

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

THE INCREDIBLE, EDIBLE

DIRTY SOUTH

Fabulous fare in
New Orleans



Chef Brian Landry's winning dish of sautéed cobia with Louisiana crab butter over fingerling potatoes and caramelized fennel with Louisiana jumbo lump crabmeat and vegetable pearls.

PAT GARIN PHOTOGRAPHY

DESTINATION DINING

Choosing the best dish out of a dozen options isn't always easy, but it's nearly impossible when they all showcase Louisiana seafood and are prepared by some of that state's best chefs. I faced this challenge a few weeks ago

while helping judge the inaugural Louisiana Seafood Cook-Off. All the entries were fabulous; I'd very happily eat any one for dinner tonight if I could. But there could be only one winner.

Before the competition started, fellow judge Chef Tenney Flynn of G. W. Fins leaned over and revealed that beyond specific judging criteria of flavor, technique, presentation and so on, he'd be looking for something more elusive: the dish that would best represent Louisiana at the national level. From that perspective, it's poetic that Chef Brian Landry of Galatoire's Restaurant in New Orleans won. As a young chef working at one of the oldest restaurants in his state's culinary capital, Landry fuses both Louisiana cooking traditions and developing trends. And if his sautéed cobia with Louisiana crab butter is any indication, old and new makes a tasty combination.

About his winning dish, Landry said, "I took a very simple approach. When you get access to great seafood like we do, you don't have to do much to make it delicious." His appreciation for local fare is not unique: Fresh, seasonal, regional ingredients are fundamental to Louisiana cooking. Prized regional ingredients include wild Louisiana shrimp, crawfish and other seafood, Cajun caviar, oysters, satsumas (tangerines) and Creole tomatoes. While here in Atlanta (and generally everywhere in the world nowadays) utilizing fresh, seasonal, regional ingredients is celebrated as the latest trend, folks in Louisiana have done it for generations. Or, as farmer Anne Baker put it, "We're so far behind, we're ahead."

"When you eat locally and seasonally, it's a comfort zone of flavor that you recognize," said Lorin Gaudin, New Orleans food writer and radio host. "It feels natural and normal."

Indeed, while much of "today's generation has grown up thinking that food comes out of a drive-thru window," said Chef Frank Brigtsen, previous generations "grew up connected to food and knew what it was and where it came from."

Recipes passed down for generations are adapted to suit modern tastes by talented cooks. For example, Donald Link, chef for Herbsaint and Cochon, as well as the winner of the 2007 James Beard Foundation Award for Best Chef of the South, makes rabbit and dumplings based on his grandfather's recipe, with a few tweaks.

IF YOU GO

- **Antoine's** opened in 1840, is New Orleans' oldest restaurant and serves original Creole. 504-581-4422. www.antoines.com
- **Brigtsen's** serves modern Creole in a historic setting. 504-861-7610. www.brigtsens.com.
- **Cochon** serves Cajun and Southern cuisine. 504-588-2123. www.cochonrestaurant.com.
- **Galatoire's** opened in 1905, and is a French Creole bistro. 504-525-2021. www.galatoires.com.
- **G. W. Fins** serves upscale seafood. 504-581-3467. www.gwfins.com.
- **Herbsaint** is a French-American bistro. 504-524-4114. www.herbsaint.com.
- **Tujague's Restaurant** opened in 1856, and serves six-course Creole dinners. 504-525-8676. www.tujaguesrestaurant.com.

WHEN TO GO

New Orleans always makes sense as a culinary travel destination, but these three events are aimed at taste buds:

- **6th Annual Tales of the Cocktail**
July 16–20, 2008
www.talesofthecocktail.com
- **5th Annual Great American Seafood Cook-Off**
Aug. 2–3, 2008
www.greatamericanseafoodcookoff.com
- **18th Annual New Orleans' Wine & Food Experience**
May 18–22, 2009
www.nowfe.com



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SP FOOD

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"We're just doing simple things like using stock instead of water to give it a little more depth, and a few more herbs and seasonings to round it out better," he said. "But it's the same concept. We're not doing anything weird to it. It's not like we're doing rabbit and dumplings with foie gras and truffles."

Louisiana is home to two of our nation's most distinctive cuisines: Cajun and Creole. Cajun is rustic country food with French and Southern influences and typically features foods straight from the land—or, as Chef John Folse puts it, foods "from the swamp floor pantry." Creole, meanwhile, blends French, Caribbean, European and African influences.

Cajun and Creole are not as spicy as many assume. The misconception may be blamed on the prevalence of blackened fish on menus across the nation. "If Cajun food is spicy, it's probably just not being done right," said Link. Used properly, peppers brighten and deepen dishes without adding heat.

The best way to explore Louisiana's culinary scene is to visit New Orleans, where stunning examples of Cajun and Creole cuisine can be savored one forkful at a time. "If you don't become entranced by this place, I can't understand that," said Gaudin. I have to agree. Whether you're a returning or first-time guest, each visit to New Orleans is a unique blend of a comfortable homecoming and the joy of discovery. **SP**



Shrimp remoulade
at Galatoire's

NEWORLEANSONLINE.COM

FIND CAJUN & CREOLE CUISINE IN ATLANTA

New Orleans is a one-hour flight or seven-hour drive from Atlanta. But if your Cajun and Creole cravings demand more immediate satisfaction, you'll find many New Orleans-style restaurants here at home. Among our favorites:

- **Copeland's of New Orleans**
3365 Piedmont Road NE
404-475-1000
www.copelandsatlanta.com
- **Fontaine's Oyster Bar**
1026 1/2 N. Highland Ave. NE
404-872-0869
www.nnnwcorp.com/fontainesmain.html
- **Front Page News**
351 Moreland Ave.
404-475-7777
www.frontpageatlanta.com
- **McKinnon's Louisiana Restaurant**
3209 Maple Drive NE
404-237-1313
www.mckinnons.com
- **Pappadeaux Seafood Kitchen**
5635 Jimmy Carter Blvd.
770-849-0600
www.pappadeaux.com
- **Parish Foods & Goods**
240 N. Highland Ave.
404-681-4434
www.parishatl.com
- **Redfish, A Creole Bistro**
687 Memorial Drive SE
404-475-1200
www.redfishcreole.com



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