



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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Talking Beans

When I came to the United States in the late 1970s, I worked on an oil rig off the coast of Louisiana. As part of my job, I helped out in the galley, and after a few weeks the cook, Jayro, decided I was ready to relieve him while he took some shore leave. So, in a sort of battlefield promotion, I assumed the cooking duties for about twenty-five roughnecks living on a tiny metal platform a hundred-odd miles offshore, somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico.

Making breakfast, lunch, and dinner kept me extremely busy, and by the time my workday was done, the sun had gone down and I was exhausted. But 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 stars—fabulously bright so far from land—unwinding after a long day. Mitch talked about growing up as a juvenile delinquent in Alabama, Bobby talked about growing up as a black man along the coast of Louisiana, and I wondered aloud about what to cook for lunch the following day. The huge, sparkling sky hung over us, stretching off into the unimaginable distance, and we all agreed that, up on that helipad, none of life's problems seemed quite so bad.

Every day a group of welders, electricians, and carpenters came out to the rig, by motorboat or helicopter, and of course they stayed for lunch. The head man on the welding crew was Vic, and it soon became clear that Vic had something on his mind. A charming man, he'd wander into the galley and talk to me about nothing in particular, keeping out of my way while observing what I was doing. I gradually realized that Vic was Cajun, a native of Louisiana who, like many members of that ethnic group, was passionately interested in food. One day he casually mentioned, in the nicest possible way, 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 to, seasoned with a ham hock and some salt and black pepper. "Well," he said gently, resting a hand on my shoulder, "Jayro's from Missouri. And there's

beans, and then there's Beans." I asked Vic right then to teach me how to cook Beans, and thus began my apprenticeship in the fine art of Cajun cooking, albeit on a very basic level.

My mentor coached me every morning and, in the afternoon, gave me a detailed evaluation of the day's lunch. It was the kind of one-on-one training that fine culinary schools the world over can only dream of. His approach was broad and surprisingly philosophical. He helped me understand that cooking is a form of communication, a way to express one's feelings for one's fellow human beings. Vic showed me how to mince garlic, onions, andouille sausage, and celery and stir them into the pot of pintos to add a rich flavour the humble ham hock could never equal. He taught me to scoop out a ladleful of cooked beans, puree them, and



blend the paste back into the liquid to make a wonderfully thick gravy that transformed the beans into a delicious, hearty soup, perfect for serving over a heap of fluffy white rice. Among his many tips, 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, two other staples on the menu. He was spending more time in the galley than out on deck with his crew, but nobody seemed to mind since it was generally agreed that what he was doing was far more important and was for the benefit of everyone on board. Every afternoon he told me my beans were getting better until one day, as he pulled his tasting spoon from his mouth, his eyes rolled back, a truly blissful smile spread across his

face, and he said, "Now there's some Beans!" I couldn't have felt prouder if he'd told me I'd been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Up on the helipad that night, Bobby said, "They sure was some Beans you cooked today, man!" I looked up at the stars, thinking about the nearly seven thousand languages that people around the world use to communicate with each other, and savoured the immense satisfaction of having learned how to talk Beans.

