

# Talking Beans

by Tony Beckwith

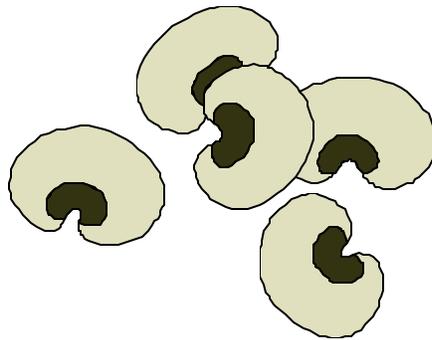
When I first came to this country, I worked on an oil rig. As part of my duties, I helped out in the galley, and after a few weeks the cook decided I was ready to relieve him while he took some shore leave. So I took over the culinary duties for about twenty roughnecks on a tiny metal platform, out of sight of land, somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico.

'Fixing' breakfast, lunch and dinner kept me extremely busy, and by the time I was finished, the sun had always gone down and I was exhausted. Rather than go straight to bed, I'd go up and join Mitch and Bobby on the helicopter landing pad. We'd lie there gazing up at the incredible stars, and Mitch would talk about growing up as a juvenile delinquent in Alabama, Bobby would talk about growing up as a black man along the coast of Louisiana, and I mainly talked about what to cook for lunch tomorrow. The huge, sparkling sky hung down over us, stretching off into the unimaginable distance, and we all agreed that up on that pad none of life's problems seemed quite so bad.

Every day a group of welders and carpenters came out to the rig, by boat or helicopter, and of course they stayed for lunch. The head man on the welding crew was Vic, and it soon became obvious that Vic had something on his mind. He'd come into the galley during the morning and talk about this and that, until I

realized that Vic was Cajun, a native of Louisiana, and food was what interested him most of all.

One day he casually mentioned that since beans were a basic part of any Cajun meal, and since they were a standard item on the rig's menu, then wouldn't it be great if the beans were really good? I told him I was cooking them just as my predecessor had taught me, with a ham hock and some salt and pepper, and asked what he thought of them. Something in



his eyes told me not to take it personally when he said, "Well, there's beans, and then there's *beans*."

I asked Vic right then to teach me how to make *beans*, and thus began my apprenticeship in the fine art of Cajun cooking, albeit on a very basic level. My mentor would coach me every morning, and in the afternoon he would give me an evaluation of the day's lunch. It was the kind of one-on-one training that fine schools the world over can only dream of. Vic showed me how

to mince up garlic and onions and sausage to stir into the pot of pintos, which added a rich flavor the humble ham hock could never equal. He taught me to scoop out a ladle full of cooked beans, puree them, and blend the paste back into the liquid, making a wonderful, thick gravy that transformed the beans into a delicious, hearty soup – perfect for serving over a heap of fluffy white rice.

Vic also taught me to save the breakfast bacon fat in an empty Folgers coffee can, and add a little to the biscuits and cornbread. He was spending more time in the kitchen than out on the deck with his crew, but nobody seemed to mind since they all agreed that what he was doing was far more important, and was for the benefit of everybody on board. Every day he told me the beans were getting better, until one day as he pulled his tasting spoon from his mouth, his eyes rolled, he smiled a truly blissful smile, and he said, "Now there's some *beans*!" I couldn't have felt more proud if he'd told me I'd been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Up on the heli-pad that night, Bobby said, "They sure was some *beans* you cooked today, man." I looked up at the stars, thinking about the many languages people everywhere use to talk to each other, and realized I'd just learned how to talk Beans. ★