

LEAH CHASE

New Orleans' Queen of Creole Cooking

"I learned to cook just hanging around it. I loved to wait tables. I love people. I had to wing it. I had no help. I had never seen the inside of a restaurant."



Leah Chase

This year Leah Chase will turn 93 years old. Born on January 6, 1923 in the small town of Madisonville, she was one of 14 children. There were no high schools there for black

children so after sixth grade, Leah moved to New Orleans to live with an aunt. After high school, she worked odd jobs, including managing two amateur boxers and becoming the first woman to mark the racehorse board for a local bookie. Her favorite job, though, was waiting tables in the French Quarter. It was here that she developed her love for food and feeding others.

In 1946, she married local musician Edgar "Dooky" Chase Jr., whose jazz band toured the country, playing the bebop sounds of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. Leah's father-in-law had opened a street corner stand in Treme that sold lottery tickets and his wife's homemade po'boy sandwiches. When "Dooky" Sr. died in 1957, "Dooky" Jr. came off the road and he and Leah took over the family business. The barroom and sandwich shop grew into a sit-down restaurant that would become one of the first African American fine dining restaurants in the country.



Leah Chase, Michael Siegel and Pia Ehrhardt.

During segregation in the 1960s, Dooky Chase's was one of the only public places in New Orleans where mixed race groups could meet to discuss the Civil Rights Movement. Although such gatherings were illegal, the restaurant was so popular it would have caused a public uproar if local law enforcement had broken up the meetings. Black voter registration campaign organizers, the NAACP, and backdoor political meetings found a safe haven there. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others would join local leaders for strategy sessions and dialogue over meals served in the upstairs meeting room. And Leah cooked for them all.

"I never needed an alarm clock. The poor souls in purgatory will get you up, and your faith in God, and your faith in yourself."

"They say an odd number of greens is bad luck, and that you make a new friend for every green in the pot."



Today, Dooky Chase's remains family owned and operated. Displayed on the walls is one of New Orleans' finest collections of African American art. The restaurant continues to serve locals and tourists alike, and it remains a stopping place for celebrities and artists like Hank Aaron, Ernest Gaines, Quincy Jones, Ray Charles, and sitting presidents like George W. Bush and repeat customer, President Barack Obama, who doesn't miss a chance to eat Leah Chase's peerless gumbo and fried chicken.



Leah Chase was inducted into the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who of Food & Beverage in America in 2010. She is the recipient of the Francis Anthony Drexel Medal, the highest award presented to an individual by Xavier University of Louisiana. The Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans named a permanent gallery in Chase's honor. She has served on many boards, including the Arts Council of New Orleans, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Urban League. She is a member of the Women of The Storm and the International Women's Forum. She has four children, sixteen grandchildren and twenty-two great-grandchildren.

Top: Leah Chase in the kitchen. Bottom: Pia Ehrhardt, Leah Chase and Michael Siegel.

"People used to say you should move Dooky Chase's to another neighborhood. If you move, you still can't change who you are. I'm still black."