

EMERALD COST LIFE

Unca Duke's Geaux Jus

By Margit Bisztray | Photography by Michael Belk

In Chinese medicine — one of the oldest, most enduring healing systems — vinegar is said to cure almost everything, including insomnia, dysentery, worms and infections. But as it so often goes with ancient wisdom, the miracle of vinegar isn't some obscure knowledge passed along through doctors; it's folk knowledge. Including in rural Louisiana.

The same can be said about chilies — whose antibiotic qualities were known to the natives of early Peru and Mexico — and of garlic, high in vitamin C and so powerful it's even said to stave off vampires.

Vinegar, chilies, garlic: put them all together and what do you have?

If you're anywhere Duke Bardwell and Byron Chism can reach, you've got Unca Duke's Geaux Jus: a premium pepper sauce made from a honey-infused balsamic vinegar and white balsamic vinegar with whole garlic cloves and chili peppers.

Geaux Jus is French for "go juice."

"Happy mouth, I call it," says Bardwell. "That heat that only mellows with age."

Bardwell — best-known locally as a musician who once played bass for Elvis Presley, recorded with Emmylou Harris, backed up Kenny Loggins and now plays

with local bands Hubba Hubba, Dread Clampitt and the Blue Orleans House Band — started making Geaux Jus in his home kitchen simply for fun.

"I was growing things in my back yard like peppers, basil, and other herbs and putting them in vinegar. I thought, 'This is kind of fun.' I developed a formula with four different vinegars. I'd vary the ingredients with tarragon or rosemary, depending on what was growing, and give bottles of this Unca Duke's Geaux Jus to my friends."

One such friend was Byron Chism, whom Bardwell met when they both worked at Criollas, when Chism was a waiter and later, after culinary training, a cook. Years later, Chism was having

enormous success with his product, Butt Rub, and had already navigated launching a food product, from securing an FDA-approved production site, to UPC and nutritional labeling, to marketing. Based on his experience, and a hunch, he felt he could sell Geaux Jus.

"It was Byron's idea to pursue a commercial label," says Bardwell. "I'd never have thought to do a thing like that."

So what exactly attracted a businessman like Chism to Geaux Jus?

"I've never seen a product like it anywhere," says Chism. "And trust me, I look. Hot sauces there are thousands of but not pepper vinegars. It's a simple concoction, a unique Southern condiment, that hasn't carried over to the corporate world because it has to be homemade. Commercial varieties have always lacked a certain depth of flavor and character. But Duke's product has a life of its own. It's unique in the marketplace."

When Bardwell first shared his production information for analysis, Chism's feedback was mixed.

"Byron said the good news was that, yes, we could do this. The bad news was how I made it was way too expensive," Bardwell recalls. "He sent me a list of ingredients we could get in bulk that I had to substitute into the formula. At one point, I really didn't think it would work. But one morning in the nether-land of half-sleep, it came to me. I had the whole house smelling like an Easter egg (from the vinegar). It was hard on Rebecca, my wife. But the next day I called Byron and told him I had the formula. It came to me in a dream."



"It's labor-intensive," says Chism. "By its very nature — a hot, acidic, wet product — it can't be factory-produced. My job was to bring a product like that into the market. Going from home kitchen to store shelves — there's the mountain."

Chism, the businessman, marketer and cook, describes Geaux Jus as a "specialty food product for people already cooking at home who want something unique. It adds a real soulful zest to food. The heat, sweet and sour all play off each other. And it's got a nice hit of garlic," he ends slyly. "I use it in a spray bottle as a baste for pork and ribs. It adds moisture and flavor."

Unca Duke recommends Geaux Jus in any recipe calling for vinegar: over bitter greens, in salad dressings, for pickling eggs or okra, as a marinade for fish, chicken or beef, in jerk seasoning, gazpacho and stock. Their test chef is Gail Underwood, and she's forever concocting new uses.

Locally, Geaux Jus is offered at Stinky's Fish Camp (where they serve Unca Duke's Geaux Juice BBQ shrimp) and at the Blue Orleans (where he is in the house band) and at many of the local stores where Byron's Butt Rub is sold.

In addition, "It makes a bad ass martini and an even badder ass bloody Mary," Bardwell says. "I mean baaaaaad ass."

On the future of Geaux Jus, he says the next product he's playing with is pickled okra with ginger, habanero peppers and garlic.

"That worked so good, I was stunned. It works in any recipe requiring a little acidity," he says, adding that Underwood has also used Geaux Jus in a Quiche crust recipe.

He testifies to the ancient health benefits touted by the Chinese, Peruvians and who knows how many others as well.

But it doesn't stop there.

"It has been known to cure the chigger bites and to remove the corrosion bloom on the battery terminals," he jokes.

"I can't tell you how many friends of mine carry this around with them everywhere. If they're feeling sick or just low down, just a taste gives them a lift, believe it or not. Ed from 'For The Health of It' (a local health store) says his favorite new appliqué is a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich dipped in Geaux Jus. I tried it, and he was right!"

It's good for you. It's easy, fun, versatile, delicious, traditional but also new. Sounds like you just can't geaux wrong. ■



At the purr of the luxury RV pulling up outside his office, Byron Chism jumps like a kid hearing the ice cream truck. This is the third time he's looked at the vehicle. Six months of the year he and his two dogs, Jake and Bodie, travel the country to barbecue competitions. The RV makes a sweet ride. It's expensive—roughly the price of a snug three-bedroom home in today's housing market—but it's the best road travel money can buy.

Sizing up the scene from the office door, Duke Bardwell shakes his head, smiling.

"He sure is selling a [boatload] of that butt rub," Bardwell says.

Chism grew up in Texas, in barbecue country. "But back then," he says, "I couldn't have told you boo about how to cook barbecue."

After earning a bachelor's degree in marketing, he worked in the restaurant

business, and it was there he met Bardwell, who was managing Criolla's in Grayton Beach.

"I liked him immensely," Bardwell

recalls. "He was a unique person, very creative. But it became clear early on he belonged on the other side of the 'wall,' in the kitchen. In his heart, he knew that. So he left Criolla's to cook at Bud and Alley's, and shortly after that decided to go to cooking school. I wrote him a letter of recommendation and he got himself into the Culinary Institute of America (CIA, in Hyde Park, N.Y.)"

Mind you, CIA does not teach barbecue any more than Juilliard teaches banjo, but Chism found himself drawn to it. This was before Bobby Flay, before trophy kitchens with trophy grills, before cooking became a status symbol at all.

The person who taught Chism to barbecue was his neighbor James Otis, who cooked with pork shoulder known in the barbecue world as Boston Butt. Chism developed a dry rub, used for Texas-style barbecue, and named it Butt Rub because it

was clever and amusing. As it happened, the name wasn't trademarked, so Chism seized it. If this sounds like the perfect

a little
BUTT RUB
makes everything better

BYRON CHISM

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convergence of both a marketing and culinary background, Chism himself doesn't see it. He attributes his success mostly to luck.

"I didn't know what I was doing. I had no money. No experience. I'm still scratching my head over how it all happened. I do know if I'd over-thought everything, I might not have the product I have today."

Butt Rub is a dry, pepper-based seasoning for flavoring anything from eggs, to nuts, to oysters, to catfish to, of course, any kind of meat.

Here's a brief lesson on barbecue from Chism, a man designated by the largest sanctioned organization in the business, the Kansas City Barbecue Society, as one of the top three cooks in the nation.

"What most people call barbecue is grilling. Both have grown in popularity but they're completely different. Grilling is quick cooking on high heat with tender cuts. Barbecue is the exact opposite: slow cooking, low heat, tough cuts. In the past, you had to figure out how to utilize everything—even the tough meats. Now it's become an art form."

Among chefs, it's a well-known badge of honor to elevate a lowly ingredient by making it delicious. Anyone can make a cut of tenderloin delicious, but how's your tripe? How's your pork rib? Can you make a cheap cut taste extraordinary? No amount of money can buy time and patience, which together define the art of barbecue.

Once he developed his product, Chism sent samples to every major supermarket. All turned it down. So he secured the domain name "buttrub.com" and spent his time winning competitions instead of courting markets.

His big break came when he won the Kansas City American Royal Invitational in 2001, his third year in the business. He ended up on Al Roker's barbecue special on the Food Network and began getting bombarded with orders. After every rerun, he'd be bombarded again. Eventually the supermarkets called. Customers were asking for Butt Rub.

Chism grins at the obvious glory of this turnaround.

"We don't have to make deals with the devil," he says. "We can pick who we're selling to."

The other links to his success were the tourists who bought Butt Rub locally to bring home for friends. People reordered off the website.

Bad Byron's Specialty Food Products Inc. now includes Butt Rub roasted peanuts, Butt Rub aprons, T-shirts and insulated drink holders, Jubilee (a seafood seasoning), Miss Lil's Premium Southern honey (tupelo, gallberry and wildflower), and Unca Duke's Geaux Jus. Susan Thomason, Chism's first employee since seven years ago, runs the operation, leaving Chism free to do what he does best: prove true his slogan. With a bustling operation, a plum RV to consider, a trophy room with skyscrapers of awards from every major barbecue competition out there it seems clear, indeed, A Little Butt Rub Makes Everything Better. ■

