



Secrets of the Lost Cajun

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Raymond “Griff” Griffin on Frisco’s Main Street outside the original Lost Cajun.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN WALSKI

I flew to Denver for a taste of Louisiana as the final blast of winter descended upon the eastern slope of the Rockies in late April. Skeptical of the up-sell, I reluctantly took the car rental agent’s advice and upgraded to a 4WD Yukon —wise move. Two hours later, my white knuckles squeezed the steering wheel as I-70 undulated and twisted its way toward the best ski villages in North America.

After too little sleep and several more inches of slushy snow, I was back in the saddle the next morning heading down the mountain to a nondescript industrial building in south Denver, an unadorned commercial kitchen where I was shown the secrets of cooking authentic gumbo in vast quantities. Raymond “Griff” Griffin, co-founder of The Lost Cajun, greeted me with a smile, then handed me a hairnet and

lab coat as he led me into the massive factory-like kitchen to share the secrets behind the best cup of gumbo this side of the Louisiana state line—or so the story goes.

Ten hours later, having supervised the cooking of 500 gallons of gooey gumbo and eaten my weight in alligator, red beans and rice, catfish, fried okra, breaded shrimp, spicy sausage and creamy lobster bisque, I knew the real secret wasn't in the recipe. The man behind this seven-year-old, 12-unit concept was the real story—a car salesman and fishing guide turned reluctant restaurateur, the founding father of a remarkable corporate culture, an enthusiastic mentor and a widower finding happiness in a new chapter.

I came all this way to meet the happy Cajun, and he didn't disappoint.

Working the kitchen

With roots that extend to West Africa in the 1700s, gumbo is Louisiana's signature dish. Even in a high-tech industrial kitchen, gumbo doesn't take kindly to shortcuts or new-age concoctions—old ways are still the best ways. It all starts by making a roux, the thickening agent that is the foundation for a dark gumbo with a texture that's just right, not thick like stew, but not watery like a broth.

“Old-time roux was made with oil and flour, and that's the way it's still done in most Cajun restaurants—it's a long, arduous process,” Griffin said, as we watched the ingredients steam in a massive commercial kettle. “If you heat it too much, the roux burns. If you undercook it, then it's not dark enough.”

Roux becomes a mash with the addition of onions, celery, Ro-Tel tomatoes, which is cooked down twice, first to remove the water and, the second time around, to caramelize the sugar. These long steps are the keys to an authentic gumbo's color, texture and flavor.

“There's no way around this, this is the way it has to be done,” he said, as I struggled to keep my eyes open, which were welling up from hundreds of pounds of simmering onions, celery and Cajun spices doing their thing.

The texture is no small matter when massively scaling up an old-time recipe to be shipped in huge quantities to Lost Cajun locations in three states. Our attention shifted to a nearby table where

the cooks conducted a viscosity test measuring the distance their gumbo's sauce traveled in a set increment of time.

Mastering this one menu item at such a high level was crucial for The Lost Cajun to be considered a true Louisiana-style restaurant, which he claimed is the reason nobody has successfully franchised a gumbo-based chain before.

“You’ve got people like the great Paul Prudhomme, you’ve got guys like Emeril Lagasse that are master chefs—I will never be in their league,” he said. “These guys are at the top of the game, but what we have done is figured out how to replicate the core product of Louisiana, which is gumbo.”

With three weekly shifts cranking out gumbo in the outskirts of Denver, the kitchen's operators told me they have the capacity to quadruple their current output

—which is at the smaller end of Griffin's ambitious goals for what was originally intended to be a one-man band.

A place to be

After retiring from a six-figure job managing an auto dealership, Griffin downsized by becoming a fishing guide on the bayou, where, as he puts it, his duties were mostly drinking beer, catching fish and telling lies. Following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Griffin and his wife, Belinda, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, wanted a break from the heat and malaise that hovered over their lives in the Big Easy.

Driving north, they made it to Colorado when her back went out, causing them to seek treatment in the Frisco area, a charming little ski town west of Denver with a downtown district that extends



Marty Canino stirring a massive pot of gumbo at the Lost Cajun's commercial kitchen.

right up to the base of Mount Royal. In the days after her surgery, they walked the streets of Frisco as part of her therapy, quickly falling in love with the easygoing culture and towering mountain views.

“She said ‘I love this town, this is where I want to be,’” Griffin recalled. “We went home, I got her straight, came back here, parked my truck right here on the side of where The Lost Cajun is now ... called her up and said ‘I found it.’” Weeks later, they opened the doors of the little Cajun restaurant in the mountains they had always dreamed of, named The Lost Cajun to denote their newly expat status in ski country.

Belinda’s original handwritten notes on a legal pad told the story of the restaurant before it even existed, down to the menu, a rough outline of pricing, notes about ambiance and even a Cajun dictionary of some keywords for the concept. Detailed as they were, their plans didn’t extend beyond that first location.

“She wanted to be in the mountains for her last days, and I was determined I was going to be the best caregiver ever known to mankind,” he said. “That’s the love of my life, so she wanted to be in the mountains so I was going to be in the mountains. I sold my fishing lodge to my sister, and said, you know, that gumbo shop will keep me busy and sane and give her something to do and ... when she passed it would give me a place to be.”

Standing on the street in front of the original location, shooting story photos with a photographer who drove up from Denver, Griff pointed to the peak of Mount Royal. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Inside, this tiny restaurant has the New Orleans vibe down pat: bright colors, an ample supply of beads and feathers, framed Louisiana scenes and servers in tie-dyed shirts—it feels like the real deal with the intoxicating smells to match.

Savoring the lagniappe

Beyond the doors of the two locations I visited—the Frisco original and a larger, 2,800-square-foot store in the southern Denver metro, you’d never guess The Lost Cajun is the product of such crushingly sad times. The Lost Cajun himself is one of the happiest, most outgoing restaurant executives in the



business.

Chefs at the Littleton, Colorado, location plating meals during a busy lunch rush.

He assembled a leadership team with experience in franchised restaurants to focus on the details he'd rather avoid in favor of the fun stuff that he's good at—glad-handing customers, cooking food and working with employees to maintain the Southern-style, polite corporate culture that is the brand's in-person signature. Sitting at a long, communal table in Littleton, Griffin was excited for me to watch our server calling in the order for our appetizer sampler.

“Chef, order in!” she yelled, standing in a designated spot for servers in front of the line. “Order in,” the chef replied. She listed the order, and he replied in kind—a genuine taste of old-time New Orleans Griffin remembers as a kid in bayou country. This friendly background banter is a non-negotiable part of the ambiance.

“She can't move her feet until he says ‘You're welcome,’” he added about the interaction we had just witnessed. “It's called finishing the conversation—they must look at each other when they call, because it's having that courtesy and respect ... no drive-by conversation.”

Courtesy and respect were the watchwords for the rest of the day as we ate like gluttonous royalty. He was anxious for me to literally try every single menu item, appetizer and New Orleans-sourced beer on the menu. Little bites and little sips, but it was hard to summon the restraint.

Griffin's favorite part of the restaurant business is passing this culture down to younger employees, in particular, whom he said love the environment because it's unexpected in today's society and different from other restaurants they may have experienced.

“I've had mothers call me up ... and say ‘You know what, I don't know what you've done to my child, but I've got another one I'd like to send up here, because you've changed our dynamic at home,’” he recalled. “They're saying please and you're welcome and ... you and I know, in our society today, there's a big thing missing about the boundaries in this election” of President Trump. “You see it in the boundaries of what we say to people and how we treat people—I'm having so much fun teaching that and seeing these kids come along.”

Whenever a customer finishes their gumbo, the server drops by asking if they'd like lagniappe, New Orleans speak for “a little more.” Pronounced “LAN-yap,” it's part of the concept's aim that nobody leaves with any semblance of an appetite.

Following multiple rounds of lagniappe, I was growing obsessed with the gumbo and fried catfish

“Cat-touffée” served with garlic French bread over rice.

Heading back home to NOLA

Shortly after Belinda’s passing in 2012, Griffin hiked to the top of Mount Royal. Looking down on Frisco’s downtown, reflecting on the now-frequent lines out the front door and customers inquiring about becoming their own Lost Cajuns, he decided it was time to start a franchising the concept they dreamed up as a couple.



The Frisco location is the smallest Lost Cajun, but remains the soul of the brand.

“We said, we don’t know what we’re doing, but we can sure find out and get the right information, and we can do this,” he recalled. The franchise was officially born.

Five years later, with 12 open locations—in Colorado, Texas, South Carolina and Tennessee—The Lost Cajun has 13 additional units under contract. Four of the future locations are with current franchisees, with the remaining nine with new owners in the San Antonio, Houston and Amarillo, Texas, markets.

Without published average unit volumes, Griffin and franchisee Greg Jones say they are hoping for annual sales in the \$1.6 million range, which they expect to hit in Littleton this year and be on target for typical future locations. Typical locations range from 2,500 to 3,000 square feet, with average build-out costs between \$350,000 and \$400,000.

“Dats a lot of gumbo,” added the founder of the latest announcements. For each new location, Griffin writes the store’s number in a secret spot within the restaurant in Belinda’s honor. The Lost Cajun is on track to hit 20 locations by the end of the year, with 25 sometime shortly thereafter.

Sitting in the corporate office above the original restaurant, a small space that’s already bursting at the seams, Griffin explained the five-year plan he formed with Jon Espey, the brand’s president. As described, it’s his window for spreading the company’s culture, being fully engaged with training, sales and opening of new locations, while also dropping by the restaurant and introducing himself to every diner.

“After five years, I don’t want to ever be in a meeting, I don’t ever want to be in another negotiation, I don’t ever want to have to make a sales call,” he said. “I only want to be involved with some of the training on the very beginning of it where I’m teaching them my courtesy and respect.”

Griffin has long dreamt of opening a store back home in New Orleans, which may come sooner than expected after his doctor suggested he move to a lower altitude following recent health issues. His newly modified plan includes moving back to New Orleans and expanding into a larger corporate office down the mountain into Denver.

Reflecting on the decades, Griffin’s experiences have shown plans can change for better and for worse. In the five years since Belinda’s passing, he has found success with a franchised concept, built a culture he’s proud of and even found new love with Tammy Taullie who is the brand’s chief culture officer and was a friend of Belinda’s.

“She would be so proud of him right now,” she said. “I guarantee you.”

As the sun began to set over Mount Royal during our final interview in the office, with a full stomach coming to terms with our day of near-competitive consumption, Griffin, Taullie and I discussed their early stumbles, including closing locations in Rochester, Minnesota, and Columbia, South Carolina. He was transparent about mistakes and lessons learned, especially when it comes to the logistics of far-flung locations.

I hesitated to ask the final question, not wanting to bring this joyful Cajun out of his well-worn happy place. “What would Belinda say about how far your plans have come?” Taullie wiped tears from her eyes, and he smiled and answered without hesitation.

“Belinda would not be surprised at all, and she’s cheering every day,” he said. “Here’s what she told me right before she passed, she said, ‘You ... are going to open that one, but I don’t want to hear another word about it until I’m gone, and then I want you all to open up a thousand of these things and spread our culture nationwide.’”

The Griff's Greatest Hits

On gumbo: “It’s hard and expensive. One of the things that was important to me was that we hold the cost down for the franchise owner ... you’re supposed to make a good profit on it. It’s not like you’re serving steak.”

On culture: “I want to be the happy Cajun. I don’t want to be involved with all the business meetings, CPAs, attorneys ... and the meetings to plan the next meeting for the meeting. I want to go to the new stores and teach people how to cook. I want to go to the new stores and teach servers how to interact with guests.”

On being a reluctant restaurateur: “I didn’t realize I had people and communication skills. I’m a high school dropout, I’m self-taught. I’ve never been to cooking school, I’ve never been to business school.”

On rejecting buyout offers: “We’ve already had substantial offers where people with vision have seen this for what it is. We’ll never be a Jimmy John’s or Ruby Tuesday, but they see we service a niche market and they’ve tried to buy us at a discounted price. The offers come in a lot, but we have said no, no, no.”

On saying no to potential franchisees: “I’ve said no a lot. They look at me like I’m crazy. It’s hard to say no when somebody pushes a pile at you, but if it’s no it’s just no because they don’t fit.”

On getting positive online reviews: “Don’t we though? Isn’t it amazing?”

On finding the right location: “If you’re one block wrong, you might as well be one mile wrong.”

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