



Baton Rouge/Plantation Country

Regional Reports From Across the State

JEANNE FROIS

Houmas House Plantation dining room

CAUSE TO CELEBRATE

Return of the living

To begin my afternoon visit at Houmas House Plantation, I was met by my host, owner Kevin Kelly, who graciously drove me on a golf cart to the Turtle Bar. This outbuilding that looks like one of the plantation's famous garçonnières has been converted into a beautiful bar filled with jade colors; turtle-themed antiques; and windows that allow wide glimpses of the profuse greenery and the blazing fuchsia, red and coral impatiens growing on the grounds. As I was presented with a mint julep, my host informed me that the building had actually been a pigeon roost. Kelly, who acquired Houmas House in 2003, is charmingly casual and entertains with a natural graciousness. The grounds of his completely renovated home are filled with the vibrant colors of flowers, deep lush Louisiana greenery and the graceful arms of tree branches poised overhead. More natural than formal, the landscape that surrounds the beautiful old house reaches out in a paradox of tamed wildness perfectly suited to the Bayou State. The more I saw of the plantation, the more I felt like I was in a kind of antebellum Magic Kingdom. Interspersed among the water gardens are statuary, and at the time of my visit, the plantation was decorated for Christmas — I thought the addition of a Santa hat atop the statue of a naked lady was a dashing touch.

From the Turtle Bar I was guided to the Burnside Café for a late lunch (see Fork in the Road). The other restaurant on the premises is the much-acclaimed Latil's Landing. Both eateries are run by chef Jeremy Langlois, who turns out to be a wunderkind of the culinary — after a peerless meal that tasted like it had been cooked by a veteran who'd worked at a five-star restaurant for decades, I was floored when the very young and very pleasant Langlois joined us at our table, absolutely delighted because his boss had bought him a cotton candy machine to create desserts.

Kelly lives in Houmas House, and though it is open for tours, the place exudes a very positive "living house" feeling. The late-afternoon autumn sun was turning amber-colored when I was left in the care of Judy, an exuberant tour guide. She ushered us into the foyer where a Christmas tree stood at the foot of the spiral staircase, and she sang "O Holy Night" in a beautiful, powerful soprano voice. The walls that had been once been anemically white are now washed in such rich tones as Prussian blue in the foyer, merlot in the dining room and front parlor and rich greens in the gentlemen's parlor and billiards room. As Judy kept up a fascinating running narrative, the quality and beauty of the antiques somehow managed to not give off a museum-like atmosphere but add to the feeling of homeyness instead.

Judy, who is black, told our group that in antebellum Louisiana there were free persons of color wealthy enough to own their own plantations and slaves and that the softening influence of French Catholicism prevalent in the state muted some of the harsh cruelty against slaves.

Kelly is the proud papa of three golden retrievers. Two of the pooches were "married" to each other on the front steps of Houmas House in proper wedding regalia — the groom in tails (the tuxedo variety) and the bride in flowing white with a veil. An upstairs bedroom is lovingly dedicated to this event.

Houmas House Plantation as it glows on River Road today is a joy to behold and savor. Open for tours, meals, weddings, receptions and other events, Houmas House is the product of loving planning combined with exceedingly good taste. It is too delicious in all aspects not to visit — and revisit again and again.

Houmas House Plantation, 40136 Highway 942, Darrow, (225) 473-9380, www.HoumasHouse.com

FORK IN THE ROAD

A tale of two eateries

Having a late Sunday afternoon lunch at Café Burnside there on the beautiful grounds of Houmas House was a pleasant adventure. Accompanied by owner Kevin Kelly, I was guided to select as an entrée chef Jeremy Langlois' Grillades and Grits. OK, when I visited relatives in Central Louisiana, this dish was a mainstay, but why would I order it in an acclaimed restaurant? But oh, my host was so right to thus lead me.

The waitress appeared with a plate filled with golden cheese grits topped with an enormous veal medallion in a sauce redolent of wine, crowned by a steamed carrot. The meat was tender enough to cut with a fork; the dark sauce with its undertones of wine, onion and subtle seasoning soaked the velvety grits. The combinations of flavors and textures together were so delicious it felt like a revelation. It was truly one of the finest meals I've ever eaten in a restaurant, almost like comfort-food-meets-epicurean-chic.

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