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The French Quarter: What the Doctor Ordered

A personal guide to the Vieux Carré by those who experience it

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA ESSEX

Hail a pedicab, look to make sure the operator has powerful legs and join me for a whirlwind tour of French Quarter eateries. This isn't an all-inclusive tour; it's my heretofore-private treasure trove, an evolving baker's dozen of current favorites distilled from living within these boundaries for the last 40-plus years.

My favorite dining spots as a medical student in the 1970s are now extinct. Most are chronicled in the recently published and definitive *Lost Restaurants of New Orleans*, except for Williams on Burgundy Street, renowned for garlic-fried chicken in those pre-Popeyes days. They included Tony's and The Spot for Sicilian-Creole standards; Gin's for white-tablecloth Chinese when someone else was footing the check; Fun's on Decatur Street for Chinese on my own dime, where about six dimes actually would buy the meal; and The Steak Pit on Bourbon Street where Todd, the owner, always gave medical students a discount.

Arise early and breakfast beckons. One block from the Royal Orleans (locals rarely add the official Omni prefix to the name) toward the river is **Johnny's Po-Boys**. The line for lunch forms later, but Johnny's dishes out a terrific breakfast seven days a week. I usually opt for two eggs over light with grits and bacon, but their pancakes and omelets are also big draws. A brand-new attraction perfect for curing an afternoon sweet tooth is Johnny's newly opened space on the second floor. It is an old New Orleans "sweets shop" with seven tables serving definitive banana splits, sundaes and Blue Bell ice cream.

Around lunchtime for the past 62 years, all thoughts at Johnny's have turned to poor boys. If you see a long line, don't despair. It moves quickly, and the wait is rarely more than 15 minutes. Their beef is slowly boiled the old New Orleans way in a seasoning bath of celery, garlic and bell peppers. Prefer beef *and* pork? Johnny's "Special" is the same cut-across-the-grain beef along with grilled ham and two cheeses. The "Judge Bosetta," ground beef crowned with Italian and hot sausages, is another favorite poor boy named after a former Huey Long crony who dined at Johnny's until he died last year at age 84. Unless you share the Judge's cast-iron stomach, save his namesake for when you have pre-booked a pedicab to whisk you to **Royal Pharmacy** for one of Kevin Tusa's stomach-acid specials.



TUJAGUE'S CHICKEN BONNE FEMME

Our next stop is **Tujague's** on Decatur Street. On weekdays at 6 o'clock, they offer free parking. Or at least that's what the regulars call it as that's when the rush-hour lane across Decatur Street closes for traffic and parking resumes. The dining room with its six-course Creole-inspired menu punctuated by postprandial coffee in a highball glass is worth a visit at least once a decade, but the draw here is the bar food. The barroom looks like its pre-Prohibition pictures, except for two silent television sets mounted above the bar and video poker machines stealing money from bar regulars during my last visit. The owner dishes out free red beans and rice for the regulars each Monday, but don't get your hopes up too high for a serving if it's your first visit.

My favorite spot in Tujague's is the artist's palette-inspired table across from the middle of the bar, but don't settle in too comfortably. You can order from the table, but the bartender expects you to fetch his expertly executed drinks from the bar. The boiled beef brisket poor boy here is my all-time favorite and enough to feed two. It is served in a signature local French bread loaf with the same delicious horseradish Creole sauce that anoints the boiled beef brisket in the dining room. This is also the locale for the most spectacular presentation of any single menu item in the French Quarter. The Tujague's version of chicken *bonne femme* is composed of perfectly fried pieces of chicken with hot, crispy homemade potato chips, topped with chopped garlic and parsley, served encircled in a bed of purple cabbage leaves. It is a beauty to behold and the greatest nod to garlic this side of the Huey P. Long Bridge.

The Italian immigrants, what with their seeming dedication to decay and disdain for paint, actually protected the old structures in the French Quarter for most of the 20th century. **Irene's Cuisine**, with a garage turned into a bar, and **Café Giovanni**, with live operatic and show tunes three days a week, are current our strongest Sicilian culinary temples. And for the best Italian pizza in the French Quarter drop into **Mona Lisa Restaurant**. They also deliver (within the French Quarter), if dozens of framed Monas watching you eat is more than you can take without liberal dosages of mind-altering substances.

If your taster is set on a seafood house, **GW Fins** is a hands-down favorite for variety and uniqueness. It is a large, modern space carved out of where D.H. Homes warehouse workers packed the store's delivery trucks years ago. With co-owners Gary Wollerman ruling the front of the house and chef Tenney Flynn making miracles happen in the kitchen, the menu changes daily. Lobster dumplings are my favorite starter. And if I remember to call ahead, I request that the chef – dubbed the fishmonger czar of the Gulf by the *Wall Street Journal* – save a head-on fish for me as his fried whole fish is on par with the freshly caught pan-fried North Alabama bream I ate as a child.

Another newbie (defined as any restaurant less than 100 years old) is **Broussard's**, where a beloved German chef who also lives in the French Quarter ladles out his own special German/Italian/Creole fusion cuisine. Nearby is also **Bayona**, home to Susan Spicer, whose food I have savored even when I had to pack my passport to cross Canal Street to Savoir Faire on St. Charles Avenue when we were both young. Well, Spicer still is young and her food keeps getting better. Her three small-plate Saturday lunch is an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon.



ANTOINE'S RESTAURANT

And now for the grand old ladies of New Orleans dining – **Antoine's** and **Galatoire's**. As with great-grandmothers, age and change aren't always kind. Devotees return and return,

usually for special occasions choreographed by a veteran and trusted waiter. But novices need not fear, the staffs at both establishments will take you by the hand and keep you on course with a few pointers; I'll let you in on to get you started. First of all, show up looking like the locals – that means a coat and tie for gentlemen. Secondly, don't try to fool the wait staff into thinking you're actually a local. You can't. A good way to break the ice is to ask if it's possible to get a Sazerac with a few slivers of ice and not on the rocks. Thirdly, ask the waiter for his or her suggestions. At Antoine's specify: "and not the frozen TV dinner," waiter's speak for their once-infamous Pompano en Papillote, a fish concoction cooked in parchment that thankfully isn't even on the menu anymore. At Galatoire's ask: "What fish looks good today?" And lastly, when you leave either establishment, be gracious with the gratuity and inquire: "Are you working tomorrow? I want to come back." Then return and ask for the same waiter. You will instantly have your own waiter. The change in the food suggestions and service on your second day will blow off your socks. Sorry you have to go through all this, but that's the way it is.

Some food observations on these two grande dames are in order. In my opinion those yummy pommes soufflés, or puffed potatoes, are best at Antoine's. The current Galatoire's version took a downward turn with a management-inspired order to the chef to make them more uniform, which translates as shorter, stubbier and thicker. They just aren't right. Antoine's also excels in the dessert department. Their Baked Alaska is the best dessert in New Orleans – a delicious, edible work of art. For fish and most entrées, Galatoire's excels. My favorite Antoine's meal is a waiter's liberal selection of appetizers to share for the table followed by a house salad, a pass on the entrées and topped off with a Baked Alaska for dessert.

The North Rampart Street border of the French Quarter is home to several new eateries, but my favorite of the strip is the **Meauxbar Bistro**. This small, upscale bistro opened a few years ago with a fixed, non-seasonal menu that always seemed out of sync; summer in New Orleans is no time for French onion soup. After a particularly scathing review in the local daily rag, the chef changed course.

The best bets in this small, friendly room are the daily specials, whether red meat, poultry or seafood. The chef's recent bouillabaisse contained perfectly poached Gulf coast seafood swimming in a light, saffron-flavored broth, which I much prefer to tomato gravy versions usually served in these parts. Jump for the frog legs – no fishy chicken taste to these delectables. Rabbit fricassee was another recent special. Baked chicken is moist. Flash-fried oysters are sublime.

The crowd at Meauxbar is top-heavy with regulars from the French Quarter as well as returning locals. Its location on North Rampart Street across from the downtown corner of Armstrong Park makes Meauxbar a driver's treat as street parking within a block or two is usually easy to find. A recent evening had a writer or medico at six different tables. Jed Horne, John Berendt and Jon Kemp were breaking bread in a room with a local trio of hand, eye and radiology wizards – Drs. Stokes, Brint and Soll, respectively.

Since our tour is of the French Quarter, I visited the only French-born chef whom I know to have recently headed a kitchen within these boundaries: during his brief stint at the Omni Royal Orleans' **Rib Room**, before leaving to start a new restaurant in the warehouse district, chef Rene Bajoux restored its old culinary traditions while also tickling diners' fancies with his own creations.

On a Saturday night in February I was dining with a gourmand's gourmet whose Allard Boulevard dinner parties are some of the hottest tickets in town. When we told the waiter that we would defer our choices to "Chef Rene," the chef himself appeared tableside. My companion Susan, gave the marching orders: "You select."

We were soon munching on buttermilk-soaked fried Louisiana frog legs with a spicy Thai peanut dipping sauce. The second course was just-off-the-plane West Coast sardines, eviscerated, deboned and grilled with heads attached on a bed of sautéed bell peppers, onions, black olives, celery, homemade chorizo and more shiitake mushrooms than you could shake a stick at. Course three was divinely roasted redfish with more shiitake mushrooms in a subtle butter sauce tented with the redfish's fried skin and crispier than any man-made potato chip.

Course four was house-made pork terrine with Louisiana hothouse tomatoes, a vanilla balsamic sauce, manchego cheese and Fallot black currant whole-grain mustard as accompaniments. "It is really a hogs head cheese made with South Texas Heritage Pork, but we lose 80 percent of our orders unless we call it a terrine," said Bajoux. Course five was

half a Texas quail that had spent its day swimming in Abita beer before being roasted and plated into a nest of sweet potato and mashed turnips.

For a single late-night dinner, the bar is the perfect spot to nurse a martini and enjoy a specimen slice of rare roast beef. I always opt for the bone-in version, which makes my dog love me for a long time if I don't lose the doggie bag on the way home. I claim my spot at the bar there several times a month. If you see a pink single-speed bicycle chained to a column outside on Royal Street, I'm in the bar.

And for my finale, I want to tell you about the place where I would eat my last meal if I knew in advance that it were going to be the last. First of all it's just across the alley from **The Pelican Club**, another of my top favorites. **The Green Goddess** is God's post-Hurricane Katrina gift to the French Quarter. Chefs Chris DeBarr and Paul Artigues are simply culinary angels sent to us from above. The menu for this smallish space is poetic. The ever-changing items on their must-have "Cornucopia on da Bayou" tasting menu recently included Oysters Delacroix, shrimp "Wearing a Grass Skirt" and "Freaky Tabouli" with smoked wheat. I am saving room for "The Sultan's Nest" dessert next visit. The tables for this jewel tumble out into Exchange Alley, with weather and city bureaucratic rules permitting. Since the management never knows how many tables might be set, there are no reservations. Pass by and check it out. When it's closed or if the wait is too long, chef Richard Hughes, the founding chef across the street, might slip you in. Either way, you can't go wrong.

Restaurants in order mentioned:

Johnny's Po-Boys

511 St. Louis St.

525-8037

JohnnysPoBoys.com

Royal Pharmacy

1101 Royal St.

523-5401

Tujague's Restaurant

823 Decatur St.

525-8676

TujaguesRestaurant.com

Irene's Cuisine

539 St. Philip St.

529-8811

Chef Duke's Cafe Giovanni

117 Decatur St.

529-2154

CafeGiovanni.com

Mona Lisa Restaurant

1212 Royal St.

522-6746

GW Fins

808 Bienville St.

581-3467

GWFins.com

Broussard's Restaurant

819 Conti St.

581-3866

Broussards.com

Bayona Restaurant

430 Dauphine St.

525-4455

Bayona.com

Antoine's Restaurant

713 St. Louis St.

581-4422

Antoines.com

Galatoire's Restaurant

209 Bourbon St.

525-2021

Galatoires.com

Meauxbar Bistro

942 Rampart St.

569-9979

Meauxbar.com

The Rib Room

621 St. Louis St.

529-7045

RibRoomNewOrleans.com

The Pelican Club

312 Exchange Place

523-1504

PelicanClub.com

Green Goddess

307 Exchange Place

301-3347

GreenGoddessNOLA.com