

world**eats** New Orleans

by Jim Gladstone
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As any visitor to this city will testify, New Orleans has an appetite for life that just won't quit. There are so many worthwhile restaurants in New Orleans that food-centric vacationers will want to eat early and often.

At **Latil's Landing**, an exquisite meal serves as the final course in a feast of Southern culture. The restaurant is located at Houmas House, a sprawling sugar cane plantation that dates back to the mid-1700s. On Wednesdays through Sundays, when Latil's is open for dinner, tours of the plantation are offered through 8 P.M. and make a perfect pre-prandial scene setter. In 2003, real estate developer Kevin Kelly purchased **Houmas House** (where Bette Davis' 1964 *Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, was filmed) and began an elaborate restoration and enhancement project that will ultimately add a bed-and-breakfast, a civil war museum, and a replica of Monet's gardens at Giverny. Houmas' guides are entertaining, knowledgeable, and able to answer detailed questions on history, art, architecture, and plantation life through the years. (Ask for Judy Davis who works her impressive singing into the tour and who, as an African American descendant of both slave and slave-holding families, offers some unexpected personal perspectives on Southern history and contemporary culture.)

The dinner that follows your tour will take place in an intimate room in the 230-year-old house, hung with antique paintings and radiating a sense of history. At only 28-years-old, Chef Jeremy Langlois brings a remarkable maturity and sophistication to his cooking, adding just the right touch of contemporary flavor to classic fare, not pushing the envelope, but posting it with his own intelligent stamp. In 2005, *Esquire* magazine selected Latil's Landing as one of the best new restaurants in the U.S.

Standout offerings on a recent visit included perfectly proportioned appetizer crabcakes with a crisp sautéed surface and moist, sweet mango-flecked meat juxtaposed in every bite; a lightly curried pumpkin bisque with a confetti of sweet corn kernels and morsels of crawfish at the bottom of the bowl; rack of lamb cleverly marinated in coffee, which adds a complex smokiness and a papaya-stuffed lobster tail served on a bed of tomato risotto. Highlight desserts include a flaky apple tart accompanied by homemade cream cheese-flavored ice cream and Langlois' twist on Bananas Foster, which turns the usually sloppy New Orleans favorite into a dapper, flaming banana split.

Houmas House is located in an easily accessible rural area, just outside of New Orleans proper. Call or visit the website for directions and transportation alternatives, including regularly scheduled tour departures from the city. 40136 Highway 942. Tel: 225-473-9380.

Founded in 1946, **Brennan's** is one of the few white tablecloth restaurants in America where the morning meal trumps dinner. Local politicians and business leaders power breakfast in suits and ties, while more casually clad tourists marvel at the bowtied squadrons of waiters and busboys bustling through their carefully choreographed service. Breakfast entrées include the signature Eggs Hussarde, a spin on traditional Eggs Benedict that adds a rich red-wine, beef stock, and herb sauce beneath the house-made Hollandaise. What would breakfast be without dessert? Choices include a dense, not-too-custardy bread pudding and Bananas Foster, the New Orleans classic that was invented at Brennan's: sliced fruit, brown sugar, and cinnamon sautéed in a boozy flame, then spooned over vanilla ice cream. Brennan's. 417 Royal Street. Tel: 504-525-9711.

For music with your morning meal, **The Court of Two Sisters** offers an old-time jazz trio with its extravagant brunch buffet that is served seven days a week and is best enjoyed on a sunny day under the shade of magnolia trees in the restaurant's outdoor courtyard. While you'll find standard egg dishes, breakfast meats, cereals, and salads, there are also steamed shrimp, crawfish, and don't miss local gems: braised veal over creamy grits, sweet potatoes in a brown sugar sauce flecked with crunchy crushed pecans, a smoky casserole of andouille sausage and eggplant, and a coconut buttercream layer cake. The Court of Two Sisters. 613 Royal Street. Tel: 504-522-7261.

If the post-Katrina reopening of Brennan's and other New Orleans classics helped bring a sense of hopefulness back to the city, the founding of notable new restaurants over the past three years is perhaps an even stronger sign of optimism.

Chef Donald Link opened the doors to **Cochon** in spring 2006, selecting the then offbeat, now -booming Warehouse District for its location. Cochon surely contributed to the boom, with its sharp bar—featuring well-priced wines by the glass and an intriguing selection of local beers and bourbons—and a hip, clubhouse environment. Recently awarded a 2007 James Beard award, Link has succeeded Paul Prudhomme as the local star of Cajun cooking. Many visitors assume that good Cajun food is readily available throughout the city. In fact, most traditional New Orleans restaurants focus on Creole cuisine, with its adaptations of French and Italian styles and sauces. Cajun, the staple cuisine of Western Louisiana, is a homier, spicier, more rough-hewn affair, although Link's handsome presentations and careful balance of ingredients smooth off some of the rougher edges. Cochon is French for pig, and its pork dishes are not to be missed. An in-house butcher prepares traditional sausages—savory boudin, with rice in the stuffing, and spicy, garlicky andouille, smoked bacon, and other rustic delicacies. The spicy grilled pork ribs served with a sweet-and-sour side of pickled watermelon rinds are a must-have, as is the toothsome sea-and-salt crunch of the fried oyster and bacon sandwich. The star dessert here is a cornmeal-based pineapple upside-down cake with coconut lime sorbet and a drizzle of dulce de leche. Cochon. 930 Tchoupitoulas Street. Tel: 504-588-2123.

The most visually impressive hotel restaurant to open post-Katrina is **Riche, at Harrah's**. The stone tile floor, French doors opening onto Fulton Street (where lunch is offered on a patio, weather permitting), and huge mirrors hung at dramatic angles over the tables create an opulent, sensual brasserie. Even without the voyeur décor, the delicious food and memorable presentations would be worth reflecting upon: Riche dots escargot across a plank of crunchy flatbread along with dollops of baked goat cheese. Bouillabaisse also gets a novel twist, with lobster, clams, scallops, and mussels presented naked in a tureen, then bathed at the table with a pitcher of saffron lobster sauce. Crackle-skinned redfish with rock shrimp and peppers, braised rabbit, and a special of fig dressed quail are also excellent. No matter what you choose, indulge in a side order of truffle oil infused macaroni and cheese, served in its own copper pot. Also not to be missed are the lavishly plated dessert specials that include miniature Twinkie, Hostess Cupcake, and Devil Dog lookalikes crafted with Valrhona chocolate and other premium ingredients. Riche. 228 Poydras Street. Tel: 504-533-6000.

A few blocks away, in the Lafayette Hotel, is another newcomer, **Restaurant Anatole**. A short walk from the bustle of Bourbon Street, the dining room and the hotel both provide welcome respite from the French Quarter frenzy. The Lafayette's luxuriously appointed rooms—with wrought iron balconies, marble bathrooms, and blissful quiet—are one of the city's secret bargains. For palates that need a break from the cumulative NOLA overload of richness and spice, Chef/Owner Raymond Toups delivers smart simplicity, focusing diners on the sparkling clear flavors of premium ingredients in a bright, airy room. A salad of slightly titer curly endive tossed with vanilla vinegar makes a bracing starter, and seared diver scallops served over wild mushrooms in simple tarragon and lemon butter presents a perfect juxtaposition of ocean and earthiness. Toups taps some of the country's best beef producers to make Anatole one of New Orleans' best venues for steak lovers. It's a rare pleasure to tuck into a perfect ribeye in a room that's not tricked up like a saloon or a nightclub. Restaurant Anatole. 600 Saint Charles Avenue. Tel: 504-274-0105.