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## **MAKING IT UP AS YOU GO ALONG**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article recounts the founding of the Southern Food & Beverage Museum in New Orleans, LA with a special emphasis on the obstacles that the organization faced and the commitment to overcome those obstacles through tenacity and creativity. The journey to the present goes from the concept and kitchen table brainstorming to a functioning and growing institution that has begun to be recognized within the industry. The obstacles include Hurricane Katrina, the BP Oil Spill, and the COVID 19 pandemic.

<https://southernfood.org/>

**KEY WORDS:** Southern Food & Beverage Museum, Hurricane Katrina, BP Oil Spill, resilience, food museums, 2008 Financial Crisis, opportunism in business, and COVID 19 pandemic

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sometimes an idea takes hold of you, and it won't let go. I have had many ideas that didn't work out, and I have been able to just let them fade away. Not every idea in the popcorn machines that we call our brains is worthy of follow-through. But when I decided that there needed to be a food and beverage museum in New Orleans that explored the culture of food and drink in a broad and historical way, I became obsessed. I felt that everything that I had done for my whole life had prepared me to create a food museum. I couldn't let the idea go. I had to do it. I had to make it work. I had to convince everyone that it was an important thing to do. I couldn't shake it loose. And I am glad that it happened that way.

## **FIRST, A LITTLE CONTEXT**

As I tried on and discarded jobs for my imagined adult self when I was a child, I finally decided that I wanted to be a doctor. I wasn't squeamish and I was good in science. I declared that I also wanted to be an astronaut and would conduct medical experiments at zero gravity while orbiting the globe. But when I started taking classes in the pre-med curriculum in college, I discovered that I hated it. I also recognized that I wasn't as single-minded as the people in my classes. They were like learning machines, while I was more interested in discussing how fascinating it was that opposable thumbs affected design. I was told very bluntly by many other students that there wasn't time to think about such things. There was too much to learn. I did not care enough to discipline myself to learn it.

What I did learn was that I wasn't the right kind of student to be in medical school. I was not single-minded enough. Rather than continue to be studying in the wrong place, I changed my major to English and after graduating, went on to law school. At the time I didn't know it, but law school attracts many people who have no idea what they want to do. I simply joined that number. I did not appreciate at the time that those skills would help me in creating a food museum. After graduating not really pursuing a career, but just trying to do interesting things while earning a living, I joined the Army JAG Corps in order to live in Europe. Later I lived in Washington, DC. Finally, I returned to New Orleans, which was my home. Upon returning home, I opened a law office and taught courses as an adjunct faculty member at various universities. I began to work at one of the universities fulltime and eventually became the CEO of the university support foundation. At the foundation I learned about finance, nonprofit funding and bonds, and saw what the power of the state could do.

It was while I was at this state university; I first worked on opening a museum that was a project of the university. I discovered how many moving parts there were in establishing a museum from the ground up. I liked all of the creativity involved in making something that previously did not exist come into being and ultimately functioning as an established institution. I enjoyed creating the infrastructure that would support the mission of the museum. I also enjoyed making the museum work. I began to think that I would like to create my own institution. Since it didn't seem that my institution could be part of the university, I left my job there and decided that I would start my own food museum.

### **WHERE DOES FOOD FACTOR INTO THIS?**

I grew up in New Orleans, a city with a rich culinary tradition with an appreciation for deep flavors. And in addition, on my mother's side, I was Sicilian. There was a very large Sicilian community in New Orleans, and I was a part of it. That included the glorious food traditions. So growing up, I had the good fortune of being immersed in 2 food cultures. This must have formed in me a still unquenched interest in the culture of food. Just by living in 2 cultures, I unconsciously sorted and ordered the differences and the reasons for the differences. It made me curious about other food cultures, their idiosyncrasies, and what they revealed about the people, the geography, the economy, and everything else about food culture. But there was no way to study this in 1967 when I began college, thus the short pursuit of a medical career. Because of my express interest in food, there was a desire on the part of counselors to put me in home economics or nutrition. But I wasn't interested. After I abandoned my pre-med studies, I tried but couldn't formally study the culture of food. But I continued to read about food, travel, and study whatever I could. During law school, my husband and I wrote a restaurant column for a local weekly. Traveling through Europe and North Africa, while we were in the US Army stationed in Germany, we used the remarkable Time-Life series about the foods of the world, as our travel guide. Eating in restaurants and bistros, shopping in markets and groceries, and eating off the street from illegal and legal vendors shaped into a unique education.

Wherever I went, I wanted to study the food. Not just eat it but learn why it was prepared the way it was, how this reflected the local culture, how it reflected geography, and how it was reflected in the lives of the people. There was this bottomless curiosity that was untrained, unrestricted by convention and wild that guided me toward creating a museum.

And one of my weaknesses is that I love to create new things that expand on what I have already done. Once something becomes established, I tend to want to hand it over to someone else to maintain it, while I go on to push out the edges of the things I have established. Keep this in mind as I tell this story.

## FOOL'S RUSH IN

When I left my position at the university, I was in my mid-fifties. I finally felt as though I knew what I wanted to do. For many people it would probably feel too late. I took heart at this late start on realizing my dream, by looking to Julia Child. She too was in her mid-fifties when she began her television career in food. And she accomplished much from those beginnings until she died. And I really believe that I spent my life up to the point of starting the museum, learning all of the skills that I would need to found and operate the museum. I had legal experience. I had done research. I had taught. I have eaten in many places. I had read and talked to people. I had experience in nonprofit finance. I had experience in fundraising. I had worked within several hierarchies – the US Army and a university. I had been part of establishing new museums. So when it was time to begin creating the Southern Food & Beverage Museum, I had accumulated enough experience to feel ready and able.

I wanted to do this so badly that I really didn't hesitate. There was no feasibility study, because I was going to do this no matter what. The fact that there were few food museums to use as models was actually an advantage, allowing me to make it up as we went along without having to explain why I chose this path over that one. Although talks began in 2003, we formed a corporation and applied for 501(c) (3) status in early 2004. There was no standard against which to measure either what we did or how we did it. But I did ask a lot of questions.

Among several trips to gather information, I made a trip to Copia in Napa, California, and asked people there what they would have done differently and what mistakes they had made. I am grateful to them for their forthrightness. Our beginning situations were very different, as I did not have a primary major donor, as Copia had. And from those talks I learned that I was willing to get started on a small scale with the idea of growing. The alternative I had experienced with fund-raising for the university museums was raising money until I had achieved some budget goal, but I felt that this was like a tiger chasing its tail. Once you have raised \$X, you find that you really can't start until you raise 10% more. And by the time that happens you still need 5% more.

The alternative to endless fundraising with no project was to begin. We began small and vowed to continue to grow. And that was a good decision for us. I recruited a small covey of people who were interested in the idea of a food museum. The city of New Orleans was open to this idea and was actually exploring the possibility of establishing music or jazz museum as well as a food museum. Not that they gave us money, but it allowed us to access some personnel resources at the city. We developed a mission statement, and we selected a board. We named ourselves the prosaic Southern Food & Beverage Museum, and we created a website. All of this made us exist. This all happened in 2004 including a pop-up exhibit. We felt we were moving forward very fast. Good thing that we did not know what was in store for the city.

We began with a board of 3 people so that we could get things done without a large board full of opinions. We were exploring where to open while we were fundraising and explaining who we were. We held pop-up exhibits to show people what a food museum was and could be. We fielded questions from journalists who had no idea that we were just an idea. There was a definite fake-it-till-you-make-it vibe. And we often pinched ourselves when we were taken seriously. But we knew that despite our case of impostor syndrome, we were deadly serious.

## **BUMPS IN THE ROAD**

The first obstacle that we had to overcome was the fact that almost no one knew what a food museum was. We solved that problem by mounting pop-up exhibits. This also made us aware of how important exhibits were. It would be necessary to change our exhibits to make sure that people had a reason to return. We learned also that we told our stories in words. We were learning how to tell a story with artifacts. Our pop-ups revealed how much we tended to rely on placards advancing the narrative, at the same time teaching us the need to tell stories with things. So the pop-ups allowed us to practice telling a story with artifacts and informed the public about what a food museum is.

We were in negotiations to create our food museum, complete with draft plans, when the city of New Orleans was visited by Hurricane Katrina in August, 2005. The city was devastated. The personal losses and the material losses took years to overcome. We had based our planning on the city being visited by millions of tourists. That plan was abandoned and we became willing opportunists, grabbing any opportunity that might come along. Our first big break was a request by Viking and the James Beard Foundation that we create a Katrina Exhibit that could be mounted in New York during the award ceremony in 2006. The Foundation was awarding the annual Humanitarian Award to the chefs of New Orleans collectively, honoring the chefs for feeding first responders and the hungry in New Orleans. Taking advantage of our experience with pop ups, we mounted the exhibit in the hotel where the awards were being announced, put it up and took it down in the same day, just for the award ceremony. But we had created an exhibit that was seen by much of the food world. We were on the map. After the award ceremony that exhibit traveled, and helped us honor not only the restaurateurs of New Orleans, but also the history of the restaurant.

It was many years before tourism truly returned to New Orleans. Nevertheless, we started over, taking advantage of the blow to the city, and taking over a space in the Riverwalk Marketplace, which eventually reopened after the city began its recovery. We were able to help fill the River walk, a mall that hugs the Mississippi River originally developed by the Rouse Corporation in

preparation of the 1984 world's fair in New Orleans. We benefitted from the generous terms that we were extended to us by the mall. And we helped make the mall feel full and occupied.

We began our first year with enthusiasm and optimism. We had work to do, but we had no idea how large our ambition was nor the obstacles that the world would throw at us. We had overcome Hurricane Katrina and had gotten a national pop up. What else could happen? We just proceeded to act as though the world was out there waiting with welcoming arms. Despite being in a mall in a damaged city, we opened our museum to all of the fanfare that we could muster in June 2008.

Our opening speaker, besides the Louisiana Commissioner of Agriculture, Dr. Mike Strain, was New Orleans native, Admiral Stephen Rochon, who was then the director of the Executive Residence and White House Chief Usher. It was very exciting. We were covered by USA Today. And people from New Orleans came to visit the museum out of a mixture of curiosity and pride in New Orleans cuisine. And after our opening, it was not uncommon to find in front of the door of the museum, an artifact of some kind. Sometimes it was a vintage electric mixer complete with box or a collection of sugar flowers. Sometimes there was note saying, "thought you might like this," sometimes there was nothing else by the object. And after an article in the local paper, things were also left quietly on my porch, for me to find when picking up the newspaper in the morning. People began to give us objects and we certainly felt their love and support. And these objects made the exhibits better.

## **TELLING STORIES WITH ARTIFACTS**

In preparation for the first of our pop-up exhibits, I asked an acquaintance, who became a friend, if she wanted to curate the pop-up. She was in a career shift at that time and saw opportunity and possibility in the job. She said yes. And she not only produced our first pop-up exhibit, but she became our first curator. Together we learned to tell stories through objects and not with words. My son recommended that I read a graphic book about the ins and outs of writing a graphic novel to learn more about non-verbal storytelling. It was a good suggestion and told its own story in drawings, which made it even more helpful.

We soon learned that most grants for museums required that you not only be open but also have operated for 2 years before being eligible for a grant. And another lesson in the real world, several grants that had been awarded never materialized, because of the economic downturn of 2008. It was also the year that what I had thought of as the flagship food and beverage museum – Copia – closed. We adapted by looking for less expensive ways to tell our story, actually laying off people, and beating the streets to make sure that we could keep going. Because Copia had been so outwardly successful, and because it had such well-known names as Julia Child on its

board, it had garnered serious donations from the food industry. When we approached some of their donors, they explained that perhaps a food museum was not a viable idea – look at Copia – and that they would not throw good money after bad.

Another blow to food and tourism in New Orleans happened in 2010. That was the year of the Deep-water Horizon Oil Spill. As New Orleans was physically getting back on its feet and as tourism was on the rise, the fear of contaminated Gulf of Mexico seafood raised its head. Ever opportunistic we were the venue for the Seafood Promotion Board event that included the Director of the FDA, seafood chefs from around the country, and seafood inspectors. We set up tanks for chefs to learn about petroleum contaminated seafood and clean seafood so that they could understand why we could eat clean seafood from unaffected parts of the Gulf. We were validated as a neutral place, not a restaurant with a stake in the story. It allowed chefs from around the country, flown in by the Seafood Promotion Board, to learn about us and began to define our reputation as a place where contemporary as well as historical information was available. Our own story began to deepen, as we became more mature as a museum.

Although we were new and naïve, we always presented as a mature institution, even as we were establishing ourselves and even as we felt like children playing pretend. We did not think of ourselves as a mature museum for several important reasons. The first and most practical reason for this was that every time that we needed anything, we had to acquire it. There was no toolbox stocked with everything we might use. No, we ran to the hardware store almost every time we needed a tool, tape, nails, screws, wire, glue, or anything. I began to fantasize about a storeroom with glass, frames, mat board, and other notions, that would allow us to just pick up what we needed from a storeroom. That was years away. I dreamed of the accumulated detritus of a 125-year-old institution. I dreamed of being the food museum equivalent of the Louvre.

Second, we were not staffed like a museum. Instead of departments that were well staffed, all of us had multiple jobs: working the admissions desk, ordering things for our shop, installing exhibits, doing research, writing thank you letters, updating the website, sending out the newsletter, doing publicity, creating new exhibits, updating social media, creating programming, rubbing elbows with the press, and doing public speaking, just to name a few of the jobs handled by a staff of 3. And because we had not worked in a food museum before, we just did what was needed regardless of job title. And we continued to make it up as we went along.

In the first year we giggled over the seriousness with which we were approached, since we knew that our museum was held together by chewing gum, tape, and invention. But we were so earnest in our desire to create something that reflected what we saw in our imagination, that eventually we did create what we had only imagined. We created exhibits with substance. We illustrated them with artifacts in a meaningful way. We touched our audience. And all the while the acceptance of and respect for food and its place in culture was happening in the world. Today it is almost hard not to believe that food and drink are accepted cultural touchstones, but previously, except for the odd anthropologist, that was not always the case. That slow



development of a recognition of food and drink as a cultural marker somehow coincided with the maturity of the Southern Food & Beverage Museum. We couldn't have made that happen, so we were creating something at the right period in our society. We cannot fail to credit the zeitgeist in helping to make us work and flourish.

## THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE

Once we had a museum with a growing collection, we did move out of the mall and to larger space. We renovated and moved to the old Dryades Market in a reviving neighborhood in New Orleans. It expanded our space, and that allowed us to have a demonstration kitchen instead of a table with a portable burner. And we had a restaurant and bar. Later we also created a garden and outdoor cooking space on a lot in the back of the museum. But each step in our expansion made us aware of our limitations, and simultaneously made us more ambitious. And we could not have anticipated that the bank that had believed in us and made it possible to renovate and move to the Dryades Market would be taken over by the FDIC. This event has caused us more than a little existential distress. And the COVID-19 pandemic has also caused us to have to re-examine ourselves, much as other nonprofits have. These events remind us constantly that we live on a knife's edge. We must be excellent tight-rope walkers.

## TRANSITIONS AND RESISTING FOUNDER SYNDROME AND THE FUTURE

Before the pandemic I recognized myself as an aging leader, and I wished to be sure that this institution that I had worked so hard to establish would be able to carry on without me. I asked the board to allow me to step aside as President and CEO to become Founder. I was afraid that if something happened to me that the organization might not survive. I knew of too many instances of the failure of nonprofits after the loss of the founder. With the cooperation of the board, a new CEO was hired. And I could continue to help the organization grow, using my own particular brand of skills. And fortunately, the new CEO has complementary skills, so we are not stepping on each other's toes all the time. And I have had the pleasure of watching the institution grow in new directions and become even better.

As I have said I enjoy expanding and pushing the edges. Now that the museum itself is established, and there is a great President and CEO running the show, I am ready to create a more rounded culinary and hospitality institution. **What began as the Southern Food & Beverage Museum Foundation is now the National Food & Beverage Foundation.** We took advantage of the quiet of COVID to concentrate of this institution growing. The expansion of what we do includes consulting with other institutions interested in creating food museums or

expanding their existing museums to include food; expanding our library into a Research Center; working with a university press to create a series for the museum; expanding our podcast and media network – Nitty Grits – to represent the entire food and beverage system; and expanding the National Culinary Heritage Register.

Most of these expansions are national or international. For example, the Research Center has books, archival material, and menus from around the world. We have partnered with Nunez Community College in Chalmette, part of the Greater New Orleans area, to house and establish this research center. The Research Center includes the Boyd Library, food and beverage ephemera, special collections of food and music related items, menus from around the world, photographs, posters, advertising materials, and collections of the papers of many chefs and food writers. We are the repository library of Les Dames d'Escoffier International. We have a large collection of community cookbooks and a collection of rare books by African American cookbook authors.

We are excited to have the collection at the campus of our partner Nunez Community College, which has a culinary and hospitality school. But students, journalists, scholars, and the general public have access to the collection. It is exciting to know that deceased chefs like Paul Prudhomme have left us book collections, but also those chefs and food writers and others in the industry are leaving us their papers, their awards, and other ephemera. Because both immigrants from outside the US and migrants from other parts of the US are constantly coming to the south (as well as to the rest of the country) food is constantly changing and being influenced. The library of the research center reflects the need to access materials from other parts of the US and other countries in order to better understand what is happening in the south. And it is far better to have access to books written about the food of another country that was written in that country, than only to have books written in the US. Having books in many languages as well as books written in English is necessary for the best research. And how better to support the region and explore its food, than by having this resource available. And it also enhances the museum's ability to research its own artifacts, exhibits, and its place in the south. The SoFAB Research Center at Nunez Community College officially opened in October 2022.

And the National Culinary Heritage Register will be an important national resource as we continue to understand the roles of small and large places in defining American cuisine. Because cuisine is a social invention it is constantly changing and its influences are almost infinite. And because the National Park Service's mandate in registering historic locations around the country is primarily linked to historic preservation, there is no registry for historic places - 50 years old or older - like farms, fishing grounds, as well as buildings like manufacturers, restaurants, and distilleries, for example, that are not important architecturally, but because they are important because they have impacted the food of America.

## **MY FUTURE AS FOUNDER**

As I get older, time seems to be passing faster, even though I know that it is not. I think that my future will depend on my health. Right now I think I am healthy and able. I love coming to work, and I love working with people who are so much younger than I am. I learn from them every day. And it keeps me on my toes. I am extremely grateful for having had the opportunity to live such an interesting life.

I know that I am old enough to be old, but not old enough to be cool. I hope that I can grow old enough and stay healthy enough to be cool and lend a cool vibe to the museum. That is something that only time can bring. But looking back today, I can see that we have actually created something that is real and that has taken on a life of its own. That is extremely exciting. It has happened because we were not afraid to do it. (I do not discount that we were too foolish to be afraid.) Ultimately that is why anything succeeds, even when it is well planned, well-funded, and well known.