

TOM FITZMORRIS'S

HUNGRY

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A CULINARY HISTORY OF NEW ORLEANS

The City Where Food Is Almost Everything

HUNGRY TOWN

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The City Where Food Is Almost Everything

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PART ONE

Doing What
Comes Naturally



Commander's Palace. It took more than a year to repair the antebellum building after Katrina.

The Pleasures of Hard Times

EXPOSED TO THE ELEMENTS

New Orleans is like your first raw oyster. You must suspend your squeamishness and take it on its own terms to enjoy it. If you keep your distance, you'll never get it. If you go for it, though, you will be rewarded with the fulfillment of lust. Lust is an urge you need to have to live in this city successfully. Without lust, you're probably better off living somewhere else.

No matter what else you think or hear, the central lust in New Orleans is for eating. Passionate eaters recognize that about the city almost as soon as they arrive. The same way they do in Italy, France, and Spain, and for the same reasons.

Some people who love New Orleans might hesitate to credit something as quotidian as food with having so much magnetism. But not long ago some very convincing proof that food is almost everything was put before us. For New Orleanians, it was an extreme example of what we feel when we travel to another place and realize that the people there don't cook the way we do. We begin to itch to get back.

People who were living in New Orleans in the summer of 2005 will talk about what happened there for the rest of their lives. I was, and I will. Those of us who survived Hurricane Katrina (and many didn't; it was as bad as the television coverage made it look), those of us who love living in New Orleans, wondered what force possibly could pull our city and our lives back together.

To our surprise and delight, that force was provided in almost unbelievable measure by cooks, restaurants, gumbo, poor boy sandwiches, soft-shell crabs, and our love of eating together.

I should have known. I've spent my entire adult life eating, thinking about eating, writing about eating, and talking about eating. But every time I think about the role our unique culinary culture played after Katrina, I shake my head and grin.

My first inkling that something wonderful was about to happen came on October 12, 2005, with an e-mail from a reader of my Web site: "I saw in your newsletter that you're back in town. My wife and I have a reservation for eight o'clock at Restaurant August. She said that even though we don't really know you, you really ought to join us and our son as our guest. Please say yes!"

How could I say no? I'd just returned to New Orleans after six weeks of post-Katrina evacuation—my longest absence since I was born on Mardi Gras 1951. I was home alone while my wife and two teenage children remained evacuated in Washington, DC.

Downtown New Orleans was still a bizarre mix of familiarity and chaos. I parked my car on the sidewalk behind a fire hydrant on Gravier Street, just off Tchoupitoulas. The New Orleans Police Department was in disarray and wasn't paying the slightest attention to even flagrant parking violators. Across the street was Restaurant August, a primary contender for the title of best restaurant

in town since it had opened in 2001.

I opened the door and pushed into the crowded bar. Every face I saw was familiar to me. Some were friends, some prominent New Orleanians, some both. Most of the men wore jackets and ties, and I did I. The women were dressed beautifully.

For the next ten or fifteen minutes, we all gave each other the “Katrina hug.” In those days, that’s how we said, “My God! You’re still alive!” Since well over a thousand people died as a result of the storm, the hug was given and received in earnest. After disengaging from it, we traded stories of our situations, knowing that we could go on for hours. Meanwhile, I scanned the room for my hosts. I saw three people I didn’t recognize sitting in the corner of the bar. I figured it had to be them.

It was. They had a bottle of Veuve Clicquot open and a glass of it poured for me by the time I elbowed my way over to them. I gave these strangers the Katrina hug, and we began a (lengthy) dinner that will never fade from my memory.

I’ve had more than a few unforgettable dinners. I started writing about them in college, and I never quit. It became my life’s work, distributed mostly in print and on the radio, but in practically every other medium too. What most engages me, in work and play, is the food of New Orleans. I love it passionately—as did these new friends who’d invited me to dinner. As compelling as our Katrina conversation was, they also wanted to talk about food.

We remained in the bar for more than an hour past our reservation time. When we were finally admitted to the dining room, another forty or fifty acquaintances needed the Katrina hug and a few words before I could sit down. After that, fifteen or twenty minutes more passed before a young woman wearing a Restaurant August T-shirt—not the standard uniform of the restaurant by a long shot—walked up, smiling and perspiring. “Welcome to August!” she said. “I’m Debbie, and I’ll be your waitress tonight. I’m glad you have something to drink, because the next time you see me will be in about a half hour! Bye!”

We looked at one another and laughed. Octavio Mantilla, one of the owners of the restaurant, had warned us about this. Restaurant August typically has two dozen servers and busboys in the dining room and eleven cooks in the kitchen. That night, serving more customers than the restaurant could really hold, there were just three servers and two cooks; the whereabouts and fates of the absentees were still largely unknown.

One of the cooks was August’s chef and co-owner, John Besh. A Marine sergeant in the first Gulf War, he was one of the two or three hottest chefs in town, with a growing national reputation. (He’s been on the cover of *Food & Wine* magazine, among others.) He’s a good-looking, instantly likable guy and a well-trained, inspired restaurateur.

Besh returned to town soon after the storm, to find his restaurant had sustained little damage. That was a big relief not only to him, but also to people who liked him and his food. On CNN we’d all seen a much-replayed video of a burning building on the same block as August and wondered. During Besh’s first days back, the city was still officially evacuated. A few people had never left town, especially in the French Quarter and the Warehouse District. But most of the people on the streets were military troops. His kitchen crippled by a lack of gas and water, Besh set up a propane burner and made pots of red beans and rice to feed these people, as well as anyone else who drifted by.

When they returned to their kitchens, Besh and other front-line chefs thought that any customer who showed up would be interested only in sustenance. While Besh cooked his beans, Scott Boswell of the five-star Stella!, grilled hamburgers and sausages on a charcoal grill in his French Quarter courtyard. Bob Iacovone, of the four-star Cuvée, around the corner from August, made meat loaf.

When civilian customers began to return, however, they had different ideas. “What the hell is all this?” they wanted to know. “What about the gnocchi with the crabmeat and truffles? Where are the

oysters and soft-shell crabs? Barbecue shrimp?”

The returning diners were also disappointed that the wine lists were attenuated. With power out for weeks, wine-storage-room temperatures (there are no cellars in New Orleans) climbed above a hundred degrees, popping corks from many bottles and cooking the rest. Millions of dollars in wine was lost in the first week of September 2005.

These were not the desires of callous people out of touch with the reality of the disaster. Eighty percent of the city was deeply flooded, and more than 100,000 houses were rendered uninhabitable. That affected nearly everybody. Many of the people who had lived in the flood zones were in a very bad fix, with no place to go, no food, no job, and no resources—but an equally large number of the homeless were in situations better described as extremely inconvenient than life-threatening. Quite a few of the gourmets at August, Stella!, and Cuvée were without a place to live. Some shared homes with friends. Others commuted into town from temporary quarters as far as a hundred miles away. Many of them had to deal with lost businesses and jobs. Yet there they were, dressed up, dining and drinking, smiling and laughing, almost as if nothing had happened.

Almost nobody in New Orleans escaped the crisis entirely. We were all concerned about the condition and future of the city, which at the very least was cause for alarm. Every level of government, local to federal, was dissolving in a swamp of incompetence and shifting blame. But, by God, if we could go out to dinner and find that the essence of living in New Orleans—this eating and drinking like nobody in the world does the way we do—was still there . . . well, then, it might be possible to go on.

So, we went on. And we ate. We ate in grand restaurants like August if that’s what we needed to do to be convinced that the food infrastructure was still sound. Or we ate in raffish old poor boy shops like Mother’s, a block away. Or in our own kitchens (or those of the people who were letting us stay with them), cooking our own red beans and rice, and gumbo. We cooked and ate not just to fill our stomachs, but to live the New Orleans life, eating and drinking with relieved abandon.

The urgent return to New Orleans food cut across all of society’s imaginary lines. Rich to poor, black to white, comfortable to homeless. Most New Orleanians ate the military MREs (meals ready to eat) the FEMA folks vouchsafed us—if only until we could get our hands on some shrimp, a pan, and some kind of cookstove.

Every restaurant that found enough employees (and that was their most vexing problem) was overflowing with customers. And they didn’t seem to care how long the wait was for a table or how limited the menu. They’d just get a drink and get back to telling Katrina tales. People had a lot of time on their hands; many were on furlough from their jobs and had nothing much else to do. Money didn’t seem to be a problem; insurance was coming in, and everybody got a \$2,000 check from FEMA. *Laissez le bon temps rouler!*

THE COUNTER CLICKS

I had an inkling things would go this way about three weeks before. At that time, large sections of the city were still flooded, and a second enormous hurricane—what a sick joke that was!—saw the town reevacuated. I was holed up in a basement in rural Maryland, the guest of an elderly semirelative, who had dial-up Internet service and only one phone; I couldn’t get online until after she went to bed. In one night’s flood of e-mail I came across what seemed an absurd question: “Would you send me a list of all the New Orleans restaurants open right now?”

“Are you kidding?” I wrote back. “The whole city is shut down. People aren’t even supposed to be there. The number of restaurants open in New Orleans is zero!”

Three more people asked the same question the next night. And more each night after. I figured I'd better check around. Battling through the badly compromised New Orleans phone system, I found out that twenty-two restaurants were somehow back in business. Most were outside the city proper, but a few in the French Quarter and up Magazine Street had opened, too. I posted the list on my Web site and directed the ever-increasing number of inquirers there. Day after day, I added restaurants to the list as I found out about them.

That list—which I called the New Orleans Restaurant Index, and still update daily—captured more attention than anything else I'd ever done. My count of open restaurants is widely quoted in the national and local media and even in mayoral speeches. The city's main tourism bureau gave me its "Hero Award" for it.

And today the Index provides one statistic that never fails to astound: New Orleans has substantially more restaurants now than it did before the hurricane. It seems hard to believe. Unless, of course, you're one of those who understands what a hungry town New Orleans is.

DELICIOUS GRAVITY

But back to that dinner at Restaurant August. My new friends and I began our dinner with an *amuse-bouche* from the chef—seared foie gras. Then, fried Florida oysters. (I would, with amazement and lust, eat my first post-storm Louisiana raw oysters a few days later.) Next, the misleadingly named, outrageously over-the-top dish we call barbecue shrimp in New Orleans. John Besh does a particularly good version of them with enormous Louisiana shrimp.

The entrées included mussels with fries, filet mignon with an intense demi-glace sauce, and buttery almond-crusted sautéed sheephead (an underrated Gulf fish), topped with jumbo lump Louisiana crabmeat. It was all as marvelous as it would have been before the storm. Only two concessions had to be made to the stresses of the moment: We had to use some paper napkins and plastic plates (although most of the meal was on china, with silverware). And the French fries were frozen (the produce truck carrying the fresh potatoes had rolled over a particularly sharp piece of debris—one of millions strewn on the streets—and didn't make it).

As we did with the other deviations from the norm that we had come to expect in our lives, we laughed these off. How could they diminish the joy of a dinner like this? Or the knowledge that we could find other places to do it again tomorrow? Nobody I saw leaving Restaurant August that night was sporting anything less than a happy countenance.

The people who never had much of a romance with the city in the first place saw nothing but a shocking mess. To them, the idea that food could possibly compensate for the disadvantages of living in that morass was ridiculous. And maybe they're right. In addition to dangerous hurricanes and precarious levees, New Orleanians must battle with a chronically sluggish economy, a high crime rate, and embarrassingly poor public education. The disenchanted citizens made a good case for leaving forever, and many of them did.

Unfortunately for me, my wife Mary Ann, my son Jude, and my daughter Mary Leigh joined the justifiably disdainful group. They didn't want to come back from Washington. Jude never really did. What began as a temporary enrollment in a boarding school there became permanent. The Marys came back home for a few months but went back to Washington for many more. They didn't return permanently to our (undamaged) rural home near Abita Springs until the summer of 2007. And then begrudgingly.

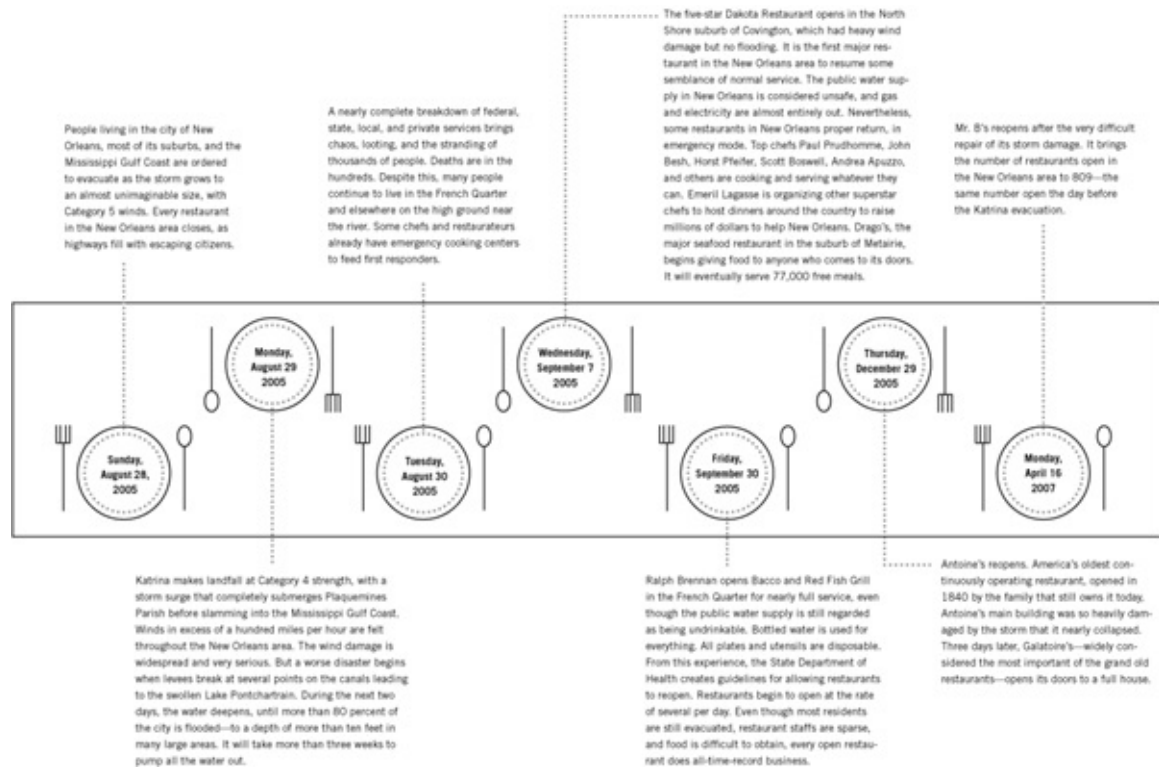
Although they're thankful I make a living at it, they can't understand the delight I take in my work. It requires me to live in New Orleans to pursue it; that diminishes most of its appeal for them. But not

for me. I can't imagine living without my peculiar work. Or living anywhere but New Orleans. Even though, frankly, in the months following Hurricane Katrina I had no idea what value such a frothy, inessential pursuit could have in the distressed city.

Which brings up the question everybody asks me: "How did you get a job like that?" The dialogue stops short until I answer. So I'll get that out of the way in the next chapter.

KATRINA TIMETABLE

From a Culinary Perspective



Sunday, August 28, 2005

People living in the city of New Orleans, most of its suburbs, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast are ordered to evacuate as the storm grows to an almost unimaginable size, with Category 5 winds. Every restaurant in the New Orleans area closes, as highways fill with escaping citizens.

Monday, August 29, 2005

Katrina makes landfall at Category 4 strength, with a storm surge that completely submerges Plaquemines Parish before slamming into the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Winds in excess of a hundred miles per hour are felt throughout the New Orleans area. The wind damage is widespread and very serious. But a worse disaster begins when levees break at several points on the canals leading to the swollen Lake Pontchartrain. During the next two days, the water deepens, until more than 80 percent of the city is flooded—to a depth of more than ten feet in many large areas. It will take more than three weeks to pump all the water out.

Tuesday, August 30, 2005

A nearly complete breakdown of federal, state, local, and private services brings chaos, looting, and the stranding of thousands of people. Deaths are in the hundreds. Despite this, many people continue to live in the French Quarter and elsewhere on the high ground near the river. Some chefs and restaurateurs already have emergency cooking centers to feed first responders.

Wednesday, September 7, 2005

The five-star Dakota Restaurant opens in the North Shore suburb of Covington, which had heavy wind

damage but no flooding. It is the first major restaurant in the New Orleans area to resume some semblance of normal service. The public water supply in New Orleans is considered unsafe, and gas and electricity are almost entirely out. Nevertheless, some restaurants in New Orleans proper return, in emergency mode. Top chefs Paul Prudhomme, John Besh, Horst Pfeifer, Scott Boswell, Andrea Apuzzo, and others are cooking and serving whatever they can. Emeril Lagasse is organizing other superstar chefs to host dinners around the country to raise millions of dollars to help New Orleans. Drago's, the major seafood restaurant in the suburb of Metairie, begins giving food to anyone who comes to its doors. It will eventually serve 77,000 free meals.

Friday, September 30, 2005

Ralph Brennan opens Bacco and Red Fish Grill in the French Quarter for nearly full service, even though the public water supply is still regarded as being undrinkable. Bottled water is used for everything. All plates and utensils are disposable. From this experience, the State Department of Health creates guidelines for allowing restaurants to reopen. Restaurants begin to open at the rate of several per day. Even though most residents are still evacuated, restaurant staffs are sparse, and food is difficult to obtain, every open restaurant does all-time-record business.

Thursday, December 29, 2005

Antoine's reopens. America's oldest continuously operating restaurant, opened in 1840 by the family that still owns it today, Antoine's main building was so heavily damaged by the storm that it nearly collapsed. Three days later, Galatoire's—widely considered the most important of the grand old restaurants—opens its doors to a full house.

Monday, April 16, 2007

Mr. B's reopens after the very difficult repair of its storm damage. It brings the number of restaurants open in the New Orleans area to 809—the same number open the day before the Katrina evacuation.

My Katrina Disaster

I was very lucky during Hurricane Katrina. My house was undamaged, and I didn't miss one week's pay. Then, afterward, my New Orleans Menu newsletter actually became much more successful than it had been before the hurricane. I did suffer one great loss, however. My office was right behind the Superdome and flooded about four and a half feet deep. Everything in it was destroyed. Thirty years' worth of photographs, including the negatives. Boxes and boxes of menus from the restaurants I had visited over the years. And the magazines and newspapers that had published my work. Having that stuff would have improved this book. But, compared with what happened to many other Orleanians, I hesitate to complain.

Fortunately, I lost none of my article archives from 1984 onward, since they were all well backed-up on computers. And, in an unbelievable stroke of luck, one of the subscribers to The New Orleans Menu had every single issue ever published, from 1977 onward. She was about to throw them all away, but she sent them to me instead.



RECIPE

Crabmeat Berdou

Long before it closed in the 1990s, Berdou's was in a time-warp, operating in the style of a much older restaurant. This dish was a favored specialty, and I get requests for it regularly. George Berdou himself demonstrated the dish on my television show; it was a keeper. It will appeal especially to garlic lovers.

Béchamel

- 4 Tbs. butter
- 3 Tbs. flour
- 1 cup milk, warmed
- ½ tsp. salt

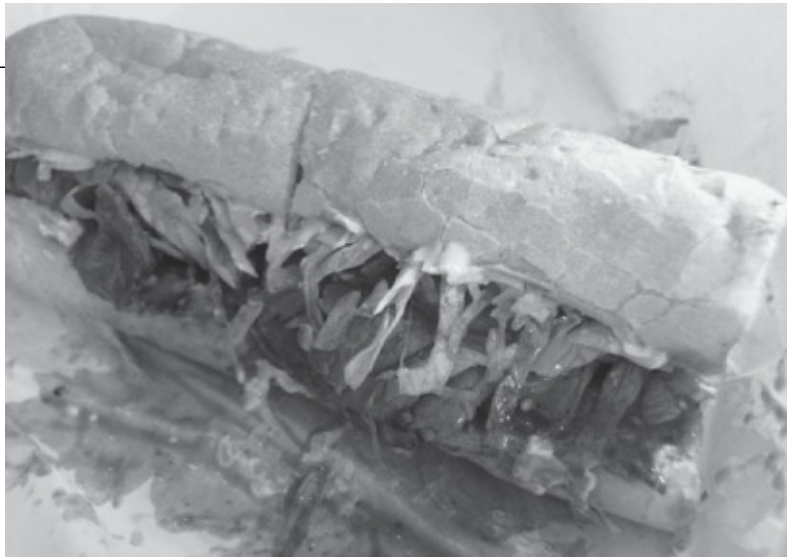
Crabmeat Mixture

- 1 stick butter
- ½ cup green onions, chopped
- ½ cup mushrooms, sliced
- 1 Tbs. garlic, chopped
- Pinch cayenne
- ½ cup sherry
- 1 lb. lump crabmeat

Preheat the broiler with the rack about four inches below the heat.

1. Prepare the béchamel. Heat the four tablespoons butter in a saucepan until it bubbles. Stir in the flour to make a blond roux; don't allow it to brown. Whisk in the milk over low heat, until the sauce thickens. Add the salt, and keep warm.
2. In a second saucepan, heat the stick of butter until it bubbles, add the green onions, mushrooms, garlic, and cayenne, and sauté until the mushrooms are tender. Add the sherry, and bring to a boil. Lower the heat, and cook until all the liquid is absorbed.
3. Carefully add the lump crabmeat, agitating the pan to combine with the rest of the ingredients, so as not to break the lumps. Divide the mixture onto ovenproof serving plates: six to eight for appetizers, four for entrees.
4. Nap two or three tablespoons of the béchamel for appetizers, or a generous quarter cup for entrees. Put the plates into the hot broiler for about a minute. Serve immediately, warning guests that the plates are hot.

MAKES SIX TO EIGHT APPETIZERS OR FOUR ENTRÉES.



A good, gravy-laden, sloppy roast beef poor boy, the dish that turned me on to lustful eating.

How I Got This Job: A Lucky Coincidence of Interests

THE POOR BOY

Before I ever thought out what I'd do for a living, I knew that I liked investigating the food I ate more thoroughly than most other people I knew or read about. The realization came courtesy of Uncle Billy—my *parran*. That's what you call your godfather if you come from a French-speaking New Orleans family, as I do. He was a longshoreman, a solid, salt-of-the-earth guy, gregarious and always laughing. He hung out and drank beer with his buddies at Clarence and Lefty's, one of scores of neighborhood bars scattered throughout the city. In those days, most of them served food, too. One night when I was eight or nine years old, Uncle Billy was stuck with me for the evening. He took me along to Clarence and Lefty's. He thought I was too skinny, and he had a plan for fixing that. He sat me down at a table and said, "Here's what you're going to eat for supper, Tommy!" A motherly waitress set a roast beef poor boy in front of me; it was my first encounter with the classic New Orleans sandwich. A foot-long piece of French bread, stuffed with thickly sliced beef round, drooling with brown gravy. I was a picky eater, and this wasn't my kind of thing. But I couldn't say no to Uncle Billy, who was a much tougher guy than, say, my dad.

I picked up the enormous sandwich and took a bite. Uncle Billy beamed. "You gonna like that!" he said, and returned to the bar. I was no stranger to delicious food. My mother was legendary in her family as a great Creole cook. But that was everyday food for me. This was something else again. The crisp, light bread . . . the meaty, intense gravy . . . the mayonnaise and tomatoes and pickles . . . it all came together in one irresistible eat.

Uncle Billy checked back after a few minutes. He looked angry. "What did you do with that poor boy?" he demanded.

"I ate it!" I said. "It was good!"

His face returned to its kinder squinty grin. "Yeah? You want another one?" He surely was kidding. But I told him that I did.

Nobody can eat two roast beef poor boys from a New Orleans neighborhood bar. But I put a good dent in the second one. Those sandwiches in that old dump left me with a taste memory that still lingers as vividly as anything. One thing I knew from that moment: Very few dishes in the world are as delicious as a well-made New Orleans roast beef poor boy.

And then, taking a wider view, I also knew that there had to be plenty more new good things to eat out there.

RADIO PLAYBOY

At the same time that I discovered the poor boy, another strong interest was forming in my mind; ~~never imagined the two would merge into a career. It started in a tree. I sat in it, listening to~~ transistor radio. It was 1962, and the two New Orleans rock stations were engaged in an epic battle that wound up changing the sound of radio nationwide. The two inventors of Top Forty radio each owned radio stations in New Orleans—the only city where they competed against each other. They threw their best disc jockeys, jingles, and formats into the battle as they played pre-Beatles rock music.

Young teenagers like me were their target audience; I hardly ever took the earphones off. After one particularly funny burst of deejay patter, I jumped down from the tree and went inside to tell my dad the news: “I know what I’m going to be when I grow up! A radio disc jockey!”

He laughed. “You can’t do that. Those guys are just a bunch of playboys!”

While that shut my mouth, I was sure of my new goal, and I thought about my dad’s advice. Okay, then, step one: Become a playboy.

But what, I wondered, does a playboy do? The answer came from a now-defunct comic strip called *Steve Roper*. The title character was a magazine reporter who lived a life of bullet-dodging adventures but with an understated, civilized personal style. In the adventure of the moment, Roper’s editor had hired a glamorous new fashion writer and asked Roper to show her around town. She was dubious about Roper—particularly when the taxi taking them to dinner dropped them in front of a warehouse in a rough neighborhood.

Roper knocked on the battered door; a tuxedoed maître d’ opened it. “Ah, Mr. Roper! Your table is ready and your Champagne is chilled. We have your favorite cut of venison tonight. Please come in!” Roper and the fashion reporter sat down to what, at the end of the repast, she described as the most spectacular dinner of her life.

“How did you find this place, and why is it hidden?” she asked.

“The chef doesn’t want everybody to know about it,” Roper said. “Only people who appreciate the best.”

Wow! If anything in the world were worth knowing, I thought, it would be something like that. People would listen if a radio playboy talked about such things on the air.

KNOWING WHAT’S GOOD

A few years later, on my high school senior trip, my classmates and I visited Washington, DC, and New York City. This would be the point in most food writers’ memoirs when they experience revelation in taste. For me, it was the other way around. We went to some pretty good restaurants, for teenagers. But my fellow travelers and I agreed that nobody up there seemed to know what was good. No roast beef poor boys—anywhere? No gumbo? No fried oysters? What, were these people nuts? We couldn’t wait to get back home and eat real food again.

Not long before, Craig Claiborne had begun writing what is generally acknowledged as the first real restaurant review column in America, for *The New York Times*. I wonder what would have happened if I had read it then. I suspect it would have been another *Steve Roper*-type revelation.

That eye-opener came two and a half years later. I remember the moment vividly. My buddy Chris and I were walking across the campus of what is now called the University of New Orleans (UNO). We were nineteen and had just left home to rent a house with some other guys. As we walked, Chris read out of a book bits he found intriguing and hilarious. The author was Richard Collin, one of our history professors. He’d just published the latest in Simon and Schuster’s *Underground Gourmet* series, guides to inexpensive, unpretentious, and oftentimes ethnic restaurants.

But *The New Orleans Underground Gourmet* took a different tack from those in other cities. Since most restaurants in New Orleans were (and are) inexpensive, unpretentious, and, in their local way, ethnic, Collin's book covered the city's entire restaurant scene—from Buster Holmes, with its platter of beans for fifty cents, to Galatoire's and LeRuth's, the best New Orleans restaurants of their day.

His wasn't the first New Orleans restaurant guide. But Collin was the first to say, in print, that some restaurants were far better than others. That some were nowhere near as fine as the reputations. And—most interesting to us college students—that some of the best food in town could be found in some of the least known, cheapest places.

Collin wrote in high contrasts. If he liked a restaurant or a dish, he made it sound as if it lifted the diner to Valhalla. If he didn't, he could be devastatingly derisive. Lines like “The food is nothing to write home about, although you might have time in the long pauses between courses” and “It would be a bad deal if it were free” raised eyebrows—especially when applied to famous, allegedly excellent establishments.

Collin's book altered the food consciousness of New Orleans residents. Dramatically. And that is saying something, given how much thought we always gave to what we ate. We were convinced that our city was the home of some of the country's best food. But few of us had any idea how broad the culinary world in New Orleans really was. Inspired by Collin's reviews, we began, avidly, to try new eateries and dishes.

Restaurateurs were suspicious of Collin. He forced them, through his readers, to rethink their comfortable games. They didn't like to have to do that. Some fought him, trying hard not to change, trying to convince people that their food really was as good as they said it was. But many more New Orleans diners had now tasted of the Tree of Good and Bad, and found new options they hadn't known they had. It was the start of a sweeping, overdue improvement in the local restaurant scene.

I had grown up eating great food, but only at home. My family never went to restaurants—not even little neighborhood places. But I made up for that—quickly. By my late teens I was already in the habit of dining in restaurants. I loved everything about the experience. Like most people, though, my universe was limited to a small number of restaurants serving familiar food. What I learned from reading Collin jazzed me up. And became an obsession. This mix of familiar and unknown pleasures was deeply alluring. Reading his book was like looking through a telescope for the first time.

I embarked on a program of restaurant adventures. It spiraled out from neighborhood cafés and poor boy shops to soul food restaurants in mostly black neighborhoods. (I was struck by how similar the cooking there was to my mother's.) Then I moved up to bistros and ethnic restaurants, all new to me. I ate food I would never have considered trying before. My palate became omnivorous.

That took fortitude at times. Once a buddy accused me of not being much of a gourmet, because I didn't eat raw oysters. He shamed me into going to Felix's Oyster Bar to lose my virginity. It was unpleasant. It required real determination to eat the half dozen large bivalves on the marble-topped bar before me. I ate too many crackers and too much ketchup-and-horseradish sauce, trying to buffer the cold, unique flavor and mouthfeel of the oysters. I was glad when the last one was down.

But a funny thing happened a few days later. I was suddenly struck with a desire to eat more oysters. This time, I knocked back a dozen. I was soon convinced—as I still am—that oysters are the most delicious of all seafoods.

It took a while to break down other barriers, too. Because I've always spent more time working than I should (to the detriment of my grades, back then), I had the money to go to Antoine's, Galatoire's, Brennan's, LeRuth's, and the other grand restaurants in town, with their numerous Colli stars. But I had neither the confidence to go, nor friends with matching funds. Instead, my introduction to haute cuisine came from an unexpected source.

In 1972, I quit the job I'd had since I was twelve working in a grocery store to take a job with *Figaro*, a new alternative weekly newspaper, begun by James K. Glassman. (Now a well-known political and economics writer in Washington, DC, Glassman had married a New Orleans woman and was launching his career in town.) I was already writing movie, theater, and music reviews for the *Driftwood*, UNO's campus newspaper. Originally, my job at the *Driftwood* was as its editorial cartoonist. When the fall semester began, though, a new editor cleaned house. He told me his friend would take over my cartoonist gig—and that I was, like, fired. Not wanting to give up the clubhouse privileges that accrue to newspaper staff, I begged to stay on to write feature articles.

“Like what?” he asked.

I had no ideas prepared, but I thought fast. “Do you know about the Flambeau Room?” I asked quite sure that he didn't. The Flambeau Room was a white-tablecloth restaurant in the student center patronized mostly by faculty but open to anyone. It had waiters and waitresses, bone china, and silverware. The manager was Peter Sclafani, Jr., the son of one of the city's most celebrated Italian chefs. The chef was Leon Ricard, who had spent a few years at Brennan's; the Brennans liked him enough to send him to the Cordon Bleu.

The Flambeau Room served slightly scaled-back versions of Brennan's food, at absurdly low prices. A lunch of turtle soup, chicken Clemenceau, and caramel custard went for \$1.50. That was lower than the price of a hamburger, fries, and a Coke in the snack bar next door. I knew a good deal when I saw one, and I ate in the Flambeau Room every day. There I tasted oysters Bienville, shrimp rémoulade, eggs Sardou, redfish court bouillon, filet mignon marchand de vin, and dozens of other classic French-Creole dishes for the first time. The chef liked to use béarnaise sauce, which I found astonishingly delicious.

Top New Orleans Restaurants, 1970

This is how the New Orleans restaurant scene stacked up when I became conscious of it, at age nineteen. The ratings are those of Richard Collin in *The New Orleans Underground Gourmet*, the first set of restaurant ratings ever published in New Orleans. The bolded restaurants are still open as of 2010. The top restaurants for various years appear elsewhere in this book. More about these restaurants is available online: <http://www.nomenu.com>

**** FOUR STARS ****

(the maximum rating)

Galatoire's

LeRuth's

*** THREE STARS ***

Acme Oyster House

Andrew Jackson

Antoine's

Barataria Tavern

Brennan's

Caribbean Room

Chez Helene
Christopher Blake's
Commander's Palace
Crescent City Steak House
Elmwood Plantation
España
Gin's Mee Hong
Mosca's
Pascal's Manale
Ristorante Tre Fontane

“Sure,” said the new editor. “Write about that.”

My piece ran in the *Driftwood* on September 1, 1972. It was unambiguously a review. I held forth on what I thought was great and what could be better. I based my decrees purely on the impressions of my naive palate. Despite that, the article was received as credible. The editor, in the only smart move he ever made (he was gone by the spring semester), told me I ought to write a weekly column about other places to eat on- and off-campus.

That began the column I write every week to this day. And my career as a restaurant critic and food writer. It set a pattern of impecuniousness, too. The cost of the meals I reviewed wasn't reimbursed by the *Driftwood*. In fact, I have yet to find an employer willing to cover my expenses, which run for into five figures every year. While that makes for a significant tax deduction, it remains the one undeniable drawback of my work. Writing restaurant reviews came with other benefits, though. Women thought it was a cool thing for a guy to do. Cooler still if the guy invited her along to partake in the review meals. Without realizing it, I had followed in the footsteps of Steve Roper—if rather far behind him. Not a playboy, but with some worldliness. Perhaps even enough to become a voice on the radio. That was still my primary goal, and my college major.

My father never understood any of this, and he kept asking when I'd get a real job.

A REAL JOB

In 1974, the month I graduated from college, I published my first restaurant column in *New Orleans* magazine, a slick, inoffensive monthly. It paid well (no expense account, though) and had some cachet. I must have made an impression on the publisher, Joe David III, because after four months he offered me the job of editor in chief.

I was twenty-three. Although working with Glassman at *Figaro* had given me confidence in my ability to build a publication, I have to admit now that I was in over my head. Fortunately, a cadre of talented freelance writers and artists were always at my door, and we wound up putting out a product that doesn't embarrass me to peruse all these years later.

I discovered early on at *New Orleans* magazine that our local audience knew no limits when it came to articles about eating. They devoured the material much more avidly than they did traditional food writing, which was mostly about cooking. Cooking and eating are related, but they're not the same thing. For every person who likes to cook, ten or a hundred or a thousand people like to eat. So the number of magazine pages we devoted to restaurants tripled—at least. I wrote most of the articles myself. The other writers thought I was overdoing it, but the advertising staff was very pleased.

sample content of Tom Fitzmorris's *Hungry Town: A Culinary History of New Orleans, the City Where Food Is Almost Everything*

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