





Dedicated DINERS

* New Orleans has rebuilt its culinary reputation, attracting foodies from all over the country to come and have a taste.

There's an old saying, that in New Orleans, "People live to eat" — and pre-Katrina, that was certainly true.

But is it still possible to find the tantalizing signature dishes that built the city's gastronomic reputation... or have they been lost? At this very moment, foodies are contentedly dining all across the city of New Orleans, their smiles wide as they push back from tables in neighborhood dives and upscale restaurants.

These satisfied customers exist because local chefs, many of whom have called the Crescent City home for generations, recognize that recovery will come not from federal dollars. It is up to them to keep folks salivating over traditional foods that make New Orleans feel like home.



& Wine Cellar (calasbistro.com). Calas Bistro specializes in savory versions, meaning poultry or seafood are mixed with the rice before deep-frying. The bistro is in Kenner, just minutes from the New Orleans International Airport, providing a convenient fueling stop before your flight. The appetizer, at

Chef Frank Brigtsen is doing his best to serve some of those dishes. Upon opening his uptown restaurant 21 years ago, Brigtsen earned a reputation for his skill with rabbit, duck and seafood. Since reopening four months after Katrina, with the help of committed family and staff, **Brigtsen's** (brigtsens.com) has also become known for serving side dishes of hope. Brigtsen's post-Katrina mantra is: "Rebuild New Orleans - One Plate at a Time."

Fellow chef Susan Spicer, who launched her eclectic **Bayona** (bayona.com) in the French Quarter in 1990, agrees it's an exciting time for food and the city. "Chefs are having a great time rediscovering, reinventing and updating these traditions," she says.

Customers seem to appreciate the rediscovery that has been taking place in the New Orleans food world. With grateful hearts and empty bellies, they're opening their wallets to "patronize the restaurants they care about, to make sure they stay open," says Aaron Wolfson, who launched his upscale cooking store, **The Savvy Gourmet** (savvygourmet.com), just as Katrina blew in.

Also, he says, diners have adjusted their expectations. So what if the hours are tighter, the lines longer and the staffs leaner? At least it's possible for addicts to get their fix. Take the po-boy fanatics, those who can't imagine not ingesting

at least one of the messy, overstuffed sandwiches each week. Without three locals bakeries—**Gendusa's**, **Parkway** and **Leidenheimer**—up and running, supplying the city with New Orleans French bread (so delectable with its telltale doughy centers and crunchy crusts), a traditional po-boy would still be hard to nab.

If you're uptown, try the seafood "half and half" po-boy at **Domilise's** (504-899-9126). At least 10 inches long, they're overflowing with fried shrimp and oysters. Get it "dressed" with hot sauce, lettuce and mayo, and you'll have a hard time keeping your fingers clean. It's a culinary adventure worth its \$11, but be sure to also tack on another local favorite, an iced can of Barq's root beer.

If you're staying in the French Quarter, make sure to plan a breakfast at the **Old Coffee Pot** (504.524.3500). It's the only eatery in the city that offers calas, the traditional fried rice fritters served piping hot and generously dusted with powdered sugar. Choose between the plain and pecan versions, and act like a local and drown them in the maple syrup offered tableside.

Two other restaurants also routinely serve calas, Brigtsen's and the **Calas Bistro**

\$7.50, comes with three calas; select from shrimp, jambalaya or red beans 'n rice.

Sampling calas will certainly cheer local food ambassador, chef and cooking instructor Poppy Tooker. Frankly, she's up in arms that the calas are teetering on the edge of extinction given their historical importance to the city. Calas were a very popular item back when slave vendors sold them in the French Quarter, lustily calling out (in French), "Ladies,

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hot calas are here!"

Why they're not sold everywhere is a mystery. "People can't get enough of them," admits Old Coffee Pot owner Lynn Brayton.

Her customers also salivate over bread pudding, another traditional favorite best made with New Orleans French bread. Pearl Jefferson, a waitress at the Coffee Pot for 48 years, has been whipping up bread pudding for the last three decades.

It's this combination of passion and commitment that will shut the mouths of naysayers for good, says Brigtsen. Great dishes made with fresh ingredients by loving hands—shared with friends and family—make even the worst day something to shrug off.

Restaurants in New Orleans were overwhelmed by the emotional response they got after Katrina. Peter Menge, who coordinates the cooking classes at The Savvy Gourmet, has seen a similar response over the last year. Some linger, soaking up the inviting atmosphere of the casual restaurant. Others have chosen to participate in the Savvy's monthly cooking classes, which began just months after Katrina, intent on unraveling the secrets of the Creole dishes they first enjoyed at their grandmother's.

"After Katrina," says Menge, "we were all shell shocked.

Every single restaurant was closed. There was a tremendous sense of loss and fear, a lot of questioning of 'Is anything coming back, and what have we lost?' Our cooking classes became restorative to the soul."

The classes, taught by Tooker, afford her the perfect soapbox from which to preach her own post-Katrina mantra: "Eat it to save it."

"We need everyone to come and eat in New Orleans," she says. "That's the best gift anyone can give us." ✂

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