

Wonderful setting and food make Latil's special night out

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Louisiana residents think nothing of traveling a few miles for an exciting dining experience. In fact planning a dining-out excursion to the countryside adds anticipation and a sense of adventure to the entire event.

A trip to Houmas House Plantation on River Road in Darrow, La., is always a pleasure. When dinner at Latil's Landing Restaurant is included, then you're in for something special. Arriving at Houmas House at dusk, we were enchanted with the fountains and lush gardens. The last of summer flowers set off the brick-paved, lamp-lit walkways that wind through the garden and lead to both the main house and the restaurant.

Latil's is located in the French House, which was built in the 1770s by Alexander Latil and now is the rear wing of the mansion. We were seated in a second-floor room that has been renovated in keeping with 19th-century décor. The 250-year-old building has been renovated to expose the original beamed ceilings, cypress mantels and original wood floors. Dark red walls, with areas of exposed old brick, and period chairs covered in red velvet create a warm atmosphere. A collection of art and artifacts enhances the décor. Added to this, guests are seated at tables with crisp white-linen cloths, candlelight and French Limoge china that replicates the original pattern created for the home's owner, Wade Hampton, in the 1830s.

Latil's offers a gourmet menu created by executive chef Jeremy Langlois, who favors dishes reflecting his Louisiana heritage. While the menu is not extensive, it certainly offers enough variety to suit most diners. Also, we found dinner prices in keeping with fine restaurants in Baton Rouge.

While studying the menu, we were treated with a savory mini-appetizer, a slice of toasted bruschetta topped with chive- and green onion-flavored cream cheese, a thin slice of tomato and a medium shrimp. Shortly afterward, a basket arrived filled with toasted French bread and asiago cheese bread. The bread is served with a trio of flavored butters: praline, herb garden and sweet cream.

To start, we tried the Abita shrimp appetizer (\$10), a delicious treat with two large shrimp, covered with a lightly seasoned beer batter and fried just long enough to make the batter crisp, but leave the shrimp sweet and tender. These were placed atop a generous helping of thick, creamy cheddar cheese grits accented with smoky tasso cream sauce with bits of tasso. The chicken and andouille gumbo (\$7) more than satisfied. Created with a dark, rich roux, the broth was served over rice and was perfectly seasoned with enough peppery taste so there was no need to add additional hot sauce. However, the amount of chicken and sausage in the bowl was rather skimpy and somewhat disappointing.

The roasted beet and crab salad (\$10) could easily make a meal for anyone seeking something light and not overly rich. We appreciated the taste of the delicate lump crabmeat that was tossed in a mild lemon basil dressing and a minimum of additional seasoning. It was served with cold sliced beets and a bed of mixed organic lettuces drizzled with a light vinaigrette.

Prior to receiving our entrees, we were served a refreshing cosmopolitan sorbet topped with orange-flavored vodka served in a sugar-rimmed martini glass.

For an entrée that totally dazzles, the lobster with Creole tomato risotto (\$30) is an exceptional dish. The broiled lobster tails were stuffed with delicate lobster meat and papaya along with tiny shrimp and bits of onion and celery. The tails were served with a luscious creamy risotto accented with Creole tomato and a parmesan broth. The flavors of tomato and parmesan, which could have easily overpowered the lobster, never did. The ingredients were added to the rice in just the right amount so they only complemented the lobster.

The second entrée, the breast of duck (\$25), a popular Louisiana dish, is elevated to kingly status. That's somewhat fitting, since Houmas House has been restored by owner Kevin Kelly to its antebellum status as "The Sugar Palace." The dish features succulent slices of duck breast fanned out on the plate atop a large helping of smashed candied yams. Drizzled over the duck meat was a sweet praline pecan sauce. If ordering this dish, be cautious in choosing heavy appetizers or soups. It is rich and extremely filling.

With such generous entrees, one really doesn't need dessert. However, Chef Langlois is known for creating elaborate confections. We tried the white chocolate bread pudding (\$8), a variation on the popular Louisiana dessert. Coconut adds a nice texture and bit of exotic flavoring to the cinnamon-laced dessert, and a buttery white-chocolate sauce finishes it off with élan.

We found an evening at Latil's Landing to be the perfect respite from a busy week. The service was impeccable. For wine lovers, the restaurant offers numerous choices from the mansion's collection of boutique wines. You can choose from white and red wines and champagnes running in price from around \$20 to \$2,400 a bottle.

Reservations are recommended at Latil's.

Latil's Landing is just one setting for dining at Houmas House. Lunchtime guests can relax in the casual atmosphere of Café Burnside, where the menu ranges from a grilled chicken Caesar salad (\$10) to a seafood po-boy (\$8) and catfish Wade Hampton (\$12). Sit in The Pavillon with windows that offer great views of the fountains and gardens. Hours are 11 a.m.-2 p.m. daily. And if you really want to be extravagant, ask about a private, intimate dinner inside one of the wine cellars, a converted historic water cistern, where you are surrounded by a staggering collection of wines.