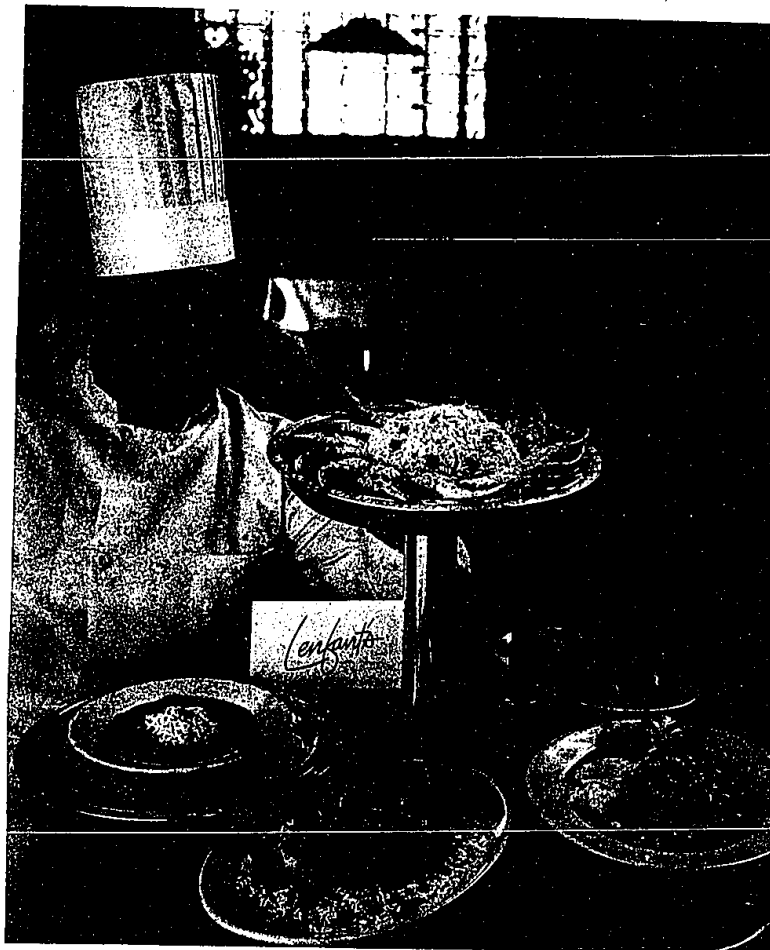


# A MARDI GRAS FEAST



Late in winter, New Orleans bursts into colorful activity for Mardi Gras, a celebration held the Tuesday before Lent. It's a time of exuberance, with parades, flamboyant costumes and delectable Cajun food.

As a last fling before Lent's privations, Mardi Gras dishes are traditionally robust and satisfying. Lefant's Restaurant, home of authentic new-style New Orleans cuisine under Executive Chef Steven van Noppen, offers a menu that features some of the finest American regional cooking.

For a Mardi Gras feast, open the festivities with fresh Tomato, Spinach and Rice Soup. The perfectly cooked vegetables make a tasteful starter enhanced with the uniquely mellow yet piquant zest of Tabasco pepper sauce, the Louisiana condiment known the world over. Reserve a handful of the spinach leaves to add a few minutes before serving for a colorful accent in this clear, light-bodied first course.

Then, serve golden Crab Fingers Sunburst, a dramatic appetizer of quickly sauteed jumbo crab fingers on a bed of basic cooked rice, all kissed with the warm glow of saffron. Dazzling in appearance, it will please with the lively herbs and spices of Cajun cooking gentled by the satisfying plainness of rice.

Rice is a staple of Cajun cookery, sometimes eaten three times a day. Economical and versatile, with its ability to enhance many foods, it is a frequent accompaniment, as in Chicken Brochettes. Cooked here with a combination of red and green bell peppers in traditional Cajun fashion, the rice forms a nutritious base for the herb-fragrant chicken.

Another entree, Seafood Crepe, features crab meat and crawfish tails bathed in a shrimp sauce robust with flavor. A key seasoning is Tabasco pepper sauce. The premium liquid pepper sauce is used to bring out every ingredient's taste and heighten them with a freshness all its own. If crawfish tails are not available, substitute shrimp.

Close this fabulous repast with Pecan Baked Bananas, an elegant way to serve America's favorite fruit with the South's favorite nut meat.

To create an authentic festive atmosphere, use green, gold and purple linens, flowers or ribbons to surround your guests with the traditional Mardi Gras colors and watch them dine with the joy of carnival in their eyes.

## TOMATO, SPINACH AND RICE SOUP

- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 1/2 cups uncooked rice
- 1 cup peeled, diced tomatoes
- 1 can (10-3/4 ounces) tomato puree
- 1 bag (10 ounces) fresh spinach, cleaned and washed well
- 1 quart chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano leaf, crushed
- 1 teaspoon Tabasco pepper sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
- Salt to taste
- 1/2 cup minced chives or sliced green onion tops

Heat oil in stockpot. Add onion and cook over medium heat until soft but not brown. Add remaining ingredients except chives. Simmer 30 minutes, or until rice is tender. Stir in chives. Makes 6 servings.

Chef Steve van Noppen

## CRAB FINGERS SUNBURST

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 onion, minced
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 cup uncooked rice
- 2 cups chicken broth or water
- 1/4 teaspoon Tabasco pepper sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon ground turmeric
- Pinch saffron or 1/2 teaspoon safflower (Azafraan)
- 1 green bell pepper, cut in 1/2-inch squares
- 1 red bell pepper, cut in 1/2-inch squares
- Crab fingers\*

Heat oil in a 1-1/2 to 2-quart saucepan. Add onion and cook over medium heat until soft but not brown. Add garlic and rice and cook 1 minute. Stir in chicken broth and seasonings. Bring to a boil; stir once or twice. Lower heat, cover, and simmer 15 minutes (25 minutes for parboiled rice). Remove from heat. Stir in green and red peppers. Replace cover and let stand 10 minutes. Pick firmly into one 3 to 4 cup mold. Unmold onto serving dish. Arrange crab fingers and sauce around rice in a sunburst pattern.

### \*Crab Fingers

- 1/4 cup butter or margarine
- 24 crab fingers (claws), largest available
- 1/4 cup dry white wine
- 1/4 teaspoon Tabasco pepper sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
- Pinch saffron, optional
- Salt to taste
- 1 tablespoon snipped fresh parsley

In large skillet cook crab fingers in butter until slightly firm. Add wine and seasonings. Cook 5 minutes. Stir in parsley. Makes 4 servings.

Note: If crab fingers are unavailable use peeled deveined raw shrimp.

Chef Steve van Noppen

## CHICKEN BROCHETTES

- 1 pound skinned, boned chicken (breasts or thighs)
- 12 fresh mushroom caps
- 1 cup olive oil
- 1/2 cup lemon juice
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 teaspoon Tabasco pepper sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/8 teaspoon each thyme and rosemary leaves
- 1/8 teaspoon each ground cumin and turmeric
- Rice\*

Cut chicken into large cubes. Thread chicken pieces on 4 skewers, alternating with mushrooms. Place in shallow dish. Combine remaining ingredients except rice. Pour over brochettes. Refrigerate 3 to 4 hours, turning occasionally. Remove from marinade. Broil or grill 4 to 5 minutes. Turn, baste with marinade, and broil 4 to 5 more minutes. Serve over beds of fluffy rice. Makes 4 servings.

### \*Rice

- 2 tablespoons butter or margarine
- 1 1/2 cups uncooked rice
- 3 cups chicken broth or water
- Salt to taste
- 1/2 cup each diced green and red bell peppers

Melt butter in saucepan. Add rice and stir to coat with butter. Add broth and salt. Bring to a boil. Stir once or twice, lower heat, cover, and simmer 15 minutes (25 minutes for parboiled rice); or until rice is tender and liquid is absorbed. Stir in peppers. Replace cover and let stand 10 minutes. Fluff with a fork.

Chef Steve van Noppen

## SEAFOOD CREPES

- 1 pound raw shrimp
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small carrot, finely chopped
- 1 rib celery, finely chopped
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons dry sherry
- 1/2 cup tomato puree
- 1 quart heavy cream
- Salt to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon Tabasco pepper sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 2 tablespoons butter or margarine
- 1 pound peeled crawfish tails, optional
- 1 pound fresh mushrooms, quartered
- 1 bunch green onions, including tops, thinly sliced
- 8 ounces lump crab meat
- 8 crepes, about 8 inches in diameter

Shell and devein shrimp. Rinse and refrigerate. Rinse and chop shells. Heat oil in saucepan. Add shells and cook over high heat until red. Add carrot, celery, and onion. Lower heat and cook 5 minutes. Stir in sherry, tomato puree and cream. Simmer, stirring often, until volume is reduced by half. Add salt, Tabasco sauce, and pepper. Strain and reserve. Melt butter in saucepan. Add shrimp and cook over medium heat until slightly firm. Add crawfish (if used), mushrooms, and green onions. Cook on low heat 5 minutes. Stir in crab meat and half of cream mixture. To serve, heat oven to 375°. Pour a thin layer of sauce into a shallow baking dish. Spoon equal portions of the seafood mixture onto the unbrowned side of each crepe, using about half of mixture. Roll up. Place crepes, seam side down, in baking dish. Spoon remaining filling over crepes. Moisten with additional sauce, if desired. Bake, covered, 20 to 25 minutes or until heated through. Makes 4 servings.

Chef Steve van Noppen

## PECAN BAKED BANANAS

- 8 ripe bananas (no bruises), unpeeled
- 1/4 cup butter or margarine (preferably unsalted)
- 1/2 cup pecan butter
- 1 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 cup rum
- Vanilla ice cream, optional

Preheat oven to 350°. Place unpeeled bananas in a 13x9-inch baking dish. Bake 25 to 30 minutes, or until bananas are soft. Remove and allow to cool. Meanwhile, in small saucepan melt butter. Add pecans and cook over low heat 5 minutes. Remove pan from heat. Stir in brown sugar, cinnamon and rum. Return to heat and cook 5 minutes longer. Peel cooled bananas; place in baking dish. Spoon sauce over bananas. Bake at 350° until sauce is bubbly. Serve with ice cream, if desired. Makes 4 to 8 servings.

