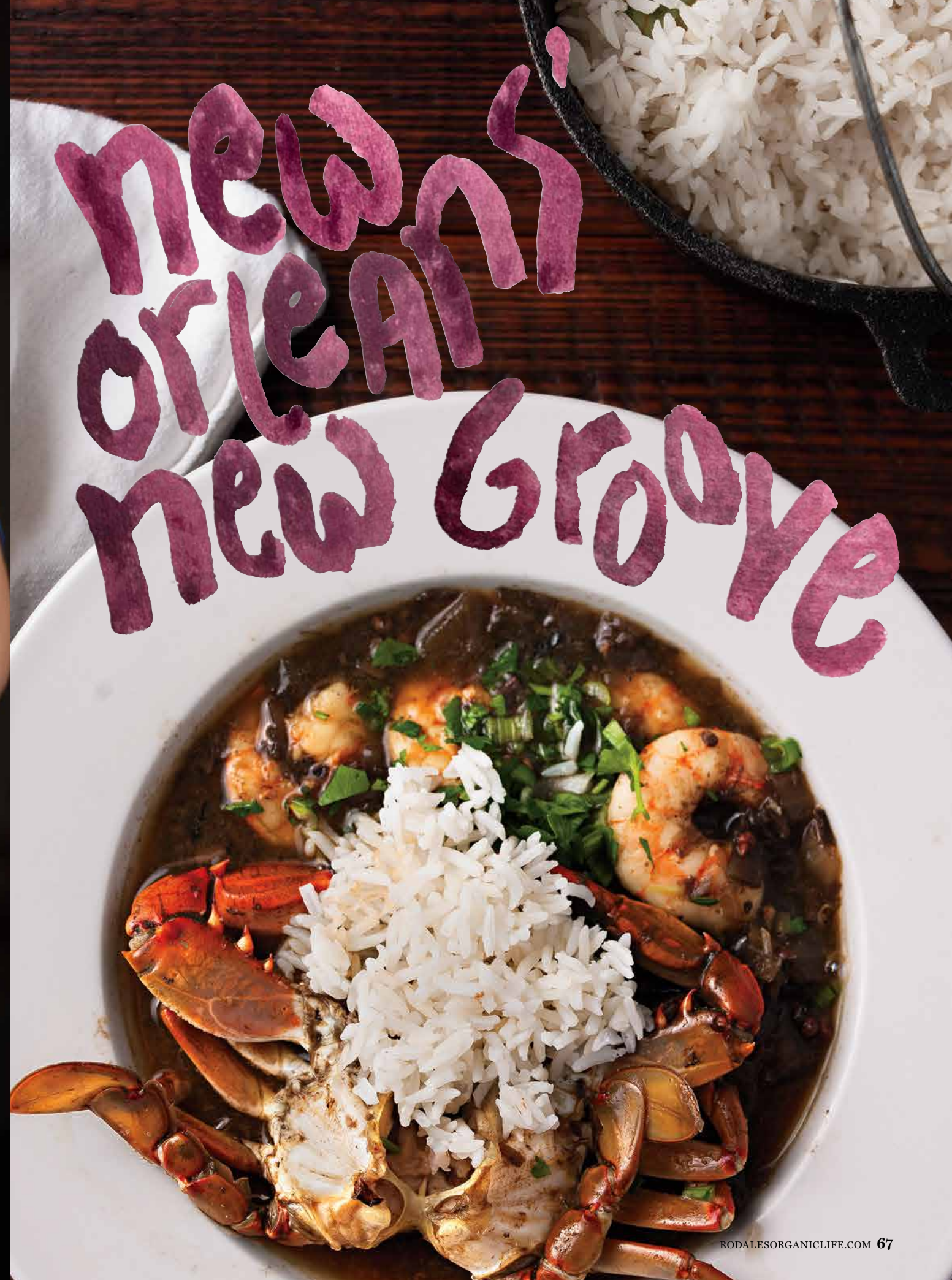


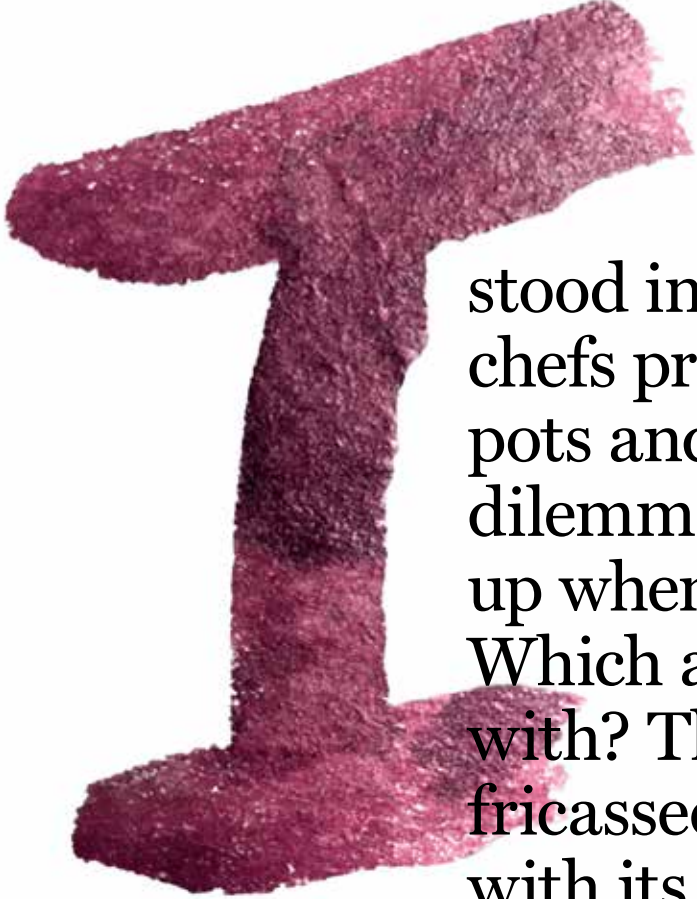
Flower farmer Megan McHugh, of Pistil & Stamen, shows off her passion for growing. Facing page: Mosquito Supper Club's shrimp and crab gumbo.

A decade after Hurricane Katrina, the Crescent City has come back more vibrant than ever, thanks to organic growers and chefs hell-bent on building a sustainable future

STORY BY BETSY ANDREWS PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES OWENS

new orleans
new Groove





stood in the middle of a dozen chefs presiding over grills and pots and pondered one of the dilemmas that only comes up when I'm in New Orleans: Which amazing dish do I start with? There was the backbone fricassee. It sure looked good with its deep, dark roux and rich stock. And the boudin sausage filled with rice, liver,

and shoulder meat. How about that crazy pig's stomach? It was stuffed with pork scraps, and someone was browning it in a pan. And there were cracklings frying, and ribs being barbecued. It was the finale of a Slow Food New Orleans festival, and the city's cooks were throwing an old-fashioned Cajun feast. On that sunny March afternoon under a local farm's cypress trees, the one thing I knew for sure was that I would try it all. As a trio of musicians struck up some zydeco music, I sauntered to the station manned by Isaac Toups, chef-owner of the restaurant Toups' Meatery, and asked him what he was stirring. "Liver, heart, kidney, cheek, tongue, garlic-and-paprika broth, pork stock, and black-eyed peas," he said. "We're gonna pour it over raw tenderloin, like a pho, and cook it à la minute in your bowl. Is it traditional? Absolutely not. I'm making it up as I go."

This was a surprising admission from a native of a region with a cuisine more iconic than just about any other. Rich and porky in multiple ways, Toups' stew, of course, turned out to be delicious. But it wasn't the New Orleans cooking I knew. Ever since my first visit when I was 14, I had adored this town—its infectious music, its garrulous citizens, and, most of all, its old-school cuisine. It wasn't exactly healthy eating. Little of it was organic, let alone fresh or local. But I loved those rich gumbos, fried-seafood po'boys, and creamy, spicy Creole sauces. So in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city, I moved down for the winter,



New Orleans chef Ryan Hughes with Gulf of Mexico red snapper at a Slow Food event.



volunteering as a prep cook to help some of my favorite restaurants recover. It was a gut-wrenching time (one I wrote about in a blog, “On the Line in New Orleans”), and I’d only briefly returned since.

Until this year, that is. After Katrina’s 10-year anniversary, I felt the urge to see for myself what had changed. I knew that a wave of newcomers had arrived, replacing those pushed out by the storm—particularly African Americans, whose presence had decreased by more than 95,000 since 2000. I wanted to know how, if at all, these post-storm New Orleanians were paying tradition forward. Some fresh faces had opened restaurants, and the next generation of local chefs had come of age. Had the city’s marvelous cuisine remained intact, or had it been irretrievably altered?

What I found over a two-week exploration was more complicated, and more positive, than I had anticipated. There are lots of newfangled restaurants in New Orleans, and many of them—headline-grabbing places like the James Beard Award-winning Shaya, lauded for its Israeli menu—are serving food that was once unheard of here. But many of the upstarts are supporting Louisiana food producers with assiduous local sourcing. The most interesting of them are transforming the way the city eats by tapping into its history. And the people who stayed, no matter their ethnic backgrounds, are bringing new energy and inspiration to the city’s culinary traditions. New Orleans is still battered by weather, inequality, and other hardships. But the food is fresher, more local, and more sustainable than ever before.

The pork fest I attended was courtesy of Toby Rodriguez, an expert at the *boucherie*, the Cajun art of breaking down a pig. As a crowd looked on, Rodriguez had gently fed the animal a handful of grain and, after a friend said the Lord’s Prayer, fired a bullet between its eyes. Then he butchered it, doling out cuts to chefs. “Shoulder!” he cried out, carving with exactness. “Barbecue!” The entire production was a re-creation of a workday from Rodriguez’s youth in Poche Bridge, Louisiana. “Whoever helped left with something,” he explained. Each dish they made answered the question, How can we stretch the meat to feed our family for the longest time?

But this *boucherie* was also a creative new way to promote a tradition of sustainable eating. Rodriguez, in a salt-and-pepper beard and baseball cap, said he turned his heritage into a business, Lâche Pas Boucherie et Cuisine, after he realized that many people had never seen an animal die for their supper. “I saw how disconnected people are from that food source,” he said. “I have a little girl, and I felt it was my responsibility to leave her a legacy. People used to do this to preserve meat. Now we do it to preserve culture.”

Whole-animal butchery is one of the new-old practices gaining a foothold here. Once confined to rural Louisiana, the *boucherie* now appears in a variety of city storefronts offering local, high-quality cuts. At Cochon Butcher, a sandwich spot and *boucherie*, chefs Donald Link and Stephen Stryjewski process animals for all five of their New Orleans restaurants. At the new Shank Charcuterie in Marigny, owner Kristopher Doll fills his butcher case and turns out dishes like tender pulled-pork sliders with meat from whole hogs he buys from nearby Chappapeela Farms.

Four years ago, Chappapeela’s Louis and Rebecca Lirette started raising pigs humanely—no hormones, no antibiotics, no cages—to meet the growing demand from local chefs, who buy them not just because the animals lived happier lives but also because the meat tastes better. When Justin Devillier, chef-owner of uptown’s La Petite Grocery and the two-year-old Balise in the Warehouse District, first moved to New Orleans from California in 2003, he had to have most high-quality ingredients flown in. Younger chefs like him began campaigning for better local product. “It took a while to convince a lot of the bigger restaurants that could support the farms to get involved.”

That dedication to Louisiana ingredients helps protect ways of life here, perhaps nowhere more so than in the Cajun country that spiders out into the bayou south of New Orleans. I dined one night at Mosquito Supper Club, a two-year-old pop-up then housed in an 18th-century French Quarter building. Owner Melissa Martin, petite but fierce, stood surrounded by art by a local swamp painter and explained her mission to 24 guests at communal tables. “I grew up in Chauvin, Louisiana,” she said. “There’s hardly any land left there. That’s why it’s so important for me to share this food, because we’re holding on for dear life.”

Her staff served *boulettes*—seasoned fritters—held

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Neighborhood kids kick it in front of the whole-animal butcher and café Shank Charcuterie, in the Marigny.

NOLA's Freshest Restaurants

There are over 1,400 restaurants here, up from 800 pre-Katrina. Growth has brought diversity and local, sustainable sourcing, including at:

AUGUST Chappapeela pork, Belle River crawfish—John Besh's French Creole flagship highlights Louisiana's best. restaurantaugust.com

BALISE Find locavore crowd-pleasers like cornmeal Gulf sheephead and pickled quail eggs (see page 92 for a recipe). balisenola.com

BAYONA Chef Susan Spicer has been supporting local farmers since 1990. bayona.com

COCHON BUTCHER Crews break down whole hogs at Donald Link and Stephen Stryjewski's *boucherie*, behind Cochon. cochonbutcher.com

CARMO NOLA's greenest restaurant serves a pan-tropics menu heavy on seafood and veggies. cafecarmo.com

COMPÈRE LAPIN St. Lucian chef Nina Comp-ton brings an haute-Caribbean touch to NOLA ingredients. comperelapin.com

COQUETTE Paradigm Gardens supplies produce for dishes like fairytale eggplant with farro piccolo and chanterelles. coquettenola.com

GW FINS The invasive lionfish in your ceviche here may have been speared by chef Tenney Flynn himself. gwfins.com

HERBSAINT Creole-Italian dishes are made with local ingredients sourced by Link Group forager Ashley Locklear. herbsaint.com

KILLER POBOYS This shop slays with sandwich twists like roasted sweet potato with black-eyed pea and pecan spread. killerpoboy.com

L'ENFANT TERRIBLE Devour inspired vegetables and offbeat snacks at this roving pop-up. facebook.com/enfantterriblenola

MEAUXBAR Market-driven dishes include seared scallops with butternut gratin, turnips, and bacon vinaigrette. meauxbar.com

MOPHO Southeast Asian meets Cajun at this modern pho shop, a paean to NOLA's longtime Vietnamese community. mophonola.com

MOSQUITO SUPPER CLUB Melissa Martin feeds you gumbo and bayou Cajun culture at this weekly pop-up. mosquitosupperclub.com

PIZZA DOMENICA Wood-fired pies get topped with ingredients like beets, Brussels sprouts, and carrots. pizzadomenica.com

SHANK CHARCUTERIE Whole-hog butchery yields fresh cuts and dishes. shankcharcuterie.com

SHAYA The fresh-market Israeli cuisine speaks to NOLA's evolving palate. shayarestaurant.com

TOUPS' MEATERY The nose-to-tail pleasures here include lamb neck with black-eyed pea ragout. touspsmeatery.com



Butcher Toby Rodriguez of Lâche Pas Boucherie et Cuisine. Facing page: L'Enfant Terrible's blackened cucumber and roast turnips.

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together by ground shrimp; a bitter greens salad dotted with satsumas, Louisiana's flavor-bomb mandarins; gumbo chockful of shrimp and crabs, its heft and chocolate hue thanks not to the roux most chefs use but to okra "smothered," or braised, for nearly a day. These family recipes, made with a few impeccable ingredients, represented bayou cuisine at its purest, and Martin was out to save them. Her hometown is a casualty of the oil industry that has carved miles of canals into the wetlands, unleashing Gulf of Mexico waters that swallow a football-field-sized chunk of ground every hour. Those incursions go hand in hand with manmade catastrophes like the 2010 explosion of the *Deepwater Horizon* rig, which dumped 130 million gallons of oil into the Gulf, decimating its seafood stocks.

Competition from cheaper fisheries is nearly as worrying as the environmental woes. Martin grew up in a family of shrimpers, oystermen, crabbers, and trappers, so she sources many ingredients from relatives. "I don't serve seafood," she told me, "unless I know the people behind it." It was a tacit criticism of the restaurants here that use the imports that, last year, caused a drop of about 65 percent in shrimpers' revenue, according to the Louisiana Shrimp Association.

But if the people working the waters are under duress, Lance Nacio is evidence that they're also finding new ways to make Gulf fishing successful. I met this third-generation shrimper at the Slow Food fest, where I sampled his sweet, plump catch. A few days later, he invited me to partake in one of my favorite seasonal rituals here, a crawfish boil, at his home on the bayou in Montegut. As the sun glinted on the rigging of his boat docked across the causeway, the goateed Nacio presided over a propane-fueled boil tub. The "bugs" in it had been raised in ponds just down the road, a hyperlocal harvest.

They took all of 6 minutes to cook. Nacio dumped them, with potatoes, onions, and whole heads of garlic that had stewed in the spicy boil, onto folding tables covered in butcher paper. As we dug in, Nacio told me about the gear he bought with low-interest federal loans available after Katrina and the *Deepwater Horizon* spill. "We have a modified turtle-excluder device to get rid of sharks or rays, as well as turtles," he said. "We use a fisheye bycatch-reduction device to allow top-swimming fin fish to find a way out. We pull 1¾-inch tail bags so we can let out little fish."

If none of this seems to be about catching shrimp, that's

because it wasn't. It was about releasing unwanted fish. Sixty-two percent of what the region's shrimp trawlers net is other species, which is a problem for the Gulf's overall health. Nacio's smarter gear has reduced his bycatch by 10 percent, which enhances what he pulls in. "There's less sorting time and less bycatch eating up the shrimp, and we get a better price," he said. This is good for business and, in turn, for his way of life. "We want our kids to fish, so we need to be good stewards of the environment," he said. "I grew up off the resources of southern Louisiana. You gotta protect those resources because you want them to be around year after year."

The plate Dana Honn laid in front of me did not scan as a New Orleans dish. It held slices of raw fish drizzled in yellow chile sauce and finished with organic sprouts. But Honn made a compelling case that this dish, a Peruvian *tiradito*, belongs in a new New Orleans as much as any bowl of jambalaya. He and his wife, Christina, run the state's only 3-star-green-certified restaurant, Carmo, in a colorful Warehouse District space decorated in block prints of local fish and art by New Orleans schoolchildren. Dana, who is from Kansas, and Christina, a native Brazilian, opened the restaurant in 2010 with a dual purpose: to showcase the cuisines of Earth's tropical zones, and to do it sustainably. In the past, it would've been tough for a café serving Burmese tea leaf salad and Brazilian *moqueca* to make it here. But as the history-minded Honns explain to diners, their cuisine fits in. "New Orleans is a gateway to the tropics in this hemisphere," says Dana. "By 1810, nearly half the city was Haitian, so what does that mean to what we eat now?" When Carmo served the Haitian New Year's soup *joumou* one January, a woman who had just ordered a bowl approached him with tears in her eyes. "You gave me the opportunity to do something so important to me," she said.

The Honns' other goal—sustainability—has become easier as chefs and producers have banded together to protect fragile resources. As part of this effort, they're cooking bycatch, demonstrating that seafood that has historically been discarded is, in fact, good to eat. The slices of butter-soft raw fish in my *tiradito* were puppy drum, a Gulf species that had gotten trapped in Lance Nacio's

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Clockwise from top left: Herbsaint's seasonal greens; Carmo; a harvest at VEGGI Farmers Cooperative; Beverly Curry at St. Augustine; Chappapeela pork at August; Grow Dat Youth Farm's Dennie Butler; Tony Accardo's produce; Jenga Mwendo and Andre Brown of the Backyard Gardeners Network; Mosquito Supper Club's strawberry pies.





Queen Mary Kay Stevenson of the Wild Tchoupitoulas Indian Tribe struts her stuff on Super Sunday.

nets. The Honns donate a dollar from every order to the Gulf Restoration Network, an environmental group whose work supports local marine populations. Their café exemplifies a theme I kept seeing here in action: It's no longer enough that the food tastes good; it has to do some good for the city, too.

One afternoon I stopped by Guerrilla Garden, in the Lower Ninth Ward. Jenga Mwendo and her teen interns were hosting a get-together on the lush corner property, sharing home-cooked food from a trellised outdoor kitchen and handing out just-harvested collards. Mwendo, tall and soft-spoken, was born in this area of black-owned homes, which is isolated by the Industrial Canal, a manmade waterway that links the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain. She was living in New York when Katrina burst the levee, submerging the ward. New Orleans had long been dotted with underdeveloped neighborhoods. The cataclysm upped the number of vacant lots to 66,000.

"I couldn't watch my city drown on TV and complain if I wasn't there," said Mwendo. So she came home and founded the Backyard Gardeners Network, launching two gardens that anchor shared plots, "food as medicine" workshops, and kids' programs. Her efforts bring fresh food to an area where there was little. Now she's studying sustainable real estate development at Tulane University. The Lower Ninth needs a grocery store badly, and she'd like to see one owned by the people who live there. "But we also can support ourselves by growing food and sharing it," she said. "Our grandparents always had something growing. It's a cultural tradition of self-reliance."

Guerrilla Garden is one of dozens of gardens of organic edibles and flowers that have sprouted in the empty lots left by Katrina, forming a burgeoning network of urban farms. There's VEGGI Farmers Cooperative, which employs Vietnamese shrimpers put out of work by the oil spill; Grow Dat Youth Farm, where teens learn to plant; Vintage Garden Farm, which trains developmentally disabled growers; and Pistil & Stamen, one of a group of urban farmer florists. They all feed an ever-increasing appetite for homegrown, largely organic products. A dozen years ago, only a handful of chefs sought fresh-market ingredients. No longer.

To gain access to the best local produce, Donald Link and Stephen Stryjewski even hired a full-time forager. I took a ride one morning with the Link Group's Ashley Locklear to the Northshore area along Lake Ponchartrain. We found farmers Carolyn and C.C. Gaiennie tending their 8 organic

acres at Market Lane Farm. The place was bursting with arugula, mint, rosemary, and leeks. The abundance was hard earned, C.C. assured me. "Man, can we grow weeds!" he said.

Despite all the newness, though, there are some New Orleans traditions that don't need tweaking. I timed my visit to coincide with a ritual brought by Italians in the late 1800s to honor Saint Joseph, who protected Sicily from famine. All over town, homes and businesses erect food-filled altars and welcome visitors to partake. At St. Augustine Catholic Church, in the Treme, I chatted with Beverly Curry, who watched over a vast display of cookies and cross-shaped breads. A 175-year-old institution with a historic black following, the Katrina-ravaged St. Augustine faced demolition in 2005, but its elderly congregants put their bodies in front of the bulldozers. "I slept outside for 14 days on metal chairs," Curry told me. "I was so sore. But they let us keep the church."

Super Sunday is right around St. Joseph's Day. This is when Mardi Gras Indians take to uptown streets to hold mock battles in hand-beaded, feathered regalia. Barred in the old days from Carnival's revelry, black New Orleanians created their own event, masking as Native Americans to honor and emulate their resilience. It's a powerful assertion of community and culture.

This being New Orleans, it's also a huge, mobile party. After hours of dancing behind Indians and brass bands—interspersed with NOLA-style celebratory drinking—I was famished. So I stopped at Molly's at the Market. The Quarter pub is known for frozen Irish coffees, but I was there for vegetables. I had met chef Matthew Kopfler at the Crescent City Farmers Market, where he was buying organic heirlooms from fourth-generation farmer Tony Accardo. Kopfler's pop-up, L'Enfant Terrible, was now in residence at Molly's. He served dishes like roast turnips, charred carrots, and a spice-coated, pan-seared "blackened" cucumber. "Ten years ago, someone would have beat the shit out of me for serving that," he said. "But the way the tide's going in New Orleans, if you're having a drinking night, this food makes you feel good."

He was right. I ate thinking about continuity and change. The cuisine I loved wasn't gone. It was evolving, like the city, to handle whatever came next. That would include many more visitors like me. As always, and now more than ever before, New Orleans would feed us superbly. ♣

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