

Remembering Leah Chase, a giant among New Orleanians, who died June 1 at 96

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Leah Chase, now 95, is a native of Madisonville and the subject of a new film 'Leah Chase: The Queen of Creole Cuisine.'
PROVIDED PHOTO/Pontchartrain Film Festival

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Leah Chase, whose name loomed as large in New Orleans history as other greats like Louis Armstrong and Fats Domino, died June 1 at 96, her family confirmed in a statement tonight.

Until the end, Chase — nicknamed "the Queen of Creole Cuisine" was still cooking at her Treme restaurant Dooky Chase, named for her late husband. Generations of New Orleanians lined up for her Friday buffets of fried chicken and all the fixings, and seatings for her Holy Thursday menu of "green gumbo" (*gumbo z'herbes*) were booked months in advance.

Born in Madisonville in 1923, Chase was one of 14 children. She moved to the south shore and began helping to run a local po-boy shop with her father-in-law, Dooky Chase, and her husband, Dooky Chase Jr., while she worked in white-owned restaurants in the French Quarter. Before long, she decided there was a market for a white-tablecloth restaurant catering to black New Orleanians.



The extraordinary life of Leah Chase: remembering the Queen of Creole Cuisine

She told Gambit in 2012: "My mother-in-law (Emily Chase) was a great cook, but being a black woman of that time she did not have any experience in restaurants like I had seen it from working in the Quarter So I said, 'You know, we're going to have it here like other people have it.'"

The new Dooky Chase became a magnet for black artists, musicians and dignitaries visiting New Orleans. According to the Dooky Chase website, "Leah Chase has fed Quincy Jones, Jesse Jackson, Duke Ellington, Thurgood Marshall, James Baldwin, Ray Charles, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama." (Word had it that when Obama added hot sauce to her gumbo before tasting it, she was not happy.)

The restaurant also became a place where many civil rights meetings of the 1950s and 1960s were held, with black and white civil rights leaders alike meeting together.

When Gambit named her New Orleanian of the Year in 2015, civil rights activist and Freedom Rider Doratha "Dodie" Smith-Simmons said, "It was just a place where we felt safe. ... For a lot of the people and students who came down here to work on voter registration, their fondest memory was of going to Dooky Chase's for a meal. Because of what Leah and her husband did, people didn't forget that."

Characteristically modest, Chase said, "My job was just to feed people. People like me could just be cooperative and support them, and that's what you did. In New Orleans, you don't do anything without eating. So they would come here and I would make gumbo and fried chicken, and they'd have lunch and plan their moves.



Leah Chase.
Daniel Erath

"Sometimes it was hard and sometimes it was frightening, because you didn't know who was going to come back and who wasn't."

The restaurant was even pipe-bombed. "It hit the bar, tore the bar up and put a hole in the door, but nobody was hurt," Chase recalls. "It didn't frighten me."

After the floodwaters following Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of Dooky Chase, she and her husband lived in a FEMA trailer next door until they could reopen the doors to the restaurant in 2007.

Chase and her story were also inspiration for Princess Tiana, the first African-American Disney princess, in the 2009 animated film "The Princess and the Frog." In 2016, Chase won a Lifetime Achievement Award from the James Beard Foundation.



New Orleanian of the Year 2015: Leah Chase

"Leah Chase was a legend, an icon and an inspiration. It is impossible to overstate what she meant to our City and to our community. At Dooky Chase's Restaurant: she made creole cuisine the cultural force that it is today," Mayor LaToya Cantrell wrote on Twitter. "Leah Chase served presidents and celebrities, she served generations of locals and visitors, and she served her community. She was a culture-bearer in the truest sense. We are poorer for her loss, and richer for having known and having loved her. She will be badly missed. My sincere condolences, my prayers and my love go out to her family. The City of New Orleans will be there for them, in gratitude for all that Leah gave us. May she rest in God's perfect peace."

Funeral arrangements were not immediately announced. The Chase family requested that in lieu of flowers, well-wishers and mourners make donations to the Edgar L. "Dooky" Jr. and Leah Chase Family Foundation, P.O.

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