DINING IN NEW ORLEANS
PERSONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM AN EXILE

About the Author
Rick Downing is a Product Manager with Springer-Miller Systems, as well as author of a culinary and travel blog. Not only has Rick traveled the world seeking culinary experiences but he has curated a cookbook collection of over 6,000 volumes.

INTRODUCTION
I was reborn when I moved to New Orleans. Freshly graduated from the University of Virginia, I thought my life was well under way, but I was mistaken. In New Orleans my real life began. I spent 10 years in the crescent and have carried that stamp on my soul for the last 30. I visit when I can but it is never for long enough. Like any ardent convert, I endlessly proselytize the wonders of paradise to any who will listen; and now I’m talkin’ to you. Your culinary journey awaits.

New Orleans is overflowing with amazing restaurants. You could spend weeks sampling Antoine’s, Galatoires, Brennan’s, Arnaud’s and on and on. The challenge is that everyone wants to go to them. It can be difficult to get reservations and less enjoyable when the crowds are thick. They are all extremely popular with both tourists and locals and, quite honestly, the experience of going to them as an outsider versus going with a local is very different. I recommend that you make some local connections while you are at HITEC, and make plans to return after the show to really explore NOLA. In the meantime, here are some foolproof alternatives that are guaranteed to leave you wanting more. Much more.

FINE DINING
Elsewhere, this term connotes images of somber cathedrals of epicurean excess, 12-course tasting menus and 3-digit explorations of molecular gastronomy. In New Orleans it means an evening of professionally delivered hospitality focused on your comfort and conviviality...sort of a spa for your palate. Never hesitate to ask your waiter for guidance and give the house a chance to show what it can do.

Herbsaint – 701 St Charles Avenue (Central Business District) - http://www.herbsaint.com/
This is the flagship of Chef Donald Link. (His growing local empire also includes his exquisite seafood restaurant Peche and the Cajun/Southern temple Cochon.) He is one of my absolute favorite chefs and I guarantee you will not be disappointed. Though not a true Cajun restaurant, Donald’s Cajun roots heavily influence the menu. Any and everything on the menu would be fantastic. You definitely want reservations and it would not be too early to try booking now. This may be within walking distance of your hotel or a short cab ride.

Broussard’s – 819 Conti Street (French Quarter) - http://www.broussards.com/
When I lived in New Orleans, Broussard’s was always high on my dinner list. It has all the charm of a great elegant New Orleans dining establishment but not quite as much tourist traffic...more locals. You don’t have to get formal but a jacket and nice slacks would not be out of place. This is what French Creole cuisine is all about. You could likely walk here but, given the heat, you may just want a cab. It is located around the middle of the French Quarter.

Commander’s Palace – 1403 Washington Avenue (Garden District) - http://www.commanderspalace.com
Few restaurants embody the spirit of this city better than Commander’s. A local landmark since 1893, its reputation for the past 42 years has been built by the sure taste and steady hands of America’s First Lady of Hospitality, Ella Brennen, and her family. Haute Creole Cuisine lives here and what a wonderful home. Generations of New Orleanians have been coming here to celebrate occasions both special – birthdays, anniversaries, family reunions, and ordinary – a long lunch, TGIF, tonight’s dinner. This is also the birthplace of the Jazz Brunch and there is certainly no finer place to experience the sheer secular joy of Sunday morning coming down. Damn the Mimosas, full speed ahead. Jackets are preferred and jeans are discouraged - a small request in exchange for a seat in paradise.
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CASUAL BUT STILL Upscale
There are a number of places in the city that would fall into this classification – wonderful atmosphere, great service, excellent food from renowned chefs – but presented in an informal setting.

Compere Lapin – 535 Tchoupitoulas Street (Warehouse Arts District) - http://comperelapin.com/
This is one of the hottest new places in the city and is set inside The Old No. 77 Hotel & Chandlery. Chef Nina Compton has been making a very big name for herself introducing the city to her native cuisine from St Lucia. It is hardly a traditional menu but she is definitely making things that you will want to put in your mouth. (By the way, the street is pronounced “chop-a-too-luss”.)

Upperline – 1413 Upperline Street (Garden District) – http://upperline.com
For many years, Upperline has been a bastion of true old-line Creole fare. The turtle soup is legendary but it is difficult to go wrong with anything on the menu. This would be a cab ride (though you could take the St Charles streetcar, get off at Bordeaux and walk a block and a half.

Atchafalaya – 901 Louisiana Avenue (Lower Garden District – Touro neighborhood) - http://www.atchafalayarestaurant.com/
The roots of this restaurant go back to the 1920’s but the current owners bought and renamed it in 2008 (pronounced “at-cha-fa-ly-ya”). Great (!) place for brunch Thursday through Monday but equally good for dinner any night of the week. Very popular with locals so reservations are strongly recommended. The cuisine would be considered contemporary Creole with a spicy dash of Cajun. Wonderful wonderful wonderful. Highly recommended.

This is a relative new comer to the scene but it has certainly made a splash. New Orleans manages to turn almost everything into a hybrid cuisine – French-Creole, German-Creole, Greek-Creole, Thai-Creole (seriously) - and Avo is a great example of Italian-Creole. Fun place, great food. The location, by the way, would be a cab ride but traveling up Magazine Street is one of the most fun things you can do in NOLA. The street follows the river all the way from downtown off Canal up to Audubon Park and is lined from one end to the other with amazing restaurants, bars, bistro and the greatest concentration of antique shops in the world. For a fun day excursion, take a cab up to Jackson and Magazine (stop in at District Donuts) and then just start walking up Magazine until you can’t go any more...then take a cab back to your hotel and start planning dinner.) Better yet, time it so that you can have dinner at Casamento’s (http://www.casamientosrestaurant.com/main/main.html), one of the great oyster houses nurturing New Orleanians for decades.

CASUAL AND/OR Funky
Ok, so this may be my favorite type of restaurant in N’Awlins. It’s all about the food with unique atmosphere thrown in for free. Here is a smattering of suggestions:

Camellia Grill – 626 South Carrolton (Riverbend) – No website
The best thing I can do is quote from Wikipedia, “The Camellia Grill is a landmark diner in the Carrollton section of New Orleans. It is on Carrollton Avenue near its intersection with St. Charles Avenue on the St. Charles Streetcar line. The Camellia Grill opened in 1946. Despite suffering little physical damage, the restaurant was closed after Hurricane Katrina until April 2007, when it reopened under new ownership. During this period of closure, the Camellia Grill’s front door was festooned with hundreds of notes from locals and tourists who missed it. The restaurant only offers counter service and its staff is usually gregarious. It is well known for its long-serving waiters, the most famous of whom was probably Harry Tervalon, Sr., who was the first waiter hired in 1946, and who even after his 1996 retirement remained associated with the restaurant (including cutting the ribbon when the Grill finally reopened after Katrina), until his death in August 2007.”

If I still lived in New Orleans, I would find a way to eat breakfast (or lunch) at Camellia at least once or twice a week. I knew Mr. Harry for many years, just as did thousands of other New Orleanians, and he was just one of dozens of characters in that city that were legendary. You definitely want an omelet though the sandwiches are great, as well. And you absolutely have to order a freeze (any flavor) with a double scoop of vanilla. The best way to get there is to take the St Charles streetcar and get off when it turns the corner onto Carrollton Avenue. The Grill is right there across the street.
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This sandwich shop is next door to Cochon which is another upscale restaurant from Donald Link just a couple blocks up from The Old No. 77 Hotel & Chandlery. Fantastic place to grab lunch. Great sandwiches.

Port of Call – 838 Esplanade Avenue (French Quarter) - http://portofcallnola.com/
OMG, if those walls could talk. The place has been around since the 60's and hasn't changed one bit in all that time. Throughout the years I lived there, I would end up in the PoC at least a couple nights a week. I say “nights”, but since the bars don’t close, it would probably be more accurate to say “mornings”. “Extremely casual” is the best description but, trust me on this one, your life will be changed by the burger. I can’t tell you what the hell they do to make it so good but it is beef crack. Do not be distracted by anything else on the menu – order the Mushroom Cheeseburger and the baked potato (loaded). If there are two or more of you (or if you’re just feeling hungry) get a Schooner Salad w/Blue Cheese. They have their own specialty drinks but a cold beer (order a local Abita) is all you need. Esplanade is the last street in the French Quarter but, if you’re not staying down in the Faubourg, you still should walk down there. It is the quiet end of the Quarter and very easy to imagine yourself living there.

Elizabeth’s – 601 Gallier Street (Bywater) - http://www.elizabethsrestaurantnola.com/index.html
This is what small, local neighborhood dining is all about. The food is pure New Orleans – down home, country, southern, creole. The amazing thing is, there are several dozen places around the city that could be described in almost identical language. I just happen to be particularly fond of this one and going there is a good way to see another NOLA neighborhood. Unless you’re staying down around the Faubourg, you’ll want to take a cab because it would be a bit of a hike but you might also get spooked by the neighborhood. You shouldn’t (though there are most definitely places not to venture around the city) but you don’t live there so you don’t know that. Bywater is an area in transition (though far further along than when I lived there). It still looks a bit rough to non-locals but, if you were to feel uncomfortable, I would feel bad, so I recommend a cab.

Willie Mae’s Scotch House – 2401 St Ann Street (Treme neighborhood) - http://www.williemaesnola.com/
Since 1957 Willie Mae’s has been serving fried chicken to die for. Treme is one of numerous black neighborhoods in the city but, these days, perhaps the most well-known thanks to the television series of the same name and the sheer number of world class musicians who call those few blocks home. You will want to take a cab there and back but you need not be concerned with being there. Get (at least) the red beans & rice, green beans and the fried okra for side dishes and definitely check out the bread pudding for dessert. This is southern soul food at its finest. Being totally honest, I was late in becoming a devotee of Willie Mae’s but it was only because of my eternal devotion to the late, great Austin Leslie’s soul palace, Chez Helene. (It should tell you a lot that Chez closed close to 35 years ago yet most folks in New Orleans could tell you about the menu as if they just went there yesterday.)

Booty’s Street Food – 800 Louisa Street (Bywater) - http://bootysnola.com/
Booty’s is a great example of what happens when you cross street food sensibilities with a NOLA esthetic. I don’t know what the hell it is but I like it. Bring open taste buds and an empty stomach. Now we’re havin’ fun, for sure.
PLACES YOU MUST GO

Sometimes in life, we make decisions that we later regret and sometimes we don't know to regret them until someone else points it out. That's what I'm doing here; I'm saving you a lifetime of regret but only if you pay attention. Don't ask questions about these...just go. You can thank me later.

**Pascal's Manale Restaurant** – 1838 Napoleon Avenue (Freret neighborhood [pronounced Fir-ret]) - http://pascalsmanale.com/
Originally opened in 1913, Pascal's Manale is a cornerstone of local N'awlins cuisine and, more specifically, Italian-Creole goodness. It is not only the genesis of NOLA's BBQ Shrimp (!!!) but a true keeper of the flame for such dishes as the Seafood Pan Roast, Chicken Bordelaise, Italian Olive Salad, Shrimp & Crabmeat Remoulade, Oysters Rockefeller & Bienville, Bread Pudding. OMG, it is impossible to go wrong with anything on the menu most of which hasn't changed over the past 100 years. While I could easily list a dozen other foundational restaurants, Pascal's Manale is as good a way as any to experience the true heart of New Orleans food - no pretensions, no gimmicks, just damn good food. Get in a cab and go...just do it.

**Dooky Chase's Restaurant** – 2301 Orleans Avenue (Treme) - http://www.dookychaserestaurant.com/
Since first coming on board in 1946, Chef Leah Chase has earned the sobriquet "Queen of Creole Cuisine" with every dish served at this legendary dining establishment. At the age of 93 she may be moving a little bit slower but that hasn't stopped her exercising a sure hand in serving definitive versions of dozens of creole classics. Closed for two years following Hurricane Katrina, the restaurant came back stronger than ever and the whole city rejoiced. While it can be difficult to get reservations for the special menu served on Friday nights, there is an amazing buffet (11:00am to 3:00pm Tuesdays through Friday) that really is the best way to discover authentic Creole. This is why God made New Orleans.