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Louisiana Culinary Trails Review - From The Fields To The Table

By Babbie De Derian, Travel, Food & Spa Editor

Eating my way through the heart of **Cajun Country** and spicy goodness ... from **Lafayette** to **New Orleans**.

Louisiana, a cultural gumbo, is all about its people: the foods they grow, the seafood they catch, and the traditional Creole and Cajun dishes they have been cooking for generations. Everyone has a jambalaya and gumbo recipe they are proud and eager to share; everyone has a story to tell. "What you hear is the real thing". Their famous Louisiana boil, a mix of fresh ingredients from seven different regions, simmers on stoves throughout the state; "simple is flavorful". All it takes is a pot of water flavored with crawfish, potatoes, onions, tomatoes and a bag of spices to inspire a creative homemaker or local chef. Almost everyone has a fig tree in their backyard; they make their own preserves, pickles and sausages. People in Louisiana talk about food all the time, knowing their food influences and attracts the world.



Louisiana is working hard to showcase the state as a premier culinary destination by launching and promoting **Seven "hungry for adventure" Culinary Trails** that lead to epicurean treasures in north, central and southern sections of the state. Passionate about their cuisines and their restaurants, Louisiana is one of the top 15 culinary destinations in the world.



An invite to travel the southern "**Louisiana Culinary Trail**" gives me an opportunity to discover the differences between Creole and Cajun cooking, and a chance to meet a wide cross of genuine, gracious people who take great pride in their heritage and culture. I discover "men in Louisiana cook." There are more than 1,000 recipes for jambalaya; everyone has a recipe and theirs is better than yours.

My culinary odyssey begins with a continental flight from New York to **Lafayette** where I am met by a welcoming group of public relations reps, tourist board officials and 10 journalists from around the country. We pile into two vans; first stop, **Billy's Boudin**, for a taste of their famous made- on- the- premises boudin (smoked sausage) and cracklin (crisp pig skin). Yummy!

It's on to **Opelousas** for lunch at the **Palace Café**, family owned for seventy five years. **Tina and Bill Elder** serve down home chow and we pass around dishes for all to taste; turkey with corn stuffing and Lima beans with bacon and okra, smothered with tomatoes, are two of my favorites.



The Opelousas Museum & Interpretive Center has fascinating displays of local food producers, Yambilee memorabilia (Louisiana was once the sweet potato capital), and the Southwest Zydeco Festival archives. **Opelousas Mayor Donald R. Cravins, Sr.** greets us and speaks of the heart and soul: "we need to bring people back to the greatest music capitol in the world; we have a strong work ethic and are very proud of our culture. Opelousas was founded as a trade and agricultural center; Katrina was a life changing experience; after the levy broke, there was panic and confusion. Speak about the character of the people of this state; we are often misunderstood. Give us a chance to express who we are; we aren't there yet. We have giving personalities; we speak a little different. Thanks for being here; enjoy the sights, sounds and flavors of our community."

There's time for a "must stop" at **J.B. Sadez Hardware Store**, open since 1878 and **Targil Seasoning & Butcher Supplies** where they customize spice blends with your personalized logo.

We drive to Washington for an overnight stay; there are only seven B& B's in this small town; so our group divides up for the night. Arlyn, Ron and I stay at **Miss June's**. Warm and welcoming, she shares her life as a plantation owner, an artist in Paris and now back home with a B&B to run.

This historic town, settled in 1720's, was once an important steamboat port between St. Louis and New Orleans, bringing goods from around the world to local plantations, homesteaders, trappers and townspeople. We pile into a wagon and sit on bales of hay covered with burlap; a car, rather than horses, tows our hay ride past plantations and well preserved old homes. **The Steamboat Warehouse**, the only one left standing, served as a feed mill, general store and since 1977, as a restaurant.



This will make a great gumbo

Steamboat Warehouse Restaurant, now owned by 32-year-old **chef Mathew Stevens** is the hangout for colorful local characters like **Bobby Dupres** who has a radio show, lots of money and is anxious to share town history and gossip. We begin with an array of original, unusual and unique starters: crab and crawfish cakes, Moody Blues Gumbo, shrimp Betsy, sidesaddle angels, stuffed jalapeno peppers, eggplant belle rose, grilled frogs legs, catfish tidbits, crawfish etoufee (Mathew's three time world champion recipe), and the Steamboat Platter, a mix of local seafood. Fun evening!

In the morning we visit **farmer Chris Wiltz** at his crawfish pond. Chris uses large pieces of fresh fish as bait inside his crawfish traps; we take turns riding in his boat as he sets, then collects traps filled with pounds of live crawfish he sells wholesale for \$1.00 a pound.



Farmer Chris at Crawfish farm

Gerald Breaux, Executive Director of the Lafayette Visitors & Convention Bureau, hosts a picnic style crawfish feast; we dig into heaping platters of spicy fresh off the grill crawfish. There's a knack to peeling that takes time to master. Lafayette, the heartbeat of Arcadiana, boasts they have the spiciest food in the world, famous historical attractions, and Grammy award winning zydeco musicians.

Note: **The Annual Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival** has been a foodie and family pleaser since 1984.



Crawfish catch

Vermillionville in Lafayette is a 23 acre Cajun/Creole heritage and folklife park focusing on Acadia history. Fifteen houses and buildings, some donated by families whose ancestors lived in them, others reproductions, including a blacksmith and master boat builder, tell the story of life as it was lived from 1765 -1890.

After a tour of the park, we are welcomed into “ **Mama Ridell’s cooking school kitchen** for a demonstration. She turns out a savory Creole okra gumbo using frozen okra, a little canola oil, tomatoes and onions ... adding a little vinegar to cut the slime. “We smother a lot, which in Creole means sauté”. We learn heirloom refers to any crop grown before 1940; Creole dishes use more tomatoes; Cajun dishes are made with brown gravy; rice is the staple of both. She shares a little local tradition, “when pots are uncovered, you are allowed to walk into the kitchen and stir; if covered stirring is not allowed”. **Mama Ridell** hopes to grow the cooking school into a quilting and gardening experience. “So we may maintain our historic culture for our children to share with people who come to visit from all over the world.”



Mama Ridell in cooking class kitchen

Charlie G's Seafood Grill hosts us for dinner, serving little tastes of a wide variety of South Louisiana dishes in a relaxed and fun atmosphere, a popular place for locals. The open kitchen is inviting; the staff happy to be cooking; the crab risotto melts in my mouth. I loved the smoked duck and andouille gumbo and the pistachio encrusted redfish.

Breakfast at Hub City Diner

Rockin and rollin since 1990, we are served oversized platters of sweet potato pancakes, grits, tasso sausage and eggs. Brenda our waitress drizzles a mix of cane sugar, honey and butter over a heaping plate of homemade hot biscuits.



Hub diner



Hub Diner's homemade biscuits drizzled with honey

Avery Island

We gather in front of the jungle gardens on Avery Island, home of **McIlhenny Tabasco sauces**, for a press conference that officially launches **The Louisiana Culinary Trails**. The three year initiative is being supported by sixty six partners, including the **Louisiana Seafood Promotion & Marketing Board**, (1/3 of all domestic

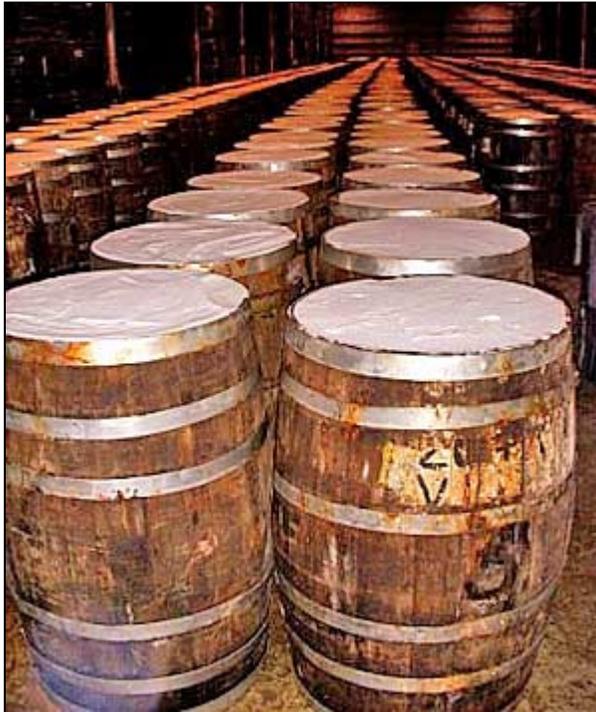
seafood comes from Louisiana). This State wide Promotion has been customized to take tourists from the farm through all the steps it takes to get food to the table . . . and to introduce people to the vast differences in the regional cuisines. The state's favorite chefs will travel to events around the country promoting "come to Louisiana for an authentic real deal".



Press conference on Avery Island

Following the conference, a VIP tour takes us through the production and barreling. Tabasco mines their own salt which gives the sauce its unique flavor. Lunch is served in the corporate dining room.





Tabasco aging in barrels

Baton Rouge

The weekend **Southern Breeze Annual Wine + Culinary Festival** kicks off on Friday with a lively “Night in the Kitchen with Tabasco” VIP dinner at **Vic’s Chophouse**, **Publisher Gary Ellis** makes a toast to launch what promises to be an exciting fun weekend; **Mcllhenny executive chef Jason Gronlund** presides over our five course gourmet menu, spiced with Tabasco sauces and paired with an innovative selection of wines from Australia.



Saturday gets off to a competitive start with the **First Annual Southern Breeze Top Chef Challenge** held on the old Capital grounds. **Celebrity chef Tim Creehan** from Destin Florida’s Copper Grill emcees as Baton Rouge’s top chiefs vie for the title by preparing a variety of duck dishes.



Top chef competition



Celebrity chef Tim Creehan emcees top chef competition

Following Saturday's competition, we spend an hour at the walk around wine tasting (180 different wines), then meet up with "**top chef** " winner **Justin Ferguson** at Capital City Grille for a special tasting lunch. His cheese grits with huge grilled gulf shrimps is another winner.

We miss Sunday's walk about brunch, (a taste of 8 top local restaurants) as we take off for New Orleans, but later learn the three day festival was a huge success, attracting a crowd of 500.

It is a misconception that Cajun food, a fusion of seven different cultures, has to be hot and spicy. There are a

variety of regional differences, many with more emphasis on the flavors of garlic and onions, than on spices. Whether you like your jambalaya, gumbo and seafood spicy, extra hot or simply flavored, eating your way from the farm to the table, along one of Louisiana's seven culinary trails, will carry your taste buds to new highs . . . and enhance your appreciation of a state whose people have much to share.

For More Info on Louisiana Culinary Trails, Lafayette, Washington, Opelousas, Baton Rouge and New Orleans . . . and to book your own custom culinary tour: www.louisianatravel.com

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