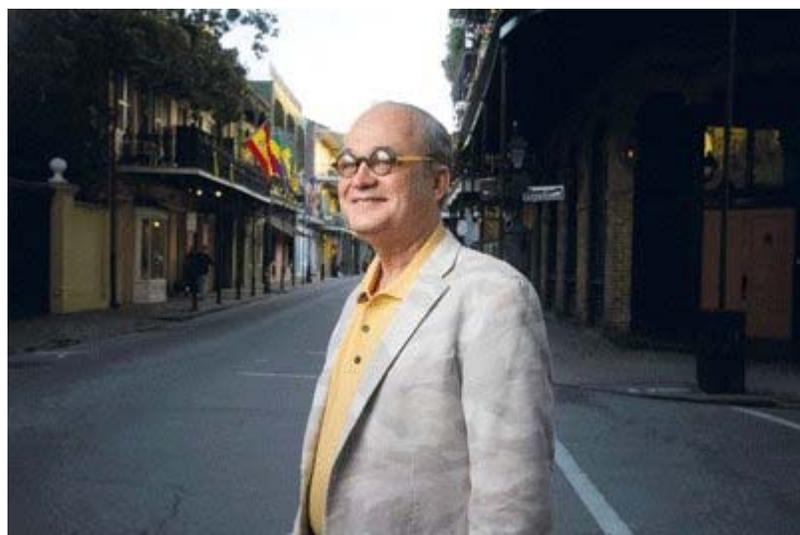


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A Local Strolls Down Royal Street

Rediscovering the French Quarter in New Orleans

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Folks who live or work in the French Quarter live a life unbeknownst to tourists and most other New Orleanians.

Take weekday lunch. Select regulars belly up to a non-functional soda counter for a feast of culinary treats from oyster poor boys to hotplate lunches at a near 100-year-old establishment neither licensed as a restaurant nor even selling food.

Kevin Tusa hosts a weekday luncheon club at his Royal Pharmacy. Regulars include drugstore customers, neighbors, former neighbors and policemen on lunch break. Tusa, the maître d' and in-house pharmacist, is regally assisted by his wife, Lenora, on busy days. Guests are welcomed with one caveat: You must bring or arrange for delivery of your own food from one of the numerous corner grocery stores or restaurants in the lower French Quarter.

There is no sandwich unwrapping fee to sit on a stool at the ancient soda counter surrounded by amber bottles of medications from the early 1900s still in place on the higher shelves. Royal Pharmacy sells soda and other non-alcoholic bottled drinks. Tusa orders his own daily lunch from a rotating number of neighborhood establishments. The regular regulars often call in advance asking Tusa to include them in his order.

“No, I’m not naming any favorites. I like them all. I don’t want to get in trouble,” says the always-diplomatic Tusa when pressed for his top three choices of establishments in the French Quarter that deliver food.

“Kevin orders from a different place every day. He rotates,” says a very deep-throated regular promised a cloak of anonymity. “The Quartermaster, aka the Nelly Deli; Johnny’s Po-Boys; and Angeli On Decatur are all good, and they all deliver.”

“The regulars like Mondays,” says Tusa. “That’s when we watch for tourists staggering in for hangover cures.

Sometimes you can tell that they haven’t been to bed for days. They buy aspirin, Alka-Seltzer, Tylenol, ibuprofen – you name it. Last week a guy came in and washed down two Goody’s powders with half a bottle of Pepto-Bismol.

“All week long tourists come in looking for relief from indigestion. They come to New Orleans and overeat all our good food. They aren’t used to our spices. The locals have different needs. The most frequent request is for allergy and sinus medicines. All our old buildings have so much dust in them. I think that’s what it is.”

As a licensed pharmacist, Tusa is a favorite prescription drug source for current and past locals. Hurricane Katrina put a hiatus on the store’s bicycle delivery service, but the homebound and reclusive Quarterites, who cannot or will not venture out of their walled homes, dispatch a friend or neighbor. Former customers who live elsewhere also call Tusa for prescription refills. Until recent international restrictions, Tusa routinely sent refills to customers in Germany, Poland, France and, for several years, to one of my patients who lived on the Caribbean island Saba.

Tusa still overnight-delivers prescription drugs by FedEx a couple of times a week to displaced customers, including some celebrities. After Hurricane Katrina, one customer traveled all over the United States by automobile for a couple of years and didn’t miss a single blood pressure medication thanks to Tusa sending refills to different addresses every few months. Try calling a local chain drugstore and asking the clerk to mail a prescription refill to Ely, Minn.

Leaving Royal Pharmacy satiated with lunch and neighborhood banter, knowledgeable Quarterites cross the street for a peek into the Fredrick Guess Studio. Guess always paints with open shutters near the door, allowing hellos and brief conversations with passersby. Guess migrated from his native Florida by way of the American Academy of Art in Chicago and five years as a professional portraitist in Manhattan. His street-front studio is a destination for locals and visitors alike who admire his colorful impressionistic style.

In the past year Guess has probably painted more French Quarter inhabitants than all other artists combined for the last 10 years. A patron commissioned him to paint 155 French Quarter residents who enjoy cocktailting with each other at different bars most Fridays in the Vieux Carré. Realtor Dorian Bennett founded in 1999 what’s now called The Grande and Secret Order of Obituary Cocktail to celebrate our unique bars and saloons and the drinks they spawned.

According to the drinking group’s website, Guess has painted the “most comprehensive painting of French Quarter friends and neighbors ever produced by an artist. It represents, for the first time in history, a view of who lives, loves and cares for the French Quarter.”

The original Obituary Cocktail oil painting is a four-by-eight-foot canvas with astonishing individual facial detail more photographic than impressionist. Guess still has a few prints of this work, serially numbered from a run of 300, selling for \$75 each in his retail gallery. His individual portraits begin at \$2,500. He just completed a full-sized nude painting of a retired university professor and author sitting in a chair, but it would take torture to extract the subject’s name from me. Guess also offers occasional “Color Your World” workshops where those of you with some artistic desires can get some tips, motivation and instruction.

Continuing up Royal Street I come to Rouses Supermarket. Those of us with decades of French Quarter life in our marrow remember Carlos, a former manager of the old A&P at this

site. Carlos would hardly look up when a street person of that era would dart inside the door and proclaim in a stage voice that carried back to the meat counter: "Now is the time for customers in all A&P stores all over the country to take off their clothes." In those pre-ATM days, Carlos was the neighborhood check cashier for regulars as well as pretty women from anywhere. "Too many bad checks from too many fantails," says my friend Dan Mosley in explaining Carlos' sudden departure in the 1980s.

Carlos' replacement and manager of the much spiffier Rouses is the dapper Edward Drevar, a longtime Rouses employee with the people skills needed to run one of the most unique grocery stores in America. "The tourists buy drinks, liquor and snack foods," says Drevar. "We turn over an unbelievable amount of fresh fruits and vegetables each week. If I had to pick one item that locals buy the most, I'd say our olive salad. It's made from an old Rouse family recipe with green and Greek olives, pickled vegetables, garlic, celery and spices, including oregano."

I leave Rouses with a pound of fresh chicken livers and a 32-ounce jar of olive salad and continue up Royal Street, making a right turn just before Canal Street to check out the oysters at Felix's Restaurant. All the oyster bays are iced down and three shuckers are hard at work. Perfect. All too often since Hurricane Katrina, shuckers shuck "cooler temperature" oysters, not iced down ones. I understand the need to store sacks of live oysters above freezing, but some of the newer shuckers forgo the ice down.

"If it ain't ice cold, it ain't good, baby," says Felix oyster shucker Keith Chanley, a 27-year veteran in shucking oysters. "I don't shuck hot oysters, me. They got to be cold to bring out the flavor."

After putting away a dozen ice-cold tasty bivalves, I'm ready for lunch. Whenever I get within a few blocks of Galatoire's, there's a magnetic attraction that draws me to that old French Creole fry house.

"I'm hungry for fried chicken livers," I tell my waiter who looks crestfallen and scurries back to the kitchen. "Dr. Lutz, chicken livers have been off the menu for years. I'm so sorry. I checked with the cooks. I can get you calves' liver though," he says hopefully.

"Ah, but they do now," I say, handing him my pound of livers from Rouses. Shortly thereafter, beautifully fried chicken livers appear in a heart-shaped pattern on a plate decorated with parsley. Perfectly fried chicken livers, crispy outside and tender inside.

As I ease out of Galatoire's after the third special birthday announcement, I decide to walk home via Bourbon Street. By the time I get to Orleans Street, I am ready for a respite. The Crescent City Cigar Shop beckons just across from the Bourbon Orleans Hotel. As usual, Armando Ortiz is holding court with a couple of his regulars enjoying a smoke in his friendly neighborhood oasis.

Once, former city councilman Joe Giarrusso and anti-tobacco advocates, including me, picketed restaurants in New Orleans without no-smoking sections. We were outside Galatoire's long enough to get some television coverage before moving on to the beloved, and now gone, Ruth's Chris Steak House at Orleans Avenue and Broad Street when the steak lady herself was at the helm. Ruth Fertel, with a cigarette dangling from her lips, wasn't amused, but she invited us in for steaks as soon as the press disappeared. Now I slip into cigar bars for an occasional smoke.

Times change.

"I have all the core brands and stock a few select boutique brands," says Ortiz on the telephone with Lou Rodriguez, a physician of Cuban-American heritage in Greenville, N.C., who launched his own brand of premium handmade cigars in January. He was anxious to hear how his product was selling in New Orleans where Ortiz had three boxes in his humidor.

As I settled into one of the overstuffed chairs in the smoking lounge next to a policeman on break, I watch photographer E. Paul Julien take some photographs of Ortiz for this article.

Julien asks about Perique, the only commercially grown tobacco in Louisiana. “I have it right here in the pipe smoking section,” Ortiz says, showing us a few ounces of the blackest and darkest tobacco I have ever seen. “It’s really strong – too strong for cigars and even most pipe smokers.”

With the olive salad in the Rouses sack and the chicken livers in my tummy, I waddle home with a lit cigar in my hand ready to burn out an eye of any attacker. Who needs a gun when you can carry a lit cigar with a hot tip?

I taste the Rouses olive salad on a slice of French bread and refrigerate the rest. Making muffulettas at home isn’t on my dance card, but I add it to salads and sprinkle it as an extra on the pizzas I order hot and delivered from another Royal Street establishment: Mona Lisa.

CONCLUSION: I just scratched the surface of a walk down a few blocks of Royal Street with a U-turn onto Bourbon Street. For example, I didn’t even get to tell you where nearby Quarterites eat red beans for free every Monday. The French Quarter is a treasure trove of finds on every block. Check it out on a weekday for a dance with the locals.