Louisiana were mainly processed into a rumlike drink called “tafia.”

The first successful sugar production on a large scale was organized by Etienne de Bore with the help of Antoine Morin from Santo Domingo in 1795 on family property (now Audubon Park in New Orleans) of de Bore's wife. His first crop netted him a profit of \$12,000, and because of this success, sugar replaced indigo as the most important agricultural crop in the state.

After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Anglo-Americans poured into Louisiana and joined others in developing the sugar industry. New varieties of cane were introduced. Norbert Rillieux, a free man of color born in New Orleans and educated in Paris, invented an evaporation system for refining sugar. An estimated 300,000 slaves were imported to work the fields. The sugar industry was king and produced some 1,200 plantations in the state before the Civil War devoted to growing sugar cane and producing sugar.

Following the Civil War, the industry slowly began to reorganize. The shortage of labor was a problem. Mechanization was needed in order to survive, and slowly mechanization and use of chemical fertilizers replaced manures, and the sugar industry began to rebound. Again, new varieties of cane were needed to replace older varieties that were subject to diseases and pests.

Consolidation resulted in fewer plantations, mills and refineries, and this economic model continues. After World War I, the American Sugar Cane League, Louisiana State University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture joined forces to develop varieties for the Louisiana sugar industry. Louisiana is the northernmost location of sugar cane production in the U.S.

Richard noted that sugar cane acreage in the state is impacted by growing urbanization, where croplands are more valuable as subdivisions than agricultural fields, increasing fuel and fertilizer costs, global competition and changing diets. He predicted that sugar cane will become a valuable source of alternative energy through utilization in ethanol production.

Sugar cane remains the No. 1 row crop in the state with an annual economic value of \$1.7 billion, he said.

As Richard outlined the history and economics of sugar cane production, the food writers took notes and asked questions so that they would understand the basis of the work that researchers are doing at the LSU Sugar Research Station.

At the station, Kenneth A. Gravois, station director, led the visitors to the center of a cane field, where they watched a demonstration of mechanized cane cutting. They then visited the breeding center, where new varieties of sugar cane are developed and tested.

Gravois explained why sugar production in Louisiana, which is now into its third century, is still viable. The industry leaders work constantly to stay ahead of problems, he said. The research station is developing new varieties of sugar cane that are more disease resistant, easier to harvest and high in sugar content and other varieties that have higher fiber content making them suitable to ethanol production.

Adaptability is essential, Gravois said. "Twenty-five years ago, we were able to get 150 to 200 pounds of sugar from a ton of sugar cane; today we produce 300 pounds of sugar. We harvest 6,500 pounds of cane per acre, and 25 years ago, we harvested 4,500 pounds."

Introducing new and better sugar cane varieties is the lifeblood of the industry.

The average life span of a sugar cane variety is 10 years. At that point, pests and plant diseases have compromised its production and a new variety must be planted. The Sugar Research Station scientists work on a minimum of 438 new sugar cane plants every growing season. These plants are planted, hybridized and nurtured over a period of time to develop new varieties that will be commercially successful. The process of

developing a variety and introducing it takes about 13 years. Keeping a steady stream of choices available to growers is important, Gravois said.

When the journalists boarded the bus to travel to the next stop, they were joined by Cynthia Campbell, Gulf states travel expert and former travel editor at The Advocate, who talked about Baton Rouge and the surrounding area as participants traveled to the Pennington Biomedical Research Center for presentations by Dr. George Bray, who spoke on his research on the effect of sugar-filled drinks on obesity, and registered dietitian/professor Catherine Champagne, who spoke on recent research on sugar substitutes. (See next week's story in Food by Cherie Sonnier on the bad news about sugar and calories.)

The next stop was LSU's Rural Life Museum, where they were greeted by chef and historian John Folse and museum Director David Floyd.

Before lunch, Folse spoke on the tragic history of slavery in Louisiana. He covered the rise and fall of the sugar plantation economy and how the production of sugar affected the life of the plantation slaves before the Civil War and after the Civil War when European immigrants were contracted to work the cane fields.

Chef Folse discussed the foods that would have been on the slaves' and sharecroppers' tables and why kitchen gardens and keeping a few chickens or a cow and maybe a pig became an important source of food for families and provided a little extra income through sales of eggs and butter.

After lunch, the Association of Food Journalists members visited the Rural Life Museum's sites: the slave cabin, plantation store, kitchen, sugar house, syrup kitchen and more. Docents from the museum explained what life was like for the slave and sharecropper and demonstrated how foods were cooked over an open hearth, an uncomfortably hot and dangerous task then and now.

Cooking in the kitchen started each day around 4 a.m. with the first chore being to rekindle the fire in the hearth from hot coals that had been kept overnight. Most of the cooking was done with reflected heat from the large fireplace, although boiling was done directly in the flames.

Martha White pointed out some of the vegetables and herbs that were grown in the kitchen garden, noting that the herbs were used medicinally as well as for seasoning and food preservation.

Floyd described sugar refining of the late 1700s through 1840s in what was termed the "Jamaica Train" process. Four to seven kettles would be built over a brick oven and were utilized in step-by-step refining of raw cane juice to produce raw sugar and molasses.

In the final cooking and cooling, the raw sugar crystallized into brown sugar crystals ready to be marketed.

After seeing how the slave and sharecropper lived, the writers were ready to hear about the final chapter in the story of the sugar plantation culture in Louisiana. They boarded their bus to travel to Houmas House Plantation and Gardens for a tour of the beautiful 1840 Greek Revival plantation house on the River Road in Burnside and to find out how a wealthy sugar plantation owner would have entertained his guests when "sugar was king."

Coffee warehouse magnate Kevin Kelly, owner of Houmas House, and Jim Blanchard, artist and Houmas House historian, presented Houmas House to the writers as it might have been when John Burnside, known as "the sugar prince of Louisiana," entertained at his Houmas House home in the 1860s.

At that time, Burnside was identified as one of the wealthiest men in the South. In Ascension Parish alone, he had 5,600 acres of improved land and 18,000 acres of unimproved land. In addition to Houmas House plantation, he owned nine other sugar plantations in the state and a store to supply 500 laborers.

A visitor to Houmas House recalled in an account published in 1938 that Burnside was a lavish entertainer and host. "His bounteous tables groaned with geese, turkeys, poultry and game. He imported salmon from England, and preserved meat in rare vintage wines from France. He kept a perpetual open house, and day and night, the welcome sign hung over his broad portals."

Today, Burnside's spirit of hospitality lives on at Houmas House. From the moment the food writers stepped down from the bus and were greeted with flutes of bubbly on the broad front porch overlooking the plantation's ancient oaks covered with lush resurrection fern to the performance of Houmas House's famous tour guide Judy Whitney-Davis, the evening was grand in scale and graciousness.

Whitney-Davis told the group the story of the founding of Fisk University and sang traditional Negro spirituals and selections from the movie "Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte" that was filmed at Houmas House.

As each journalist boarded the bus to return to the New Orleans conference hotel, Kelly presented them with a gift bag containing a Houmas House memento and two sugary pralines to remind them of their "Sugar Day" in Louisiana.

"Don't stay away," said Kelly. "We want to see you back in less than six months. Visitors become friends when they come back."