



THE FLAVOR OF NEW ORLEANS

BY BROOKE CHESHIER



THE EXTRAORDINARY MÉLANGE OF COLORS, SPICES, SCENTS AND SOUNDS OF NEW ORLEANS IS HARD TO IGNORE. THE CITY'S SIREN SONG IS A HOT AND HAZY BLEND OF TRUMPETS, OYSTERS, CRAWFISH, ZYDECO PARADES, ANDOUILLE SAUSAGE, SAZERACS, BEIGNETS, CHICORY COFFEE, MAVIS STAPLES AND GEORGE CLINTON, PULLED TAFFY, GUMBO, AND FRIED DUCK LIVER SALADS.

TOP LEFT PHOTO BY BROOKE CHESHIER
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Gastronomically, the historic port city hums with food histories. The French Quarter and surrounding Warehouse and Garden districts are stuffed with mouthwateringly good restaurants, muffaletta shops, oyster bars, watering holes, and candy stores. Old-but-still-grand dames like Commander's Palace and Brennan's continue to create signature dishes like trout Amandine and turtle soup while new maverick chefs spin Cajun and Creole favorites into new classics like brisket and collard green empanadas, and rabbit and dumplings.

The city has more than a vibrant food scene. Sure, some of the Vieux Carre's buildings seem a little worn, and water has more than marked much of the outlying areas, but the spirit and spice of The Big Easy still plays lively and loud, especially among the artists and street vendors filling Jackson Square. Street musicians and impromptu parades continue to draw crowds. And you never know when Ellis Marsalis, Dr. John and Etta James might show up to jam at Frenchmen Street's Snug Harbor. Together.

Like the snaking winds on the Mississippi, the real flavor of New Orleans is constantly evolving. It's gritty and raw — and should be experienced firsthand. Begin preparing now to visit the salty Southern city in November, when the summer steam has started to fade, the oysters are in their prime and the Po-Boy Preservation Festival swings into high gear.

EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY

Few treats are as delicious as Friday lunch at **Galatoire's**. Sit downstairs with the locals (reservations are required for upstairs seating) and linger over the crabmeat Yvonne.

Finish the afternoon with a sazerac (with rye, not bourbon) at the **Old Absinthe House** around the corner on Bourbon Street. Built in 1798, the establishment was reputed to be pirate Jean Lafite's secret drinking place. In this dark, scone-lighted bar, bartenders serve classic New Orleans cocktails like Ramos Gin Fizz and Planters Punch.

The French Quarter's Decatur Street beckons with the sweet smell of chicory. The dried, roasted and ground root of the Belgian endive

used to stretch Southern coffee supplies during the Civil War remains a coffee staple today. Enjoy it mixed heartily with steamed milk and served with the airy powdered-sugar covered beignets found at **Café du Monde**.

Chef Donald Link at **Cochon** has made a name for himself with his house-made pork dishes and Cajun creations. With its sandy wood plank siding and open dining, the restaurant oozes Southern chic. It also oozes flavor. Everything — from the crawfish pies to the “boucherie plate” of andouille sausage, smoked bacon and head cheese — is rich, dreamy and fulfilling.

The raw gulf oysters at **Acme Oyster House** are easily the freshest, most perfectly briny bivalves in the Big Easy. Bypass the mile-long lunch lines by going around 2:30 or 3:00 pm. Belly up to the bar and order two dozen oysters, a basket of fried crawfish tails and a bottle of Cloudy Bay Chardonnay (an unconventional wine-oyster pairing but it really works).

Rambla, in the Central Business District's **International House Hotel**, is filled with tall communal tables, lofty exposed ceilings and gilded wrought iron. This new Spanish/French tapas bar is not flashy, but it is loaded with New Orleans flavor. Order a bottle of aged Rioja or super juicy, young Spanish Tempranillo, and dig into brisket- and collard green-stuffed empanadas, escargot in onions and butter, Medjool dates wrapped in super smoky bacon, and pecan-andouille calamari.

Central Grocery on Decatur Street near historic Jackson Square is king of the muffaletta, an Italian loaf sandwich piled with layers of olive salad, ham, salami, pickled veggies, provolone and mortadella. It's a New Orleans tradition not to be missed.

LIVE AND LEARN

Celebrate the food culture of the South at the **Southern Food and Beverage Museum** in the Riverwalk building overlooking the Mississippi River. From the first sugar plantations to the boudin's evolution to the rise of absinthe in Southern bar culture, this small museum serves up more than trivia. This is brainfood.

Surrounded by swamps and marshes, **Avery Island** actually is a salt dome rising 163 feet above sea level along the Louisiana coast. It's home to snowy white egrets and to the **Tabasco Factory and Country Store**. Discover the history of this famous Louisiana hot sauce and take a few bottles for the road.

Wine and glassblowing receptions have become the newest trend at the **New Orleans Glassworks and Printmaking Studio**. Master glassblowers demonstrate the art of glass torch work and silver alchemy, while students try their hand at casting and firing. Tucked into a historic red brick building on Magazine Street, this almost 20-year-old glass studio houses some of the most beautiful pieces from New Orleans' finest professional and student artists.

GET SOME SHUT EYE

The **Historic Audobon Cottages** behind the renovated **Hotel Maison de Ville** are a favorite among those “in the know.” Seven cottages tucked behind the French Quarter's Rue Toulouse on nearby Dauphine Street provide a mix of privacy and luxurious hotel service.

Right at home on Royal Street, the family-owned **Hotel Monteleone** is surrounded by row after row of prestigious antiques shops. What started as a 64-room inn is now a grand 600-room hotel. Plus, it's haunted. Rates start at \$140, but the Truman Capote Suite will set you back at least a grand.

Hotel Le Cirque is perfect for those who prefer a little less damask and a lot more color. The hotel exterior literally lights up with rainbow hues at night. Clean, sleek, simple rooms look out onto Lee Circle. Enjoy truffle popcorn and a glass of Prosecco at the downstairs **Helix Restaurant and Wine Bar** before catching the St. Charles Streetcar to the French Quarter for a night on the town.

Just off Canal Street, the landmark **Roosevelt Hotel** has reopened as a **Waldorf-Astoria Collections** hotel. Some of music's greatest names, including Elvis Presley, called the Roosevelt home during its heyday. ■