



**Queen of
Creole Cuisine
Leah
Chase**

By Wendy Warren
Photographed by David Gallent

Leah

Leah Chase, one of 14 children, was born in 1923 in Madisonville, Louisiana, a small town just north of Lake Pontchartrain. Because there were no schools for black children in that part of the state in the 1920s and '30s, as a teenager she spent weekdays with her aunt in New Orleans so she could attend St. Mary's Academy. "My father was more Catholic than the pope," Mrs. Chase said, "and he insisted that his children be educated." She rode in to New Orleans on Monday mornings with a neighbor who worked in the city, and back home most Friday afternoons to spend weekends with her family.

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She was just a teenager when she first experienced the inside of a restaurant — she went to work as a waitress. During an interview conducted by author Jessica Harris, she spoke of walking to work through the French Quarter, marveling at all the women who had the luxury of being able to sleep until late afternoon and then lounge around on their front porches in expensive negligees. "I was quite naive," she said.

She went on to work as a cook in a white tablecloth restaurant and fell in love with fine dining for life. Her humble beginnings established the solid foundation for the fine, humble person she is today.

At 23, she married musician Edgar "Dooky" Chase Jr., who was nicknamed after his father's corner sandwich shop that sold lottery tickets and po' boys. "Don't ever marry a musician," she said, laughing, as she mused about their 60-plus-year relationship.

Chef John Folse, her biggest fan, says, "She assisted in the desegregation of the South, one plate of fried chicken and one cup of gumbo at a time."

That corner sandwich shop evolved into the world-renowned Dooky Chase Restaurant. It became a neutral ground for politicians and activists to meet and discuss the issues of the times — including civil rights. Chef John Folse, her biggest fan, says, "She assisted in the desegregation of the South, one plate of fried chicken and one cup of gumbo at a time."

She is known as the Queen of Creole Cuisine and is the author of several cookbooks. She sent a sweet potato pie to pop superstar Michael Jackson several times a year until his death. She has fed the likes of Quincy Jones, Duke Ellington, Thurgood Marshall, Ray Charles, and Presidents George W. Bush (the only sitting president to dine there twice) and Barack Obama (whom she scolded.) Mrs. Chase said Obama would be welcome to return, as long as he didn't have the audacity to put hot sauce in her gumbo again. "It's fine just as it's served."

The dining rooms at Dooky Chase are as colorful as its menu. Longstanding patrons of African American art, she and Mr. Chase have amassed a collection featuring Elizabeth Catlett, John Scott, Chase Kamata, and Sue Jane Smock, among many others, much of it on display at the restaurant. She's an honorary trustee of the New Orleans Museum of Art and has testified before Congress in favor of increased funding for the National Endowment for the Arts.



Leah and her family enjoying a meal at Bourbon House

In 2012, the National Restaurant Association selected her to receive its Faces of Diversity American Dream Award for her entrepreneurial achievements in the restaurant industry. She was named the Louisiana Restaurant Association's Restaurateur of the Year in 2009.

Chef Leah Chase, a true Louisiana icon.



- Get there:
Dooky Chase Restaurant
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