

Perez, Louise



Isleño And Italian Foodways

Louise Perez was known throughout Louisiana and beyond as a master of both traditional Italian American and Isleño cuisine. Growing up in an Italian American family in Poydras, in St. Bernard Parish, she learned to cook from her mother and grandmother. Italian families in the community often raised their own calves, pigs, and chickens, but meat was not always a part of everyday meals. Her family usually ate "a chicken, maybe, on a Sunday" and pork in the winter after killing a hog, but otherwise depended largely on vegetable dishes. Her father was a truck farmer. Mrs. Perez says, "We lived on vegetables, ourselves," which were picked fresh from their fields. Family meals typically included dishes like stuffed artichokes, smothered turnips, corn soup, and potato soup.

At the age of seventeen, she married Irvan Perez, an Isleño from Delacroix Island. Through her husband's family, she learned about Isleño culture, language, and foodways. Irvan's mother and grandmother taught her how to cook traditional Isleño dishes like wild ducks, caldo, rice custard, crab casserole with squash, and jambalaya.

Mrs. Perez was especially well-known for her *caldo*, a thick, nourishing soup traditional to the Isleños. The soup begins with white beans, pickled pork, and vegetables like corn, red potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots, and sometimes squash are added later in the cooking process. She believed that "cooking is like an art," and so felt free to sometimes improvise even on traditional recipes. She noted that she used more vegetables in her *caldo* than did her in-laws. Most Isleño women on Delacroix Island did not have gardens and ate fewer vegetables than she was accustomed to. The *caldo* takes about two hours to prepare. Before it is served, the whole vegetables are taken out of the broth and arranged on a platter, to be added to the soup as it is eaten.

Louise and Irvan Perez lived on Delacroix Island for twenty years until the community was virtually demolished by Hurricane Betsy. They lived in Poydras, only a block or two from her girlhood home. Mrs. Perez cooked her specialties not only for her own family but also for festival-goers throughout Louisiana. With her husband, a renowned *décima* singer and carver, she traveled widely to promote the Isleño culture and cuisine. She demonstrated Isleño and Italian cooking at the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans, the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, the Natchitoches/ NSU Folk Festival, and the Louisiana Folklife Festival, among others. Mrs. Perez died June 7, 2005.