

Historical research and sweet touch flavor meals



Sugar Baron's Dinner' at Houmas House Plantation and Gardens in Burnside includes a Lacquered Duck Breast With Whipped Sweet Potatoes prepared by chef Jeremy Langlois.

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Though the slave and sharecroppers' days were long and filled with hard work, the meals that the laborers ate were nutritious by today's standards. Greens, sweet potatoes, turnips, squash, persimmons, wild muscadines, pears, pecans, rustic cornmeal-based pone, bread or hushpuppies, and molasses or syrup-sweetened desserts featuring pumpkin, sweet potatoes or citrus in season were common ingredients. Little meat was served, and what meat that was served was mainly used for seasoning rather than an entree.

According to David Floyd, director of the LSU Rural Life Museum, on many plantations, the cook prepared the food for field slaves' noon meal. Usually their other two meals were prepared by the slaves in their own cabins.

Large quantities of foods, often a soup or stew, cornbread, greens and more, were taken to the fields in a large cauldron or buckets and ladled into clay dishes or wood trenchers.

Chef John Folsie adapted a field hands' meal to serve to the food writers participating in The Advocate-sponsored "Sugar Day" field trip Oct. 9 during the Association of Food Journalists conference in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. His take on "The Sharecroppers' Lunch" was served in metal lunch boxes printed with antique sugar labels.

Accompanying the meal were pitchers of homemade root beer to pour into blue tin cups.

He wowed the food experts with his Soup of Fall Greens, Pecan Wood-Smoked Pork Po-boys, Baked Cushaw and Yam Casserole, and Rum and Pecan Spice Cake.

As a farewell gift, Folsie presented each participant with his award-winning "Encyclopedia of Cajun and Creole Cuisine."

A "Sugar Baron's Dinner" at Houmas House Plantation and Gardens, presented by chef Jeremy Langlois and owner Kevin Kelly, was served at a long banquet table centered with tall vases filled with tropical grasses and leafy plants cut from the Houmas House gardens. Chef Langlois' menu included Bisque of Curried Pumpkin, Crawfish and Corn; Beet and Crab Salad with Candied Bacon; Lacquered Duck Breast With Whipped Sweet Potatoes; and Chocolate Mousse-Filled Crêpes with a side of Crème de Menthe Cotton Candy.

Each course of the "Sugar Baron's Dinner" used some form of sugar, starting with cane syrup blended with butter to make a sweet spread for hot French bread. The bisque was sweetened, the thick-cut bacon candied and the entrée of duck breasts lacquered in a honey, brown sugar and red wine glaze. A glazed shrimp used as garnish atop the duck breasts was skewered with a sliver of sugar cane. Langlois' mint juleplike cotton candy accompanying the chocolate-filled crêpes was an imaginative finish to an extraordinary dinner that would have pleased the "sugar prince" John Burnside, whose love for grand entertaining was re-created for the food writers.