Spotlight On: NEW ORLEANS!

Come Blow Your Horn at Our 70th Annual Convention

By Carol McCabe

It’s early morning, my favorite time of day in New Orleans, and I’m walking along Chartres Street in the French Quarter. They’re still hosing down the pavement when I stop at an open air restaurant where I always go because I like the biscuits and the bald waiter. The regulars call him Curly. He calls me Baby. He calls everybody Baby.

One of the regulars is a woman who seems to be frozen in some forgotten corner of the 1940s, her hair combed into a Betty Grable pompadour, her face powdered and kewpie-rouged. Curly takes her order with his usual gravity. “You ready for your coffee, Baby?” he asks her.

I know that if Tennessee Williams came in with Blanche Dubois on his arm and sat at the table where she’s sitting now, Curly wouldn’t blink. “How you like your eggs, Baby?” he’d ask Blanche. It takes a lot to amaze people in New Orleans.

This is, after all, a place whose history includes pirates, voodoo queens, river boat gamblers, slave traders, people who plotted to spring Napoleon from St. Helena. Here, people often dress in costume, even when it isn’t Mardi Gras. New Orleans is an old city, and has seen a lot.

My usual early morning route has taken me along Royal Street where I love to window shop at the row of antique stores whose wares range from Belter beds to Chinese export porcelain to Victorian jewelry: amethysts, garnet, coral and cameos galore, Scarlett O’Hara earbobs. Behind the windows of the Waldhorn Company,
owned by the same family for more than 100 years, there is gold jewelry that I think Mary Todd Lincoln might have worn, and a particular pair of green peridot earrings that I have fallen for.

Now I pass the quiet, slightly spooky Cabildo, built in 1795 by the Spanish. Up there on the second floor in 1803, their New Orleans successors, the French, signed the papers that transferred Louisiana to the United States. The Cabildo is a museum now; its best-known exhibit is Napoleon’s death mask.

Next door is St. Louis Cathedral, built in 1794, the oldest cathedral in active use in America. Beyond it is the eighteenth century Presbytere, another early government building.

In front of the Cathedral is Jackson Square, the heart of the French Quarter. Around the iron fence, street artists display their portraits of Dolly Parton, Ronald Reagan, and other familiar faces to show their skill at producing likenesses.

Across the river side of Jackson Square is the old Jackson Brewery, which has been turned into a lively shopping center. Along with the usual shops, the Jax Brewery has several of special interest to visitors. One sells Louisiana foods—Tabasco in bottles large enough to last some of my Yankee friends a lifetime, bottled peppers, New Orleans dark-roast coffee with chicory, Creole spices, and gumbo mixes. Another has a fine collection of books on Louisiana subjects, along with a small but esoteric collection of jazz, zydeco, and Cajun music records.

And don’t miss the food hall upstairs, where you can sample the fare from two of Louisiana’s best restaurants. Buster Holmes’ soul food is so good that Preservation Hall musicians have been known to take some along on tour. Patout’s in New Iberia, Louisiana is often described as the state’s best Cajun restaurant; sample Patout’s opulent crawfish and shrimp dishes here and you’ll save a long drive.

The French Market, across from the Square, stands on the site of an Indian trading post. The Spanish built the first market there in 1791. Today, the market is full of small shops and restaurants, the best known of them Cafe du Monde, which feels very much like a cafe in pre-war Saigon. It is no surprise, then, to find Vietnamese waitresses serving the traditional dark New Orleans coffee and the melting-hot French doughnuts called beignets. One waitress told me that New Orleans feels just enough like old Saigon to make her terribly lonely for a home she may never see again.

A produce market adjacent to the French Market sells pecans and Louisiana oranges to add to the food bundle you’re taking home. From there, it’s only a short walk to the old Mint, which houses a jazz museum and a Mardi Gras museum.

I have visited the French Quarter often enough to go my own way now, but for a first visit, try one of the horse-and-buggy tours that are a properly slow and charming way to traverse the Quarter’s narrow streets. There are also excellent guided walking tours, four different ones conducted by rangers of Jean Lafitte National
Historical Park, beginning at the French Market.

This morning, I keep walking as long as my time lasts, strolling up and down narrow cobbled streets that look as they did in the nineteenth century. I can hear a flute playing somewhere behind a high wall on Dauphine and a paddle-wheeler’s calliope down by the river. I catch a whiff of Grand Duke of Tuscany jasmine from a hidden garden on Ursulines.

I walk past the Voodoo Museum and later, the house called Madame John’s Legacy. Its name comes from the tale of “Tite Poulette” in George W. Cable’s “Old Creole Days.” In Cable’s story, Poulette was the child of the quadroon Zalli. After Zalli received the house from Mr. John, she became known as Madame John and the house was her legacy.

According to one version of local history, the house, a brick and wood plantation-type raised cottage, was built, perhaps as early as 1726, for a sea captain who died in the Natchez Massacre.

This historic and festive French Quarter, or Vieux Carre (French for “Old Square”), is an antique Latin enclave within a busy contemporary port city. An area of about 90 blocks, its boundaries are Canal and Esplanade, Decatur and Rampart; it was already old when Napoleon sold Louisiana to the United States.

This was the earliest part of the city to be laid out, shortly after New Orleans was founded in 1718. Its designer was an engineer who was influenced by the design of Versailles.

Spanish explorers had first arrived at the mouth of the Mississippi in the early 1500s. The city was founded by the French, then turned over to Spain, which ruled Louisiana during the later eighteenth century. After France regained the colony, it sold Louisiana, a territory that contained all or part of thirteen present-day states, to the United States. New Orleans gets its special flavor from its unique Spanish and French heritage, and from a geography that makes it a gateway from the Caribbean.

Americans who came to Louisiana after the purchase found the aristocratic French community unwelcoming. They then began to build the “American” part of town on the other side of Canal Street, the site today of a booming business district, of the new convention center on the site of the 1984 World’s Fair, the downtown Superdome, the towering International Trade Mart with its great Mississippi River view from the top, the Rouse Company’s new Riverwalk center, the elegant Canal Place shopping center...
The St. Charles Avenue Streetcar: Take a ride on the oldest continuously running street railway system in the world! Along the route, you’ll roll beneath huge arching oaks, past miles of gracious Southern mansions.

and a group of new world-class hotels.

On that side lies the Garden District with its big, beautiful houses and gardens of azaleas, wisteria, camellias, and crepe myrtle. The main stem of the garden district can be traveled via the 150-year-old St. Charles Avenue streetcar line, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Other interesting areas of New Orleans include Magazine Street, from the Spanish government warehouse, where the magazine once stood. This is a center for decorator and lower-priced antique and thrift shops.

On the West Bank, a large Cajun community has grown up. My favorite New Orleans restaurant, LeRuth’s, is at 636 Franklin Street in Gretna, across the Mississippi River Bridge from downtown. LeRuth’s, now operated by the two sons of founder Warren LeRuth, serves classic French dishes as well as Cajun and Creole specialties, and there is always something new to try.

Which brings me to the subject of New Orleans food, one of the city’s greatest attractions. The combination of culinary influences from France, Spain, Africa, the Caribbean and the bounty of the Gulf and the swamps can’t be duplicated. Food may be the number one topic of conversation here, and the arguments rage over which chef is hot and which is not, about which dining room is most beautiful, which the most dependable.

Some restaurants with famous names are not as good as they once were; some are better. Ask around. By all means, go to Galatoire’s and stand in that line out front, where there will be time to ask the people around you for recommendations. Then take your turn inside, where there are mirrored walls, a tiled floor, ceiling fans, and some of the best pompano meuniere amandine you’re ever going to taste.

For plain, fresh seafood, try one of the oyster houses, Felix’s or the Acme in the French Quarter. Commander’s Palace in the Garden District continues to live up to its fine reputation. If you’re up to dessert, don’t miss Commander’s bread pudding souffle, a hot, puffy version of a traditional favorite Cajun dessert, served drenched in a creamy whiskey sauce.

Tujaque’s, across from the French market, has been around since 1856; its customers have included several presidents. Tujaque’s has the look of some other old Creole restaurants without the hauteur. Here, there’s a friendly, neighborhood feeling. There is a fixed menu based on seasonal foods, always hearty, of five courses plus fresh bread and fine coffee, for less than $20 without wine.

After dinner, of course, there’s music. You can find anything from Afro-Cuban to zydeco, with about 60 clubs offering jazz, rhythm and blues, or Cajun music on weekends, about half that number on week nights. The number one stop, of course, is Preservation Hall at 726 St. Peter Street, where some legendary New Orleans musicians play traditional jazz. There are no drinks, almost no seating, and you’ll love it.

On most trips to New Orleans, I manage to spend one night walking around the French Quarter, listening to music, perhaps finally strolling along the Moon Walk next to the Mississippi (named for former mayor “Moon” Landrieu, not for the celestial body.)

I’ve been to New Orleans often in the last five years. But I’ve never had enough time yet to see it all, hear it all, taste it all. Which doesn’t mean that I won’t keep trying, Baby.

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