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TRAVEL



Tasting the French Quarter

By GREG MORAGO



After fitful starts and restarts that punctuated two years of pandemic agony, New Orleans' tourism industry is on the rebound. The new year has already brought the successful return of Mardi Gras, the French Quarter Festival and the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. And 2022 will continue to bring tourists back for events such as the Essence Festival on Fourth of July weekend and Southern Decadence over Labor Day weekend.

Big Easy dining is feeding the tourism resurgence. The food and drink that has made the city famous — Cajun and Creole classics, po'boys and muffulettas, gumbo and jambalaya, Sazeracs and sno'balls — are now, more than ever, a critical factor in reestablishing New Orleans' status as a top travel destination.

New and legacy restaurants in the French Quarter, the heart of the tourist draw, show just why the Crescent City rules.

Chemin a la Mer

The second of the two big-deal restaurants to open at the Four Seasons Hotel New Orleans is from a familiar face on the city's dining scene. James Beard Award-winning Donald Link, founder of the Link Restaurant Group (Herbsaint, Cochon, Cochon Butcher, Peche, Gianna) opened his grand ode to French-inspired Louisiana cuisine in late 2021. With Link and the hotel's other marquee name, Alon

THE DINING ROOM AT CHEMIN A LA MER IN THE FOUR SEASONS HOTEL NEW ORLEANS OFFERS A VIEW OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER.



A VARIETY OF DISHES AT SAINT JOHN, A NEW HAUTE CREOLE RESTAURANT IN NEW ORLEANS' FRENCH QUARTER



TRUFFLED DEVILED EGGS WITH CAVIAR ON THE HAPPY HOUR MENU AT BIJOU RESTAURANT

Shaya, helming Miss River, the Four Seasons is clearly among the most prized dining venues in the Crescent City.

Chemin a la Mer (French for “pathway to the sea”) occupies a scenic slice of the fifth floor pool level, with an indoor/outdoor space snug on the Mississippi River. The dining room looks ship-deck rich, a fitting setting for Link’s menu of oysters, steaks and seafood. Start with raw Gulf oysters, Gulf fish and shrimp ceviche, crawfish and asparagus remoulade, or bistro-perfect pate. Mains include a fish of the day, steaks, duck confit, salmon with lentils and pan-seared shrimp with cauliflower rice gratin. Anchoring the bar is a painting by artist John Alexander called “Purple Grackle,” a tribute to Link’s friend, the late Julia Reed, the Southern journalist who reveled in New Orleans culture, especially food. *2 Canal St.; cheminalamer.com*

Saint John

Haute Creole cuisine is both historic and pervasive in New Orleans, but it somehow seems newly essential at this lively French Quarter restaurant. The flavors and traditions of Italian, French, Spanish, African, German and Caribbean cuisines that contributed to the great gumbo that is Creole are deliciously elevated and energized by chef/owner Eric Cook, working with chef de cuisine Daren Porretto.

Cook’s crawfish remoulade is made with grilled mudbugs and served with fried green tomatoes and okra corn chow chow; shrimp étouffée is smothered in butter and comes with steamed Louisiana popcorn rice; crispy fried oysters are served with hoppin’ John and laced with green remoulade; seared fish of the day sits atop a colorful corn and shrimp maque choux. Creole beef daube is made with short ribs; the plate for his crispy-skin duck breast is dotted with jalapeño Creole cream cheese and satsuma glaze; and a signature deep-fried whole fish can be finished in either almond brown butter meunière or Creole court-bouillon. And when is the last time you saw smothered turkey necks in brown gravy with potato salad? *1117 Decatur; saintjohnnola.com*

Bijou

The French Quarter’s North Rampart, for years a somewhat sketchy thoroughfare, is now a veritable Restaurant Row, with chic bars and eateries enticing visitors away from the Bourbon Street hubbub.

Bijou, opened in late 2021 on the northernmost boundary of the French Quarter, is an inviting new player with a tapas-style menu from chef Eason Barksdale, who mentored under superchef Susan Spicer at her Bayona and Mondo restaurants. It’s a lively restaurant set in a historic Creole cottage designed with a snug bar up front and a narrow passage to a larger, light-filled bar and dining room in back with a patio.

The brief dinner menu includes tuna tartare with

sesame wontons; pan-seared salmon with gochujang sauce and kimchi served with ginger scallion rice; Cuban sandwich; tom yum chicken; squid ink spaghetti; and a proper house burger fashioned with sharp cheddar and griddled onions. A happy hour menu offers choice bites such as truffled deviled eggs with caviar and a selection of house cocktails and good wines by the glass. *1014 North Rampart; bijouneworleans.com*

Tujague's

At 165 years, Tujague's isn't just the second-oldest restaurant in New Orleans, it's the third-oldest restaurant in the country. The restaurant that invented the Grasshopper cocktail has new lease on life courtesy of a move in late 2020 six blocks upriver from its former address on Decatur.

Pronounced "two jacks," the restaurant offers a menu of New Orleans classics: shrimp remoulade on fried green tomatoes, gumbo, pan-roasted chicken breast, sauteed veal and crawfish over mushroom pappardelle, bread pudding and king cake pain perdu. A vintage ambiance was thankfully preserved in the move, and perhaps the restaurant's ghostly apparitions, part of Tujague's famous haunted history, have migrated, too.

During a recent visit, the culinary spirits showed up in a deep seafood gumbo; roasted mushroom crepes; house salad with sugar cane vinaigrette; grilled Gulf fish topped with seared shrimp in a lemon butter sauce; and an iconic New Orleans-style barbecue shrimp served over stone-ground grits.

Look for a new party spirit, too: Tujague's has become home to an occasional Sunday drag brunch with full glitter glam and bawdy fun that is perfectly at home in the French Quarter. *429 Decatur; tujaguesrestaurant.com*

Brennan's New Orleans

This one's a lagniappe. The famed Brennan's, now in its 76th year, is enjoying the spotlight with its finalist nomination for Outstanding Restaurant for the 2022 James Beard Awards. The recognition puts the French Quarter restaurant and its luxurious Creole dining menu back among the city's top restaurant choices for locals and New Orleans visitors.

But was it ever not? The restaurant that invented Bananas Foster has made culinary memories since it was founded in 1946. Through its long and complicated Brennan's family history, Brennan's has made a variety of dishes and drinks relevant even as dining trends changed: turtle soup, Eggs Hussarde and Eggs Sardou, Steak Diane, file' gumbo, shrimp remoulade, Caribbean milk punch and those blazing bananas. Brennan's is always a party, whether its from its tableside theatrics in the dining rooms or its champagne-sloshing Bubbles at Brennan's champagne sabering in the courtyard. *417 Royal St.; brennansneworleans.com*



CARIBBEAN MILK PUNCH AT BRENNAN'S NEW ORLEANS



ORDER A CLASSIC COCKTAIL, SUCH AS THE SAZERAC, AT THE BAR AT TUJAGUE'S.



CRABCAKE BENEDICT ON THE BRUNCH MENU AT TUJAGUE'S RESTAURANT



NEW ORLEANS-STYLE BARBECUE SHRIMP OVER STONE GROUND GRITS AT TUJAGUE'S



OYSTERS J'AIME, BAKED WITH CREOLE TOMATO GRAVY AND CORNBREAD CRUMBLE, AT BRENNAN'S