

New Orleans cuisine

Combining Cajun and Creole, sophistication and spice

The allure of New Orleans — a city where the charm of the past intermingles with a dynamic present, where a fusion of what was and what is results in an atmosphere charged with excitement which few people can resist.

The cuisine of New Orleans is equally a combination of tradition and adventurousness, a forthright appreciation of all the good things that local foodstuffs have to offer, combined with a flair not only local but imported from several countries on more than one continent.

In its original incarnation, New Orleans cuisine was a combination of Cajun and Creole. Cajun from the French Acadians who settled in Louisiana in the 18th century after their expulsion from Nova Scotia, and Creole from the individuals, born in the American colonies, of Spanish and French extraction. Easy enough so far, but while the differences in origins are fairly simple, the differences in traditional food are far more subtle.

Generally speaking, Creole cooking is more sophisticated, more Frenchified, more urban, characterized by delicate sauces, while Cajun cooking is spicier and more rugged with a distinct rustic flavor. However, the two have crossed-pollinated over the years and, in fact, it is the Cajun, country influence (particularly regional ingredients) which gives Creole cooking its special savor (and differentiates it from

French food, its mother cuisine), while techniques borrowed from Creole cooking surface on occasion in its country cousin.

TO CONFUSE: the issue still further, culinary influences go beyond Cajun and Creole to native American Indian and African (sometimes via the Caribbean) — making New Orleans truly a melting pot where all that is best in a variety of cuisines can combine and flourish in an environment perfectly suited to culinary experimentation.

The fare of New Orleans gets its beginning from the city's fortuitous location. In the Mississippi Delta, with its outlet to the Gulf of Mexico and the southern seas beyond.

Fish is an important aspect of the city's cuisine, as are many imports from West Indian islands and Mexico. Most significantly, a cornucopia of tropical produce, and a seemingly endless stream of herbs and spices.

Local Louisiana foodstuffs are, of course, of prime importance in both Cajun and Creole cuisine — particularly okra, the main ingredient in gumbo, and file powder, a pungent local seasoning made from the ground, dried leaves of the sassafras plant.

The underlying hot flavor in much Louisiana cooking is the legacy of the Spanish, whose small but potent peppers play an important role in both Cajun and Cajun pantries.

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Finally, the French influence, primarily in Creole food, smooths and refines, and provides an underlying structure which, incorporating change, has stood solidly up to the vagaries of time.

One of the latest variations on classic Creole cuisine is "Haute Creole," as originated and perfected at one of New Orleans' most famous and respected restaurants, The Commander's Palace.

SHRIMP CREOLE

Serves 6 to 8

6 tbsp. (¾ stick) unsalted butter
1 cup fine julienne-cut onions
1 cup fine julienne-cut green bell pepper
2 stalks celery, cut into fine julienne strips

2 cloves of garlic, thinly sliced
1 bay leaf
2 tbsp. paprika
2 cups diced fresh tomatoes
1 cup tomato juice
4 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
4 tsp. Louisiana Red Hot Sauce
1 ½ tsp. cornstarch
½ cup water
3 lbs. shrimp, peeled and deveined

1. Melt 2 tablespoons butter in a sauté pan and sauté onion, green bell pepper, celery, garlic and bay leaf for a minute or two. Before the onion becomes transparent, add paprika (for color), tomatoes, and tomato juice. Stir well. Add Worcestershire sauce and red hot sauce and simmer until volume is reduced by a fourth and the vegetables are soft.

2. Mix cornstarch and water and stir into the sauce. Cook, stirring, for about 2 minutes, to cook the cornstarch.

3. Sauté the shrimp in the remaining butter until pink and tender, about 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Pour sauce over shrimp and toss to coat well. Serve with fluffy cooked rice.

PRALINES

Makes 3 dozen

1 quart heavy cream
3 cups sugar
1 ½ lbs. chopped pecans (6 cups)
Juice of 1 lemon

1. In a heavy saucepan slowly simmer cream and sugar over low heat until the mixture becomes golden brown and reaches the soft-ball stage. Add pecans and lemon juice and continue to cook until the soft-ball stage is reached again.

2. Drop from a large kitchen spoon onto an oiled baking sheet or a marble slab moistened with water. Spread each cake out with back of spoon to about ¼-inch thick and 4 to 5 inches in diameter. Let harden, then lift from plate or slab with a spatula.

3. Pralines will keep for 2 weeks in a covered tin at room temperature.

*The soft-ball stage is reached when a small amount of syrup dropped into ice water holds its shape without separating into threads.

CAFE BRULOT

Serves 2

1 lemon

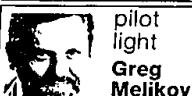
1 orange
2 dozen whole cloves
2 cinnamon sticks
1 ½ oz. Triple Sec
1 oz. brandy
1 ½ cups strong hot black coffee

1. Peel lemon with one continuous motion so that peel is in long spiral (peel over brulot bowl so that any juices go into the bowl). Peel orange in the same fashion. Insert cloves into the spiraled orange and lemon peel at 1-inch intervals so that they are studded with cloves.

2. Light a Sterno stove.
3. In a brulot bowl, place the cinnamon sticks. Add Triple Sec flame follows the motion. Mount lemon and orange peels on a fork so that you can hold them over the brulot bowl for flaming. Ladle ignited brandy over the peels.

4. Gradually add coffee, pouring around the edge of the bowl so that a hissing sound is heard, and continue mixing until flame dies out. With a fork, squeeze a small amount of orange juice into the bowl to sweeten the coffee.

Note: According to Ella and Dick Brennan, brulot sets are a New Orleans tradition, often given as wedding presents. If, however, you do not have a set, a chafing dish can be used instead to prepare the coffee, which should be served in demitasse cups.



pilot light
Greg Melikov

Fighting the battle of the bulge

Diet Day: 22 ½ pounds.

I am a candidate for a plump Easter Bunny and it isn't even spring. I have a fat face, bulgy neck, tight pants and a wristwatch band on its last notch.

The goal: shed 22 ½ pounds. I refuse to follow a strict diet-for-the-diet program. I will get down to 200 pounds with a minimum of effort except for two things: cheese and bread. I have targeted my worst enemies and will cut back on both.

I will continue taking vitamins, eating two meals a day, avoiding most desserts and not snacking around bedtime. My weight will be recorded on the same beam balance scale.

D-DAY plus 1: 220 pounds.

The power of positive thinking gets me off to a fast start.

D-Day plus 4: 219 pounds.

D-Day plus 7: 219 pounds.
It's on to smaller portions, light beer, reduced-calorie bread and no cheese except in prepared dishes. But I'm not panicky.

For lunch, I have salad with vinaigrette dressing and a hot dog; for dinner, two small hamburgers with lettuce, tomato and half a pickle.

D-Day plus 11: 216 pounds.

I was nervous at weigh-in. Ye of little faith, smaller portions, unbuttered bread and cottage cheese. I celebrate by scraping fruit sauce off my ham and eating a buttered roll. I decide to weigh on Thursdays.

D-Day plus 14: 216 pounds.

I endure hunger pangs and survive last night. En route home my car dies on the expressway. I coast to the shoulder, scale the fence, phone my wife. It starts to rain, she takes me home. I phone a towing company, we ride to the place in her car, the tow truck follows us to my car and then to my gas station, where I leave it — \$37.50 less wealthy — and we're home in the first week hour. My appetite dies. Anita forces cold macaroni and a sandwich on me. I leave a little on the plate.

D-DAY plus 21: 215 pounds.

I figured I must have dropped several pounds because my watchband was a bit loose and two people said I looked thinner.

My wife is the biggest obstacle because her idea of smaller portions is bigger than anything served outside our home. I have laid off sweets — no fruit — and gone without butter or margarine on bread more days than not. All between-meal snacks are out, too.

D-Day plus 28: 212 pounds.

I could feel it in my bones that I was thinner. I skipped one late supper, but my wife brought home a doggie bag and ordered me to eat a piece of steak, a hunk of fish, half a baked potato and the smaller half of a chocolate eclair.

But she later observed, "You've lost your belly." My pants feel snug, not bulgy, and I'm losing some flab around the neck. I'm doing isometrics in the car. I'm eating half a grapefruit some mornings to beat off hunger pangs.

(Next: The losing streak ends.)

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