

NoLa RISING

New Orleans' culinary scene has emerged to be among the country's most exciting. / BY MAGGIE HENNESSY

For a city that has spent the past 11 years recovering from one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history, optimism is tangible in New Orleans, led by resilient natives and plucky entrepreneurs equally passionate about restoring what was lost due to Hurricane Katrina as they are about moving forward. This might be most evident in the food scene, where a slew of daring new openings and renewed attention to reviving old favorites are putting the Big Easy on the culinary map for far more than beignets and boiled crawfish.

“In the decade since Katrina, things have changed tremendously—for one thing, the number of restaurants has completely exploded,” says Poppy Tooker, food journalist, radio host of National Public Radio-affiliated Louisiana Eats! and New Orleans native, who spearheaded efforts following the storm to organize fundraisers to get traditional food markets such as Crescent City Farmers Market and institutions like Dooky Chase’s Restaurant back on their feet. “This place has become sort of the new mecca,” she adds.

Once-destitute neighborhoods such as the Upper Ninth Ward are now awash in hipsters and artists. As Tooker likes to say, “Sometimes I think half of Brooklyn emptied into the Bywater (neighborhood).” And they’re flocking to hotspots such as N7, the fortress-looking restaurant with no phone number that quietly opened in late 2015 on an industrial corner of Montegut Street with a Japanese-accented French menu headlined by impeccable tinned seafood such as spiced calamari and smoked sardines.

Indeed, the number of restaurants in New Orleans has nearly doubled since before the storm, from 800 in 2005 to more than 1,400 in 2015, according to the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation. Tourism is up, too, as 9.5 million visited in 2014 (up from just 3.7 million post-Katrina), pumping some \$6.8 billion into the local economy.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

- 1) At Compère Lapin in the restored 19th-century Old No. 77 Hotel & Chandlery, chef Nina Compton melds the flavors of her native St. Lucia with Italian and French, with a few nods to her adopted home, New Orleans.
- 2) The pimento cheese appetizer at Willa Jean's reflects co-owner Kelly Fields' Lowcountry roots. The bakery is named after her grandmother.
- 3) Brennan's barbecue lobster with Creole-spiced butter, lemon confit, thyme and toasted baguette.



COMING HOME

The region is a little more than halfway toward recovering the population lost because of the storm, with nearly 90,000 fewer residents than when the 2000 census was taken. Besh Restaurant Group (BRG) executive pastry chef Kelly Fields, who co-owns Willa Jean bakery/cafe with Lisa White, is one such resident who left in the storm's aftermath, returning to open her contemporary Southern bakery in August 2015.

"Katrina kept me away from New Orleans for five years," says Fields, who had been the pastry chef at John Besh's Restaurant August. "Right after the storm, when the reality of living and working in New Orleans was not really possible, John actually encouraged me to follow my instincts to travel, see new things, work under people I admired—basically, to see, experience and learn."

She moved to San Francisco and helped open Martins West in Redwood City, California, before returning to Restaurant August with the goal of elevating pastry there and the beginnings of a plan to open Willa Jean with Besh and fellow BRGer White (who heads up bread and pastry at Domenica and Pizza Domenica).

Fields and White have been embraced for taking a more broadly Southern food approach to their menu, where grilled crawfish and Burrata are piled on housemade bread, fried chicken is drizzled with Tabasco honey and sandwiched between two flaky biscuit halves, and housemade pimento cheese is formed into quenelles and served with housemade crackers, shaved country ham and seasonal mixed pickles.

"I think our approach to 'Southern' as a sense of place allows us to celebrate something bigger than traditional New Orleans fare," says Fields, who originally hails from South Carolina. "Having a larger menu concept (enables us) to use a more savory menu as a vessel to show off what we are doing in the bakery via sandwiches, tartines and the like."

A SMITTEN TRANSPLANT

Also making a splash in 2015 was Nina Compton's year-old Caribbean-meets-Louisiana restaurant Compère Lapin. The St. Lucia native, made famous as the runner-up on the New Orleans season of "Top Chef," fell in love with the Big Easy during filming and moved there with her husband to open their first restaurant in the up-and-coming warehouse district.

"What inspires me the most about this city is actually the people themselves," Compton says. "They are open to my style of cooking and very excited, so it makes it much easier to cook what I want."

This creativity manifests itself in dishes such as cinnamon-inflected curry goat with—currently—sweet potato gnocchi and



cashews, Caribbean pepper pot that's a Gulf take on bouillabaisse with habanero/ginger-infused shellfish stock, coconut milk, local shellfish and escabeche, and pici pasta with nuggets of lobster and diced squash. Dishes such as dirty rice arancini, fried till crisp and served with tart orange mojo, give a nod to Compton's beloved adopted city.

"We tend to do a lot of spices, but also hearty and warming dishes that make people feel satisfied when they leave," she says.

VIETNAMESE GOES MAINSTREAM

New Orleans already had a reputation as a cultural melting pot of Caribbean, French, Cajun, Creole, Southern, African and Spanish owing largely to its locale straddling the Mississippi River near the Gulf of Mexico. More recently, Vietnamese restaurants, which were previously confined more to the city's east side and immigrant neighborhoods along the Mississippi's West Bank, have flourished citywide.

ABOVE: From left, Willa Jean's co-owners Lisa White and Kelly Fields.
BELOW: Curried goat with sweet plantain gnocchi at Compère Lapin.



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“It used to be a destination thing to eat Vietnamese food in New Orleans,” Tooker says. “But that whole category has exploded. The Vietnamese people began to recognize that there was an interest in their food, and that on their days off, local chefs were traipsing out there to figure out what they were doing.”

Fields is one such chef who can be found slurping pho and noshing on banh mi “probably 85%” of the time on her days off, she says. “There’s an amazing Vietnamese community here, and the food is extraordinary.”

Longtime restaurants such as Pho Tau Bay and Tan Dinh and newcomers Lilly’s Café and Magasin are slinging heady, soul-warming pho and lemon grass chicken com for the masses. And the 35-year-old Dong Phuong Bakery has raised the bar on French bread with a light, crispy, thin-crust loaf that serves as the vessel for a range of banh mi and has even made headway into the po’boy realm, Tooker says.

“Dong Phuong has completely turned the po’boy world on its head, because they make such a beautiful, light, classic, po’boy loaf-style French bread that you will see it all over on restaurant menus,” Tooker says. “That’s a gigantic change.”

One young chef who’s tapped into this collective obsession with Vietnamese is Besh alum Michael Gulotta, who left Restaurant August to open MoPho in Mid-City in 2014. This relaxed pub turns out riffs on classic Vietnamese dishes, such as clams swimming in broth laced with pepper jelly and lamb lardo, flash-fried P&J oysters with pickled blue cheese and radishes, and pho rich with oxtail, tripe, tendons and grilled greens.

Something of a constant on the scene, Besh also nurtured the likes of Alon Shaya, the James Beard Award-winning chef and owner of red-hot Israeli restaurant Shaya, in addition to opening or buying five more restaurants in the New Orleans area since Katrina: Lüke, Domenica, Pizza Domenica, Borgne and La Provence.

“The way I see it, (Besh) is the kingmaker these days,” Tooker says. “The reason for that is he identifies really great young talent, works with them in various capacities, and what he’s ended up doing again and again with chefs like Shaya and Brian Landry (Borgne) is he goes into partnership with them, but he encourages them to really take ownership with little to no interference.”

BALANCING PAST AND FUTURE

But New Orleans’ food revolution isn’t just limited to new restaurants. Seventy-year-old Brennan’s had lost much of its shining reputation when Slade Rushing (MiLa) took the helm of the kitchen following an ownership change to Ralph Brennan and a \$20 million renovation

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
 1) Willa Jean’s build-a-biscuit breakfasts have made it a brunch favorite among locals. 2) Compère Lapin’s picci pasta. 3) Slade Rushing, executive chef of the revamped Brennan’s, seen here with a portrait of the restaurant’s original chef Paul Blangé, respects tradition while putting a new spin on the dishes that made the place great.
OPPOSITE: Opened in 1946, Brennan’s became famous for its bananas Foster, which it started serving at brunch in the early ’50s.

PHOTO CREDITS Above, clockwise from left: 1) Rush Jague 2) Old No 77 Hotel and Chandlery 3) Chris Granger; opposite: Chris Granger

for the French Quarter stalwart, which reopened in late 2014. Rushing's goal of reviving classic dishes while also updating the old-school menu with a California French spin for more modern palates has been no easy task, he admits.

"You have to be a little fearless—I'm not going to lie," he says. He daringly breaks with tradition in such dishes as palm sugar-roasted duck brined in lemon grass, chilies and ginger, then brushed with fish sauce and caramel, then brushed again with black cardamom, coriander, cinnamon and Sichuan peppercorns.

He's revived a few classics, too, lightening the hollandaise in eggs Benedict by using whole butter instead of clarified butter, and using veal bones to make the stock for choron sauce in the perennial eggs Sardou with crispy artichokes and Parmesan creamed spinach. His work earned him a nomination from the James Beard Foundation as Best Chef: South in 2015. But not everyone has embraced the changes.

"I want to tread lightly on classic dishes, because we get a lot of regulars," Rushing says. "Ninety-nine percent of the time, we win them over because they see our passion and commitment to keeping Brennan's excellent. But some have their minds set on the traditional dish and just aren't open to change. So you have to be resilient, humble and have a pretty thick skin."

He says he'd rate New Orleans' dining scene up there with the best, with a lot of exciting new restaurants raising the bar. At the same time, he adds, "New Orleans without a Brennan's would be a sad place, and if we don't bring these institutions into the modern era, they'll die."

But doing that also means "honoring tradition every day," he says—quite literally, too, as a portrait of the late Paul Blangé, Brennan's original chef, overlooks Rushing's kitchen. But no actual ghost sightings to speak of. "Not yet anyway," he says, "but I've heard stories from other chefs here, believe me." ■



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