

Transcript for The Who's Dat Phat Girl Podcast - With Brooke Hoover
SEASON 2 EPISODE #27- Cajun Christmas Candy

Hey y'all, I'm Brooke Hoover. A Louisiana native, actor, writer and comedian. I've lost 100 pounds through diet and exercise or shall I say "lifestyle changes". My twenty year and counting health journey has taught me that just like taking a diet pill for weight loss, body positivity doesn't magically happen overnight. I'm working on re-gaining my self esteem and re-kindling my love affair with Cajun and Southern comfort food in a healthier way all the while juggling eating as clean as I can, re-establishing myself in the entertainment industry which, as we know, is historically fat phobic all the while showing my inner phat girl some love - that's phat with a PH - pretty hot and tempting. Let me tell y'all a tale or two...

As a kid, I always dreamed of having a White Christmas and getting to bake from scratch then decorate those traditional cookie cutter Christmas cookies. I always wanted to make tons of different types of traditional Christmas cookies - from gingerbread to sugar - cut out with intricate cookie cutters, iced and decorated beautifully. Visions of presenting friends with a beautiful array of the most colorful cookies they had ever imagined danced in my head. The kind of cookies you see on the December cover of Martha Stewart Living magazine. But, when you're from south Louisiana and you're half Cajun and your momma is 110% Rajun Cajun, you don't get "WASP cookies". You get this treats that look like Gaston or Tiboy's poop. And if you don't know who Gaston or Tiboy are, you need to read "The Cajun Night Before Christmas" Cher! (They're the alligators who pull Santa in his pirogue.)

Yep. And, it is NOT a kid-friendly baking activity. In fact, it's not a baking activity at all. Because, something we like to do down in Louisiana is make "candy":

- (1) Pralines: Please pronounce it "Praw-leen" NOT "Pray-leen" a confection of cream, butter, sugar and pecans that forms a cluster and melts in your mouth.
- (2) Divinity: Arguably made by angels and a feathery-meringue consistency with a strong vanilla flavor.
- (3) Goldbrick fudge: Tons of sugar, marshmallow cream, chocolate and oftentimes pecans that sets up by getting cold which is then cut into bricks. My personal favorite fudge ever and I have had a lot of fudge in my lifetime.

Basically, stirring a ton of sugar, butter, nuts and other simple ingredients together till your Momma and dem get carpal tunnel or whatever carpal tunnel of the arm would be considered. Tennis elbow?

And, if you want to "jazz up" that Cajun candy and add colorful red and green sprinkles and if your Momma is my momma, do. Not. Even. Attempt. It. So, I didn't attempt it. And, you better not ask "Why?" So I didn't ask why or why not, even. I just sat, watched, and sat on the counter in shorts and a tank top licking the wooden spoon covered in Cajun candy goo wishing for a Traditional WASPy White Christmas.

Now, before I start to make Momma sound like the Grinch, Scrooge or Clark

Griswold's Boss in "Christmas Vacation", Momma would bust her butt to make Christmas (her least favorite holiday) special for my dad and me.

One year, after my dad's annual work party at The Camelot Club (how pretentious does that sound?) Momma asked the manager if she could buy the centerpiece display gingerbread house. So, circa December 31, 1988, we drove to downtown Baton Rouge in her Jeep Cherokee and loaded an 80 pound gingerbread house into the back which sat on our counter till the Epiphany. It wasn't "for eating. Just for looking," the chef advised us as it had hot glue holding it together in some parts.

Another year, after a few days of incessant begging, Momma pulled down the fourteen inch pewter gingerbread man and woman cookie cutters from her former gift shop that were on the wall "just for show" so we could try to make and decorate gigantic gingerbread cookies. Momma acquiesced but the gingerbread cookies broke, burned and tasted like failure. I don't even remember decorating them probably because Momma had said something like, "That's a waste of good icing." So, we just ate the icing.

And, a year after that, Momma and I went all over town on a wild goose chase looking for red food coloring paste which is MUCH different than just red food coloring for these extra cute Roly Poly Santa cookies from a Better Homes and Gardens cookie book I had begged Momma to buy me. While Momma didn't like making cut-out Christmas cookies, she probably went along with this charade because the fact that the cookies were rolled and not cut didn't give her any traditional cut-out Christmas cookie red flags and because I wouldn't shut up about them. After driving around Baton Rouge to fifteen different stores, we found the paste food coloring at a specialty Cake Making and private party place called creative cakes. (I had my birthday there the following July.)

However, Momma would NOT budge on making hundreds of cut-out sugar cookies that I could decorate to my heart's content. I just wanted cookies that looked a bit more shaped, a bit more artsy and colorful and that were more "in between the lines" literally and figuratively. Momma never liked doing anything "in between the lines" of "normal", however. And, because all of the family who lived near us were also Cajun, they didn't do the standard "White Christmas Norman Rockwell type people's cookies" either. You got sweets that looked like mud and manure.

One year, I thought I hit the Christmas jackpot because I became friends with a girl who had "Yankee parents" and they invited me to a cookie making party. Most likely, Momma made me a special bow for my hair and I puff painted a shirt for the occasion. Momma dropped me off, I wiped my brow in the 75 degree 89 percent humidity and walked towards Heather's door feeling like I was fixing to enter a Winter Wonderland.

Heather's mom had made hundreds of cookies all in fun shapes from sleds to bells to gingerbread men to Santa to rocking horses to stars all cut out and pre-made and

ready for us to decorate. There were tubs of green, red, blue, yellow and white royal icing laid out for us and sprinkles of all different shapes and textures (well, as many textures as were available in the 80's. I know sprinkles have highly evolved since then.)

I grabbed an angel, spread some light blue frosting on her and topped her with some yellow sprinkles.

We were eleven so our cookies didn't look like anything on Food Network or Better Homes and Gardens magazine. The girls and I spent hours going to town decorating the cookies pretending to be elves in Santa's workshop. It felt so traditional and it felt so normal and I loved it. But, I kept wondering "When in tarnation do I get to eat our creations?!?" So, finally, true to form, getting impatient waiting for someone to make the first move, I decided to take a bite. I had high hopes and great expectations, for all the work, all the time and effort put in, that the cookie would taste nothing short of magic.

Keep in mind, I had never tasted a cut-out Christmas cookie before so I didn't know what it would taste like. I brought a bell decorated with red and green icing and yellow sprinkles to my mouth and took a bite. And another bite. And another bite. And I almost bit my tongue. It was rock hard and didn't have an extreme flavor one way or another aside from sugar. I felt guilty because I had a lot riding on these cookies, kind of like in a Disney movie when you know you should root for the hero but they're bogus so you end up favoring the villain much more. These cookies, were, to quote Cher Horowitz from *Clueless* "So Monet."

This "WASPy Christmas cookie" didn't satisfy me nearly as much as making it had and surely not as much as the anticipation of it or the idea of it. Whereas the Cajun Candy, I wasn't even allowed to handle in its making ("for safety purposes, baby") and, it sure didn't look traditionally pretty. But, man, it melted in your mouth and tasted like cream?...sugar?...pecans?...it tasted like home.

As I got older, Momma started deviating from the Cajun Candy but she still would never do a cookie that involved chilling, cutting and then decorating. However, her cookies always, always, always tasted delicious and they were made with love. One year, we made nearly two hundred chocolate chip cookies using a box mix from Sam's Club that were huge and chewy because Momma's secret was to "take them out partially raw. Remember, no one likes a hard cookie." I worried if they would look too clumpy and funky and not magazine cover worthy. But, students and teachers raved about them for months.

Years later, when we left south Louisiana and moved away from home, I still tried to get my way with doing beautiful Christmas cookies for gifts and there had to be at least three different distinct kinds. I was all about the idea of having a beautiful presentation. But, then, when the holidays approached combined with life, work and stress, I had no desire to make one baked good let alone three different types of

cookies. I still tried though and sometimes they came out beautifully like the sour cream frosted cookies that I hand painted with red and green food coloring or the year I made mint chocolate pinwheels and Momma made chocolate crinkle cookies with a handmade melted peppermint tray for presentation for my improv troupe. Or sometimes my creations came out looking like something made by Krampus. Like the mini pecan pie tarts I made and had the audacity to give my acting agent (no wonder they dropped me.)

Still, for decades, we didn't really make any pralines or gold brick fudge that we had made in their Cajun Candy glory like back in the 80's despite all of our "Yankee friends" always asking about Louisiana food. The Yankees had tasted Momma's jambalaya and gumbo over the years and even one year a doberge cake homemade by Momma and me in my tiny 1970's glorified EZ Bake oven in my Brooklyn apartment. But, every year when the holidays came around, I tried to fight my Cajun heritage for sake of having a perfect, picture worthy presentation.

Until December, 2020. It was like a wild alligator crawled up Momma and I's butts because we had this big urge to make pralines and gold brick fudge for our friends and to hand deliver it socially distanced style. My boyfriend Harry who's from New Jersey by way of India loves nothing more than eating Louisiana food and watching Momma cook Louisiana food. So, one day, I think subconsciously we all knew we needed a little extra sugar, pecans and holiday cheer, Momma said she wanted to show Harry how to make pralines and gold brick fudge.

Momma stirred, kept time and barked orders, Annie and Archer barked and Harry followed orders. I made sure the parchment paper didn't curl up. We all licked the spoons. It was almost like the days of yore when Momma would whip out that wooden spoon, the "pet cream" and the orange Le Creuset and the cousins and Maw Maw would come over and they would just go to town making "candy". And, I would sit, watch and wait to get to lick the spoon and scoop out remnants from the Le Creuset.

I now want to tell younger Brooke that Momma didn't avoid making traditional Christmas cookies because she was the Grinch. She was never taught how to make them so it didn't make her feel confident. Or inspired. It just wasn't in her heritage, her taste buds or her heart. I mean, think of it from the reverse, imagine a blonde haired lady with a perfect no frizzed bob in a J.Crew turtleneck from Connecticut trying to make pralines.

The holiday season is about passing on traditions and keeping up heritage. If Momma can teach an Indian man who's also a Yankee how to make Cajun Candy in a pandemic, I damn well think it is a tradition we can bring back into our lives and I can get over having a perfect presentation and instead think about the flavors of home and bring a little home up here.

You may ask, well, Brooke, you're a grown girl now. Did YOU ever try to make these

cut-out Christmas cookies for a traditional season of Yule-tide joy? The simple answer is no. It wasn't until I was in my late twenties that I even attempted a simple sugar cookie and I found them to be too hard and crumply. Too bland tasting. Then, one day on attempt # whatever it was, I didn't have enough white sugar so, by mistake, or happy accident I discovered what makes my sugar cookies soft, chewy and moist : brown sugar - which is also an ingredient very popular in most Southern and Cajun sweets. No matter how hard I tried to run from my background, I just can't seem to shake it. So, I am learning to embrace it, one sweet at a time.

It's 2023 as I record this and we have been making "Cajun candy for our Yankee friends" ever since.

Thanks so much for listening, y'all. It is my hope to inspire, uplift and entertain you with this Who's Dat Phat Girl podcast. So, if you're HUNGRY for more, you can book me to speak or perform my solo show that inspired this podcast Phat Girl Costumes written by yours truly and directed by my best bud Brian Lady at your virtual or in person event. Please visit Brookehoover.com/fluffybuttproductions or email me at contactbrookehoover@gmail.com for more information. And, let's follow each other on instagram - I'm @Br00keH00ver and those O's are not the letter O but they're ZEROS. Not because I want to be a size 0 but because I guess I'm just so clever with my late 90s Yahoo! self

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