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FIRST-CLASS TICKET

Where the Eating is Easy

Soulful Creole cuisine provides much more than a taste of New Orleans

FRENCH, SPANISH, AND WEST AFRICAN CULTURES HAVE had a strong and lasting influence on language, architecture, religion, and racial politics in New Orleans. The city's cultural legacy is rich, pervasive, and sometimes bawdy. Even its nickname, NOLA, presumes sex appeal. From the homes accented by colorful bricks, wrought iron, and shuttered widows on the cobbled streets of the French Quarter to Zulu floats in Mardi Gras and the syncopated rhythms of Zydeco, this Southwestern city is a destination for engaging the senses.

Food defines New Orleans. There is no censorship on taste,

no modified portions, and no substitutions. "If you can't use butter," asserts 86-year old Leah Chase of the legendary Dooky Chase restaurant, rephrasing Julia Childs, "use cream!"

You can tell a lot about a people by the food they eat, and nowhere is that more easily determined than in a New Orleans Creole kitchen. Earthy, solid, mixed, and spicy describe both its citizens and their most popular signature dish of gumbo. In this very Catholic city, the foundation of all their meals is a chopped mix of onion, celery, and green pepper, known as the trinity. Food in New Orleans is spiritual, and therefore very communal.



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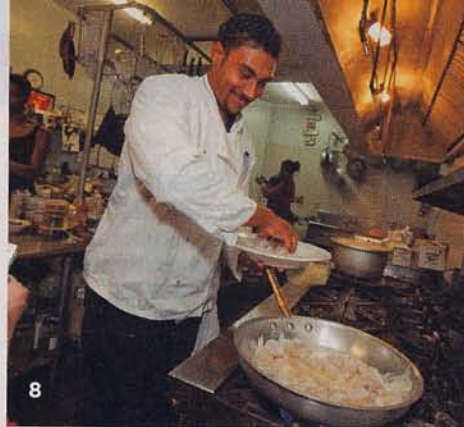


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1. BELTON PREPARES AT LIL' DIZZY'S CAFE AND AT THE NEW ORLEANS SCHOOL OF COOKING (INSET);
2. BREAKFAST AT BRENNAN'S
3. A PERFECT ROUX
4. FENTON STIRS SHRIMP
5. GUMBO: A TASTE OF TRADITION
6. INGREDIENTS, INCLUDING THE TRINITY



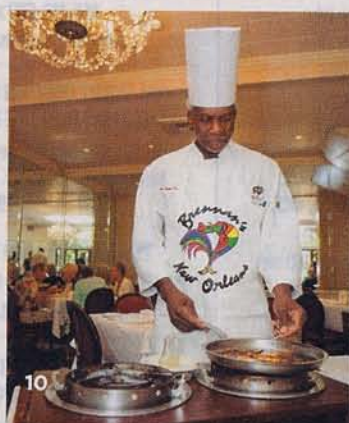
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"Food is about visiting and sharing," remarks Chef Kevin Belton of Lil' Dizzy's Cafe. "It's not necessarily what's on the table; it's who's at the table." On my recent Creole culinary tour, I learned that every meal was indeed a social event of discussion, laughter, and discovery. We were rarely hungry when my group and I sat down to eat, but we did bring a hearty appetite eager to be satisfied by yet another mouthwatering experience.

Our first stop was breakfast at Wayne Baquet's Lil' Dizzy's Cafe. With two locations, we visited the newer restaurant at 610 Poydras Street in the central business district, set on one side of a still-functioning historic bank. This spot offers dinner as well as breakfast and lunch, but it is best known for its jazz champagne brunch. Head chef Belton served us crab meat and jambalaya omelets, fried catfish with grits, and their very own spicy sausage. French bread, which is served up in a variety of ways, is almost the only bread you'll eat in New Orleans. We learned from Belton that French bread has no preservatives. As it ages and becomes hard it's called "lost bread"—perfect for bread pudding and the French toast topped with bananas and strawberries he served that morning.

The historic and classic Brennan's serves a mesmerizing array of egg dishes such as poached on an artichoke with creamed spinach or atop Andouille Cajun sausage and Holland rusk. I enjoyed a hearty bowl of turtle soup spiked with

white sherry, Brennan's blackened redfish and fried okra, and topped it off with their signature dessert: Brennan's Foster, a simple yet sumptuous blend of halved ripe bananas, a rich bourbon sauce, and vanilla ice cream. "We don't deal with specials," offers Executive Chef Lazone Randolph, who has worked with the restaurant for more than 40 years. "We serve food."

Willie Mae's Scotch House and Two-Sisters will be among your best sampling of back-a-town dining—authentic Southern food from a family-owned business in a neighborhood setting. Willie Mae's fried chicken, prepared from a rich, seasoned batter, is often voted the best in New Orleans. But we decided that her three versions of fried pork chops, including a chicken-fried preparation, also win high marks.

At The New Orleans School of Cooking is where we learned firsthand how to make Chef Doris Finister's favorite shrimp and okra dish. Chef Belton trusted us with his recipes for bread pudding with an intoxicating rum sauce and roux, the flour-based foundation for a variety of Creole dishes including a perfect gumbo.

Every Creole chef will tell you that they learned to cook in their home kitchens carefully watching a mother or grandmother. Belton, Finister, and Chef Kerry Seaton, a political science major now heading the menu and management at Willie Mae's since the retirement of her great-grandmother, all recount similar stories. "Nobody had to tell you much," says Chase, "you just watched." Her grandson Edgar Chase IV and heir apparent agrees. He cut his teeth at the restaurant as a busboy, waiter, cashier, and dish washer before preparing meals. Today he is a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu Culinary School in Paris, which his grandmother will lovingly tease him about when he adds artistic finishes to a meal.

But it doesn't matter how far a chef goes for training, the tradition of Creole cooking in New Orleans outweighs any instructions you might find in a book.

—Sonia Alleyne

- 7. BACK-A-TOWN DINING
- 8. HEIR APPARENT AT DOOKIE CHASE
- 9. BRENNAN'S FOSTER, A CLASSIC
- 10. RANDOLPH WHIPS UP DESSERT
- 11. COOKING SCHOOL IN THE FRENCH QUARTER
- 12. AN ANXIOUS CULINARY GROUP