

# The Secret Ingredient

It'll make your mouth feel happy and your tummy say yummy.

On the first Saturday of 2008's New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, about an hour before Dr. John settled in behind his piano wearing a dark red suit and a fedora, and several hours before the festival gates closed, the weather deteriorated from subtropical to April-in-Chicago. A chilly wind whipped. Dark clouds dumped. Unprepared crowds, who had dressed confidently in sandals and sun hats that morning, beelined to the tent-covered gospel and blues stages. The booth selling sundries ran out of rain gear. Wet festivalgoers persuaded vendors and grounds crews to give them trash bags, which, with one head poke, become impromptu ponchos. One blogger from New Orleans posted that night that, once he finally got home and into a hot shower, even his rear end had pruned up.

Inside Vaucresson's Sausage Company's food booth, where I was helping to sell hot sausage and crawfish sausage po-boys, we battened down, pulling our chairs back from the elements, stashing our bags on a raised shelf beneath the steam table, and unfurling a heavy plastic sheath to cover the wide-open ordering window. I put on a sweatshirt and wished that I hadn't worn my best sneakers. The Fair Grounds, which hosts Jazz Fest for two weekends every spring, is a horse-racing track the rest of the year. When it rains it smells like a barnyard, and the mud—which may indeed be just mud or may be a public-health hazard—scares me. We heard stories about kids swimming, heads submerged, in a “lake” that had formed over near the Crawfish Monica booth, and I wondered whether their parents had a map of area hospitals. The following day, a friend who had been wearing sandals reported a nasty rash on his feet.

Word among the food vendors was that management wouldn't cancel Jazz Fest this year come torrents or tornadoes. The event

had been declared a rainout only a handful of times during its thirty-nine-year history, and it wouldn't happen again. The financial blow to vendors, to musicians, to festival staff, and to the festival itself is too great. Sales from even a couple thousand diehard music fans are better than none. Michelle Nugent, Jazz Fest's food director, says that she spends a lot of time with the staff electrician during such storms, making sure that it's safe to keep the food booths open.

The wind and the rain came on so strongly that day that we couldn't imagine anyone sticking around, and certainly we watched a mass exodus from our dry vantage point. Parents running with small children huddled in their arms. Soggy sundresses. Wet T-shirts. Flip-flops sticking in the mud with the suction of a vacuum. But no sooner had we lost hope for the day and unrolled the protective plastic than a small queue began to form on the other side of it. So we rolled it back up a few inches, just enough for a po-boy to pass through.

The temporary food booths at Jazz Fest don't have rain gutters; they have “rain walls,” the technical term for that plastic sheath. Water gushed down at right angles on all sides as if kids were emptying buckets on the roof. Customers passed us money, we passed them sausage sandwiches, and all of it got drenched in the waterfall. That night at home, Julie Vaucresson, who married into the sausage business, had to run the bills through a cycle in her clothes dryer before she could count them. The next day, many folks traded in their damp wallets for Ziploc bags.

We have a no-foil policy in the sausage booth, because foil is too expensive to be handing out willy-nilly and festivalgoers tend to be of the give-an-inch-take-a-mile mindset. No one complained this time. They just asked for

extra napkins and tucked the sausages beneath their ponchos before heading out the gates or to the next show. The ones without rain protection ate their sausage po-boys on the spot, teeth chattering. Some people even took care to apply mayonnaise and mustard as the water crashed down. Neither the lemonade booth to our right nor the pecan catfish meunière booth to our left had any customers during the hardest rain. We, meanwhile, maintained a steady flow. It makes you wonder what a person wouldn't endure for some sausage.

Vance Vaucresson is thirty-nine years old, the same age as Jazz Fest, and the current president of Vaucresson's Sausage Company. This was his thirty-ninth year in attendance at the festival. His mom tells him that he spent the first one in a playpen while jazz greats like Mahalia Jackson, Duke Ellington, and Fats Domino wandered among the thin crowds. Back then there were more musicians than paying customers. Vance's parents, meanwhile, sold *chaurice* po-boys that had been prepared and wrapped in foil at his father's French Quarter restaurant, Vaucresson's Café Creole. In New Orleans, *chaurice* is a highly seasoned fresh sausage traditionally made with pork and associated with the Creole culture. Like the Creoles themselves, who by most definitions are of mixed blood, *chaurice* sounds like an amalgamation of the Spanish *chorizo* (from which most sources say the word derives) and the French *saucisse*.

Vance traces his paternal line to a French-Polish Jew and a French woman of color who migrated to New Orleans from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France. Around the turn of the last century, one of their descendants, Robert Levinsky Vaucresson, Vance's grandfather, established himself as a butcher and a sausage maker in the thickly Creole section

of New Orleans now known as the Seventh Ward. Robert Levinsky made an all-pork *chaurice* and formed it into “itty bitty links like breakfast sausage,” according to Vance, who these days usually adds some beef to his *chaurice* mix.

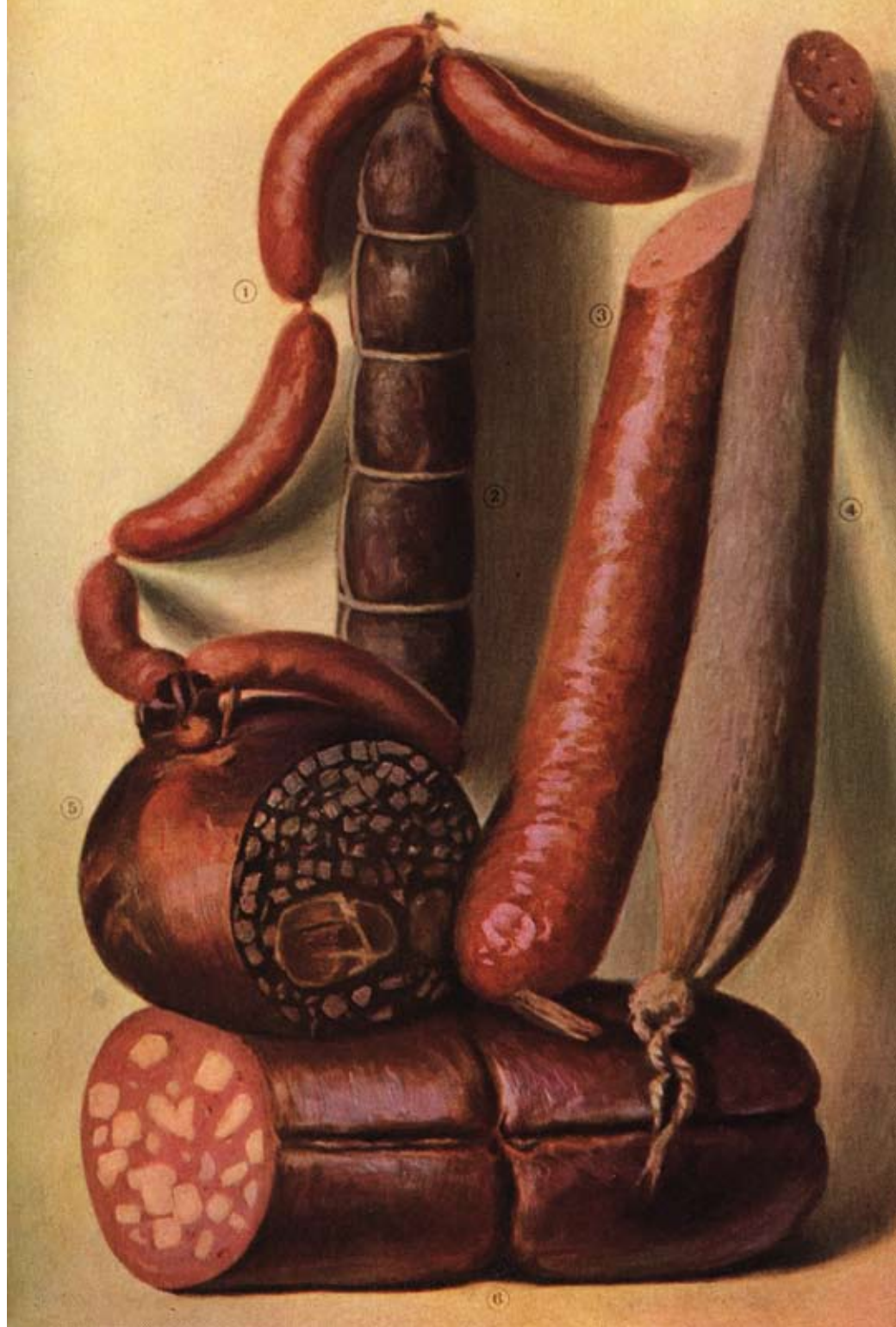
The second edition of *The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book*, first published in 1901, Robert Levinsky’s era, and long viewed as the definitive work on traditional New Orleans Creole cooking, includes recipes for an all-pork *chaurice* and *saucisses* made with pork and beef. The writers introduce their sausage section with a bold statement: “It has been said by visitors to New Orleans that the Creoles excel all other cooks in preparing appetizing sausages.”

I would argue that this claim holds true more than a century later. And it’s not only the Creoles who excel at sausage-making here, but also the Cajuns and the Germans and pretty much anyone else who forces seasoned and ground animal parts into natural casings or intestines within the borders of Louisiana.

This is a sausage-focused state.

Shortly after I started writing about food in New Orleans, I contributed to the planning of a newspaper restaurant guide wherein we organized the restaurant listings under alphabetized, edible subheads. We called the guide *Alligator to Zucchini*. “G” was for Gumbo, “R” was for Redfish. It was clear to me that “S” should stand for Sausage, but I had to fight for it. The newspaper’s publisher, a native New Orleanian, argued that “this isn’t really a sausage town.” She was wrong, and behind her back I’ve never let her live it down, but it was an honest mistake. Sausage is ubiquitous in the cooking here—red beans and rice with andouille, spaghetti with Italian sausage, macque choux with smoked sausage, Creole gumbo with *chaurice*. It usually gets secondary mention on a menu, though, if it’s mentioned at all.

Vance talks about how Creole cooks “stack” flavors by building dishes with layer upon layer of seasoning. You throw sausage in a gumbo, for example, to stack the gumbo’s flavor. Like Louisiana’s holy trinity of seasoning vegetables (onion, celery, garlic), and the trinity of ground peppers (white, red, black), and a roux, sausage does assert itself in a pot of gumbo or beans, but it’s also a team player. Just one layer in the flavor stack. Other times, sausage shows up alongside a dish, like rice and potato salad might, as an expected but unmentioned sidekick. The mistaken publisher



had been eating sausage all her life; lots of it. She just hadn’t noticed.

Vance’s sausages are flavor-stacked themselves. Pork forms the base of his mysterious-tasting crawfish sausage. Raw green onion, celery, and bell pepper also pass through the meat grinder; he adds dried seasonings and whole crawfish tails at the end, just before pumping the mixture into casings. The result is round and robust in flavor and yet just vegetal enough that non-meat-eaters have been fooled. When heated through, Vance’s all-

beef hot sausage links glow an intimidating cayenne-orange, and their interiors are speckled with dried seasoning. But the hot sausage is only hot by New Orleans Creole standards, which is to say that the heat doesn’t overwhelm. Vance explains, “Too much pepper isn’t fair to your palate because, what does it really taste like? Pepper. I want you to be able to taste my sausage. I put more emphasis on seasoning than just pepper.”

Contrary to popular belief outside Louisiana, native New Orleanians, and especially

the Creoles, worship subtleties of seasoning. They might sprinkle a few shakes of hot sauce on a hot sausage po-boy, but only after tasting it first. The same wasn't true this spring at a crawfish festival Vance attended in New Jersey, where customers slathered their sandwiches with hot sauce upon receipt. Vance says New Orleanians are generally more concerned with honing a po-boy's dressings by adding mayonnaise and Creole mustard than singeing their taste buds.

Behind the counter at Jazz Fest, we appreciate this dedication to flavor enhancement in theory only. Managing the sausage booth's condiment station is a dreaded job because it reminds you how truly messy and inconsiderate humans in masses can be.

If he can avoid it, Vance doesn't worry about condiments out at the Fair Grounds. He's too busy with his inheritance, the sausages.

Robert "Sonny" Vaucresson, Vance's father, left college early to join the family meat business, but he was an antsy entrepreneur and let his brother-in-law do most of the butchering. He dabbled in real estate and vending machines. He had a liquor store and called bingo at a hall for sickle cell patients. He was the first man of color to have a business on Bourbon Street during the Jim Crow era, and he was indicted for bribing an FBI agent on a friend's behalf (he got off). Sonny closed the meat market in the 1970s after his brother-in-law passed away. Then, in 1983, he reopened it as a single-vision sausage plant. The evolution was neither smooth nor quick—according to Vance, it took eleven years and the help of a black veterinarian, Dr. Raby, at the Louisiana Department of Agriculture to gain approval.

Sonny fought racial biases on his own terms. "Now those that knew my dad knew that he did not look like a man of color," Vance says. "He had sky-blue eyes; he was just a very fair Creole...in the Creole culture you hear about people being *passé à blanc*, which means passing for white. He never denied who he was, but at the same time my dad was about getting ahead. If you didn't ask him, well, he didn't say."

Vance started working with Sonny when he was eight years old, but as the youngest of three sons he was hardly the heir apparent. He did study business at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, a sign that he was preparing himself for the eventuality, even though

he says that he spent more time in the music department. Soon enough, Vance became the great and final hope. His eldest brother, Robert, sang opera professionally and only pitched in at the sausage plant when he wasn't touring; he died at the age of thirty-three while Vance was still in college. The middle Vaucresson brother, René, a songwriter who now lives in California, never showed interest in the sausage business. Sonny visited Vance in Atlanta not long after graduation and asked him to come home.

Vance returned to New Orleans to work with his father. They butted heads daily, Vance approaching the sausage trade from a theoretical, business-school perspective, and Sonny relying on years of trial-and-error experience. "So he would tell me how much I didn't know, and I would tell him how much he was not willing to look at," Vance says.

They worked through it. By the time Sonny passed away of a sudden and massive heart attack in 1998, at the age of sixty-seven, Vance had been working with him for around seven years. They had an expansive selection of products and more in the works: *chaurice*, green onion sausage, breakfast sausage, hog-head cheese, Cajun boudins, poultry sausages. Vance continued to run the business with his cousin, Patricia Newell, his "right hand." By July 2005, Vance and Patricia were selling to longtime restaurant customers like the octogenarian Creole chef Leah Chase, who uses Vaucresson's *chaurice* in her gumbo at Dooky Chase's Restaurant, and they were maintaining contracts with the Orleans Parish School Board, Wal-Mart, and several local grocery stores. Vance wasn't yet forty, but he had a lucrative business with which to support Julie, two sons (one living with his mother in Houston), and a baby on the way.

That's when I first met him. More than a hundred and fifty members and friends of the Southern Foodways Alliance made an excursion down to New Orleans, and a group of us locals tried to organize the most complete immersion into the city's food culture for them as is possible during a long weekend. For one lunch, we ordered muffulettas from Central Grocery, roast beef po-boys from Parkway Bakery & Tavern, and crawfish sausage and hot sausage po-boys from Vance, all of which we ate in a conference room at the International House Hotel. Vance and Parkway's owner, Jay Nix, delivered their sandwiches themselves.

They both agreed to say a few words about their businesses, an impromptu address that turned into one of the weekend's highlights.

While the duo had never met, they stood before us with their arms wrapped around one another's shoulders. Vance recounted his family's sausage-making history. Nix, a contractor by trade who had resurrected Parkway because he couldn't stand for the abandoned bar and po-boy shop to rot in his neighborhood, told us that he owed his business success to nostalgic New Orleanians who support a name and a memory when they eat. Mandina's. Brocato's. Hubig's. Galatoire's. Domilise's. Casamento's. Hansen's. Leidenheimer's. Zapp's. Parkway. Vaucresson. Nix's soft, difficult voice didn't carry very well, but the message was loud and clear. In this town, legacy matters.

Even dressed in a basic T-shirt and blue jeans, as he was that day, Vance is immediately someone you want to know. A light-skinned black man with striking green eyes, a salt-and-pepper goatee, and a firm build that does not hide an affection for sausage, he bounces lightly when he's forced to stand still. An endearing energy. We felt so lucky to have him there with us. The group devoured his sausages. A month and a half later, when Hurricane Katrina and the failed levees wreaked their havoc, drowning the Seventh Ward and the Circle Food Store where Robert Levinsky had once operated a meat stall, we wondered whether we had tasted the last of them.

Like so many Katrina stories, fiction couldn't touch Vance and Julie's. I'm drawn to it because their plow-ahead attitudes make a happy ending—or at least a tolerable one—seem possible, but also because it plainly answers some of the questions that outsiders continue to ask. Why would someone rebuild in a flooded neighborhood? Why are people still living in FEMA trailers? Why haven't those businesses opened when the flood victims of Iowa are already farming again? Are black people just lazy? Recently, a well-meaning friend who enjoys visiting New Orleans asked whether I didn't think that Katrina was God's way of getting *those people* out of such horrible conditions. She suggested that maybe the hurricane was a blessing in disguise. Vance and Julie are those people. They are also religious people—Vance sings in the choirs of two churches on Sundays. They might see the blessing (though I've never heard them phrase it that way). I don't.

In the interest of not over-dramatizing the dramatic, I'll let Vance summarize their story:

"We evacuated and we were watching TV like everyone else. When I saw the picture of the Circle Food Store, I knew that a block away I had gotten water. And then when we got back, it was the challenge of getting ten thousand pounds of rotted meat out of the facility. And then you go through the process of dealing with the insurance company, and you've got two or three policies, and then they tell you that all of them are no good because of that flood exclusion that's in there. And I didn't have enough flood insurance. So you go through a learning curve that you really didn't want, but that's what happened.

"And then I guess I had successive bad luck. My wife was pregnant five months when we evacuated. She had our little girl in New Iberia, and then she had some complications. Within that first year after Katrina, she had four successive operations, and so I learned how to be Mr. Mom very quickly. And then my office manager, Patricia Newell, who was also my cousin, who basically was my right hand in the business for fifteen years—she suffered from depression after the storm, and she committed suicide as well as killed her two kids. And so, one thing after another. Through this whole process, I have people coming up to me and saying, 'So when are you going to open up? When are you going to make some more sausage?'"

I will add that Vance and Julie were three weeks away from moving back into their home in Gentilly, a middle-class neighborhood near the University of New Orleans, when Katrina hit. A house fire had gutted it months earlier. Everything that had survived the fire was with them at Vance's mother's house, which took on ten feet of water after the levees failed.

Vance never stopped thinking about sausage during his exile. New Iberia, which is a two-and-a-half-hour drive from New Orleans, is in the heart of Acadiana, a sausage hotbed. "My personal journey was to eat as many meat products out there as I could get my hands on," he says.

Along the way Vance developed ideas for new sausages, and also for how to tweak Vaucresson's recipe for the soft pork and rice sausage that Cajuns call boudin. For one, he decided to begin making theirs with pork liver, a traditional boudin ingredient. But instituting such a change wouldn't be possible until he was actually making sausage again,

and considering the state of his home, his sausage plant, and his wife's health, that seemed an eternity away.

Vance did manage to strike a deal with another sausage producer in the area, Jerry Hanford of Crescent City Meat Company in Metairie, to use his sausage-making facilities so that Vaucresson sausage would have a presence at the first post-Katrina Jazz Fest. This was crucial. The Vaucressons are the only original food vendors left at the festival, and Vance considers the festival staff his family. Plus, it's a good money gig—the only money gig for his family at that time. But his resolve couldn't keep the bad luck from continuing. A few weeks before Jazz Fest, someone stole a large rotisserie grill that Vance had commissioned sixteen years earlier expressly for use at the festival. A hulking instrument that could

steal my grill? I can make a little money, I can do a hustle, cook a little sausage, but you take my grill?"

A rental grill stood in for the custom-made one that year (and for the next two—a new one is currently on order). For those of us enjoying the festival, rather than working it, Jazz Fest 2006 was a godsend. Cathartic. Music therapy. When I stopped by the Vaucresson booth to offer my condolences—about the stolen grill, about his cousin Patricia's murder-suicide, about life—and to buy a sausage po-boy, I found Vance working alone. Julie was still too ill to help out, and none of their other regular help was available that day. Few of their friends, many of whom also had lived in the eighty percent of the city that flooded, had been able to move back home yet. The next year, I called Vance and volunteered two ex-



cook with wood chips, charcoal, or propane, it was the only piece of machinery in Vance's life that the deluge hadn't destroyed beyond repair. Journalists wrote articles, newspeople broadcast, someone built a website called [findthegrill.com](http://findthegrill.com), but no one ever found the grill. Probably it was sold for scrap metal, big business in post-Katrina New Orleans. When Vance tells this part of his Katrina story, he turns on an indignant, Chris Rock-style soprano. "I go through all of that and then you

tra hands. He didn't need them as desperately anymore, but, like so many volunteers, I just wanted to feel useful.

It's hard. "I got into the business because it was a 'family' business," Vance says, making air quotes with his fingers. "Now I've got to rebuild a family business with no family." Julie is ready to take up some of the slack, and yet she also manages apartments at a senior-living complex, a job she loves. Plus, she has

two young children. And lingering health problems from her botched Cesarean section in New Iberia. This year at Jazz Fest, just a few bites of a spinach and fried oyster salad put her out of commission. Her doctor constantly tells her she needs to slow down.

Their Seventh Ward sausage plant, with its once colorful murals depicting seasoning vegetables and the legendary Sonny Vaucresson now faded from age and flooding, appears no closer to reopening than it was three years ago. But there has been recent, significant progress behind the scenes. Through a quirk that never mattered before, Vance's brother, René, who hasn't worked there in twenty years, is the significant shareholder in the business. Technically, Vance would need consent from him in order to pursue any small-business loans or relief grant applications. Not wanting to rock their historically shaky relationship, Vance has been reluctant to engage René in any decision-making, which has contributed to the stalled state of things. Just the other day, though, René agreed to turn over his shares, and with them the future of Vaucresson's Sausage Company.

Likely, the flood-damaged facility must be torn down and rebuilt completely. While losing a century-old building hurts, it had some ailments before the storm, and Vance wouldn't mind drawing up a new blueprint. In the past, neighbors and customers-in-the-know would drop by to purchase sausage on the spot, but there wasn't a fully functioning retail operation; this time, he wants an actual storefront, a retail market, and a po-boy shop. The plan is to continue processing Creole-style fresh sausage at the Seventh Ward facility and to work with chefs to develop specialty sausages, but Vance thinks he'll let Jerry Hanford at Crescent City Meat Company continue to manufacture some of his product line—especially the smoked sausages and pre-cooked items that are now for sale on Vaucresson's website.

Since that first Jazz Fest after the storm, Vance and Hanford have maintained a unique relationship, as sausage makers and as New Orleanians. Before then, they were competitors and strangers. "We wouldn't have known each other on the street," Hanford says. Now, they hug and slap shoulders when Vance enters Crescent City. Vance believes that God brought them together. Hanford believes that their relationship could be a template for eradicating the city's racial tensions.

"He's an honest black man and I like to think I'm an honest white man," he says. "Vance and I always say we need to form a union and tell everyone—blacks and whites—to talk to each other, break bread together. That's what we've done, literally. We eat it and swallow it the same way. We digest it the same way."

Among the ways that Vance's post-Katrina struggles and successes are interesting is that they help illuminate, and sometimes explain, the struggles and successes of the city itself. It's easier to understand the macro in terms of the micro. The domino effect following a tragedy is crystal clear in the micro—you see how, when the chips are already down, a simple glitch in the system (an illness, a stolen grill, a crooked assessor, a questionable DA) can cause major, sometimes lasting, damage. Victories are also more apparent in the micro: It's easier to recognize the little ways in which people working hard and working together really make a difference.

We're in Crescent City's freezing cold production room when Hanford and Vance agree that their post-storm alliance gives them hope. Vance tells me that he doesn't even notice the cold anymore; during summers when he was a kid, he used to nap in the refrigerator cooler at his father's liquor store. Hanford, meanwhile, works a steel blade through some raw ribeyes, tossing the trimmings into a grinder that will soon produce about seven hundred pounds of Vaucresson sausage for this weekend's Satchmo SummerFest in the French Quarter. Vance arrived at Crescent City toting gallon Ziploc bags filled with flavor-stacking herbs, spices, peppers, and salt that he weighed on a scale at home. The bags look like colorful versions of those brownie mixes you can buy in glass jars where the flour is poured on top of the cocoa on top of the sugar. He bounces as he feeds lengths of natural casing onto a metal horn that excretes the ground and seasoned sausage mixes. Every now and then something inspires him to burst into song, but I can't hear the lyrics over the hum and clank of the machinery. It could be Beyoncé or it could be gospel. An old choir director told him that when you sing, you pray twice.

Sausage po-boys don't take as long to assemble as many other festival foods do. Unlike fried chicken or sno-balls or boiled crawfish, they don't go soggy or melt or mush up from advance preparation. Vaucresson's

sausages pass through the rotisserie grill in large batches and hold well in the steam table. When an order comes in, you grab a split French roll from Binder's Bakery that someone has dressed with shredded iceberg lettuce and two slices of tomato and placed in a cardboard boat; you apply the appropriate sausage with a pair of kitchen tongs; you pass it to an expediter on the other side of the steam table who hands it to the customer who already has paid the cashier. The customer then scooches over two steps to make a mess of the condiment station. Transaction complete.

The efficiency of the Vaucressons' system begets a lot of downtime, which begets breaks for everyone and, occasionally, high jinks. Vance is the only one of the Vaucresson brothers not to pursue a career in music, but he's never too far from song. He sang backup on one of his cousin John Boutte's albums. Twice during slow spurts at Jazz Fest I've witnessed him reenacting his wedding to Julie, when, as she walked down the aisle, Vance serenaded her with "When I First Saw You" from the musical *Dreamgirls*. Both times Julie noted that at the wedding, Vance wore a head-set like Madonna.

Sometimes Vance bellies up to the ordering window and heckles potential customers with some tricks he learned from Sonny, the bingo caller. In an auctioneer's voice, he belts out, "Come get it, and it's so good! Don't walk by baby, come over here, we got it and it's good. It'll make your mouth feel happy and your tummy say yummy. It will do for you what you want it to do. It's where the rubber meets the road and the road meets the rubber. You over there, with that wonderful *chapeau*, come get this sandwich!"

One time a documentary producer overheard the calls and cornered Vance for a recorded repeat. Passersby always laugh and either veer off toward the cochon de lait booth or take the bait and order a sausage po-boy. Julie rolls her eyes and smiles; she married a ham. And all the while I'm thinking, *How does this man get out of the bed in the morning? To make sausage?*

"One of the most crippling things for me throughout my life has been fear, and it's been very active lately," Vance admits. "But I try to remember what I tell my kids: Make failure your friend. You just have to believe and keep on." 🍌