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# HOME & AWAY

## Bonkers for Bunnies

**The Iowa Rabbit Festival in Lake Charles, La., is a Cajun celebration with music, food and crafts.**

By Michelle Newman

The Iowa Rabbit Festival, a top-20 event in the southeastern U.S., isn't in Iowa at all. It's held at the Burton Coliseum Complex in Lake Charles, La. Until 2016, it was held in the nearby town of Iowa (pronounced I-O-WAY), once home to a successful rabbit-processing plant.

While the festival has expanded, rabbit remains the big attraction. Food and craft booths, a rabbit show, a rabbit cook-off, and a terrific lineup of Cajun and zydeco bands make this a fun family festival. When I was invited to judge the rabbit cook-off, I hopped into action with a pair of iridescent-blue Dollar Store bunny ears and headed straight for Lake Charles.

### Cajun Twist

The cook-off was in full swing by 6 a.m. Sixteen teams of four cooks were already set up with their elaborate cooking wagons, secret seasonings, cast-iron pots and razor-sharp hunting knives.

By 8:30 a.m., the good ol' boys got down to serious business, and the pots were simmering. A band playing country classics had to keep the volume down so the noise-sensitive bunnies in the nearby show barn wouldn't be scared.

Miss Bunny, the reigning festival pageant winner, and her rabbit royalty paraded through the grounds decked out in enormous tiaras, posing for photos.

According to Johnny Armentor, a general contractor and the Holmwood Hoppers team captain, the cooking competition is taken seriously. There's a lot more at stake than just the \$500 prize. "The winner gets bragging rights and a trophy," he said. "The prestige and title are much more important than the money." (The Holmwood Hoppers took second place in the appetizer category with Susan Breaux Racca's Rabbit Boudin Balls).



A cook-off contestant checks the progress of his entry at the Iowa Rabbit Festival.

Michelle Newman

## Beyond Rabbit Stew

“We do a slow, slow simmer to tenderize the rabbit,” Armentor said, with one hand wrapped around a cold beer and the other stirring a huge cast-iron pot of Finger Lickin’ Oxtail ’n’ Rabbit Stew.

How slow? “It takes about a 12-pack to cook this,” he said.

Most Cajun cooking involves one-pot recipes going back to the days when early settlers lived off the land. Marshes, bayous and swamps provided ingredients and spices. Nearly everything hunted and trapped wound up in the gumbo pot. Many of the cook-off contestants are avid outdoorsmen who grew up hunting and fishing and have been cooking gumbo, jambalaya and étouffée their whole lives.

Treasured family recipes are guarded closely. Most Cajun cuisine begins with the “holy trinity,” a base of onions, celery and bell peppers. Lots of garlic, cayenne and black pepper is added to the pot. An occasional bay leaf may be thrown in, depending upon the cook. Some of the teams have their own secret spice blends—the hotter, the better. Many of the cook-off teams buy their rabbits from small local breeders who raise rabbits at home.

Festival attendees can sample rabbit specialties such as gumbo, boudin, sauce picante, enchiladas and quesadillas, plus fried, barbecued and more.

Main dishes and appetizers are judged on texture, creativity, presentation, seasoning, originality and percentage of rabbit used. The variety and presentation is surprising, and the teams artistically arranged and garnished their culinary creations.

Names such as Coon Ass Surf and Turf are as outrageous as the colorful characters doing the cooking. Folks raved over Jalapeño Hoppers, bacon-wrapped jalapeños stuffed with rabbit and cheddar cheese. Pistolettes, a southwest Louisiana concoction, are deep-fried, beignet-like rolls stuffed and smothered with rich rabbit étouffée. Rabbit Sauce Piquante, Rabbit Parmesan on a bed of pasta and fried rabbit topped with crawfish étouffée were among this year’s showstoppers.



Bunny ears and smiles help these girls enjoy a sunny day at the Iowa Rabbit Festival.

Lake Charles/Southwest Louisiana CVB

## Beautiful Bunnies

After the cook-off, I couldn’t wait to hightail it over to the rabbit show. Frank Farrow, from Lufkin, Texas, has been judging rabbit shows for more than 40 years. He had his hands full with more than 200 entries of 15 different rabbit breeds. The bunnies were so adorable I almost bought one to replace my late, beloved Chihuahua Sasha. But I decided against it and back into the pen the bunny went.

All afternoon, suspense and speculation mounted as to which team won the rabbit cook-off.

The winners were announced at the big Saturday night dance.

An upset occurred when the Chenier Chefs, cook-off champs since 2013, were dethroned by the Sabine Pools team and its trophy-winning, Mexican-inspired Rabbit Carnitas with Boom Boom Sauce. Team Bud Light won the appetizer category for Jackrabbit Jalapeño Peppers.

Cajuns know how to party and enjoy life; it's in their DNA. Once the lively Cajun and zydeco bands started playing their accordions, fiddles and washboards, it was impossible to sit still. By the time Richard Lebouef & Two Step played, everyone was on their feet. It was nearly midnight, but there was no way the evening was going to end anytime soon.

### **Planning Your Trip**

Grab your bunny ears, pack your dancing shoes and hop on over to Lake Charles for this year's rabbit festival, March 17–18. To learn more, call the Lake Charles/Southwest Louisiana Convention & Visitors Bureau at (800) 456-7952 or log on to [visitlakecharles.org](http://visitlakecharles.org). Information on the Iowa Rabbit Festival can be found at [iowarabbitfestival.org](http://iowarabbitfestival.org). For vacation-planning assistance, contact your AAA Travel agent or visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

For recipes featuring rabbit, [click here](#).

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Published: Mar 10, 2017