

## Key, Lionel J. Jr.



### Filè Maker

Lionel Key Jr. was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1948. Mr. Key learned to grind dried sassafras leaves into the seasoning known as filè from his great uncle William Ricard in 1982. Using a 92-year-old mortar and pestle he inherited from Mr. Ricard, he pounds the leaves by hand into a powder.

Uncle Bill's Creole Filè originated in 1904 with William Ricard of Rougon, Louisiana. Mr. Ricard was born blind in 1894. Known as "Blind Willie," Mr. Ricard also made brooms and mops. As a child, he cut sugar cane on Alma Plantation in Lakeland.

Lionel Key Jr. didn't think too much of the old ways growing up but knew about Uncle Bill's Creole filè all of his life. In 1982, he became interested in his great uncle's custom of gathering sassafras leaves each year and grinding them to make filè. He asked his great uncle to teach him how to make it so he could carry on the tradition. He learned Mr. Ricard's tricks of making filè very carefully and has preserved his methods and tools ever since. When Mr. Ricard died in 1984, Lionel was given all of his tools to use, which included Mr. Ricard's mortar and pestle that were made in 1904 by Mr. Ricard's uncle, a carpenter.

Mr. Key continues to make filè once a year just as his Uncle Bill did. He keeps the family's secret of just when the leaves are harvested and how they are cured. He will gladly show people the final step of the process, grinding the leaves into filè by hand. As Mr. Ricard used to tell his great nephew, "A lot of people make filè, but they don't make it like me."

Lionel Key, Jr. has demonstrated filè making at the Louisiana Folklife Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and at the Louisiana State Museum at the Cabildo.

Updated September 5, 2017 by Natchitoches-NSU Louisiana Folklife Center