



IN GOOD COMPANY

BY JENNIFER STEWART KORNEĀAY



MELISSA MARTIN SERVES CAJUN CLASSICS
WITH A SIDE OF COMMUNITY AND CONVERSATION
AT HER WEEKLY SUPPER CLUB

“IT’S JUST HANGING ON. THERE’S NOT MUCH TIME LEFT before it disappears.” Melissa Martin points to a lacy swath of pale green land fanned out over the blue of Gulf waters, dangling from the bottom of Louisiana on a map. The outline of a heart encircles one portion of it, holding her home, Chauvin, in its hand-drawn, black-marker borders. “And with it, my food upbringing, which is what made me who I am, is disappearing too. That’s what this is for,” she says.

“This” is the Mosquito Supper Club, a once-weekly dinner series the chef hosts in New Orleans that invites guests to a yellow Creole cottage just outside the Garden District to enjoy a multi-course Cajun meal. But she gives diners more than shrimp roulettes and crawfish pie to chew on. Each evening also opens a doorway into Martin’s heart and mind.

“I grew up eating the food I serve at supper club, but I never cooked it myself until I left,” she says. “At some point, it just became so important that I learn it and preserve it, so I called my aunts, my mom, my grandmother and asked them a thousand questions about how they made these things. I kept working with their recipes and their advice until I recreated the smells and flavors I remember.”

Standing in the kitchen the morning after an event, she divides her attention between outlining the supper club’s origins and tending to a tall metal pot of sticky amber mash on the stove, turning an earnest, blue-eyed gaze to check the last of summer’s peaches as they melt down into a rosemary-spiked jam.

Martin’s disarming intensity has cut a clear path through her life so far. Growing up part of a close-knit, extended family of shrimpers, oystermen, crabbers, and “amazing women” (including her mom, grandmother, and five aunts) on Chauvin’s Bayou Petit Caillou, she never left the area until she went to college. There, the first time she saw a bagel, she thought it was someone’s failed attempt at a donut. “I was pretty sheltered,” she says.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARIANNA MASSEY

A woman with long, wavy hair, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and a light-colored apron, is standing in a kitchen. She is leaning over a wooden table, using a red-handled spoon to mix a large tray of food. The food appears to be a mixture of crawfish, vegetables, and other ingredients. The kitchen is dimly lit, with light coming from a window in the background. A vase with pink flowers is visible on a counter behind her. The overall atmosphere is warm and focused on the culinary activity.

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MARTIN MAKES THE MOST OF CRAWFISH SEASON, SOMETIMES SERVING THE CRUSTACEANS IN HER RICH CRAWFISH PIES. **OPPOSITE FROM TOP:** THE CHEF TAKES A BREAK; CHEZ MOSQUITO SUPPER CLUB.



After graduating from Loyola University in New Orleans, Martin went to California to study wine-making and ended up cooking in several restaurants in Napa Valley. “The chefs there, they lived and cooked by the seasons,” she says. “I realized that is exactly how I grew up. I knew then I wanted to really get into the food industry and be a part of creating and promoting sustainable food systems.”

She came back south, to New Orleans, worked in several restaurants, and then became executive chef at Café Hope, a program that equips at-risk youth with the valuable skills earned in a restaurant kitchen by teaching them to cook and to farm. “I was there three years, and it was hard to leave, but it was time for something else,” she says.

The specifics of “something else” eluded her for weeks, until one day, after binge-watching television in an effort to clear her mind, it came to her: cook the food from her childhood for small groups with carefully chosen ingredients. “Amazingly, there are not that many places here doing Cajun food, not the real stuff,” she says. In April 2014, she created her “little Cajun supper club” and dubbed it Mosquito because, “there are many different versions of Cajun, but we all have mosquitos in common.”

The supper club holds its dinners on Thursday nights September through May, beginning at 7:30

on the back patio with cocktails and a starter—if you’re lucky, it’s fat, freshly-shucked oysters from Martin’s other business, the Curious Oyster Co. raw bar. With each evening limited to twenty-four guests, there’s a semi-forced intimacy that, half a drink in, becomes natural. Under Christmas lights draped over bushes and strung between magnolias, folks begin introductions, swapping names and “where you from?” (and passing around a can of bug spray to ward off the event’s namesake).

Often, up to half the group is not native. Tourists are finding their way here; a few have become regulars, making the supper club a “must-do” every time they visit New Orleans. When Ellen Durand, Martin’s right-hand, pops her head out the back door, there’s a lull in the chatter. “Dinner time! The rolls are hot, and hot rolls wait for no one!” she shouts. Guests scurry up the steps in a Pavlovian response to the memory of a mother’s call and find their spot on the benches pulled up to two whitewashed wooden tables, each set for twelve.

An apron-clad Martin brings out the piping-hot bread and encourages the addition of butter sweetened with Steen’s cane syrup before ducking back into the kitchen. What follows changes every month, but the menu always has an emphasis on Martin’s Cajun dishes—her spins on her family’s bayou basics—built on local, seasonal ingredients at their peak. And while “Cajun” may be a catchall for lots of food found in and around New Orleans, Martin’s interpretation of the cuisine is highly personal.





FRESHLY-SHUCKED LOUISIANA OYSTERS OFTEN MAKE THE MENU AT MOSQUITO SUPPER CLUB. **OPPOSITE FROM TOP:** A GUEST SPINS A RECORD FROM MARTIN'S COLLECTION; SHUCKING AN OYSTER; DINNER IS SERVED FAMILY-STYLE.

“I’m always looking forward to seeing the guests’ smiles, seeing them comfortable and settled into the experience. But what I really want, what I hope, is that they leave with an understanding that with the food I’m putting out, I’m sharing a piece of a specific place and of myself.”

“Melissa and I are different kinds of Cajuns,” Durand says. “I’m from central Louisiana. But we all love good food made by good people.” She serves as waitress and guide during supper club dinners, explaining the food and a bit of Martin’s philosophy. “You’re supporting a lot of farmers and their families by being here,” she says. And, “yes, go ahead and put the gumbo over the rest of your potato salad. That’s how we do it.”

The connection between guests continues to strengthen as bowls, platters, and—if garlic crabs are on the menu—a communal shell cracker, are passed around. A different amateur DJ attends to a record player in the front room each week; without fail, at least one guest pauses mid-meal to peruse the vinyl selection (ranging from David Bowie to zydeco artist Rockin’ Sidney) and pick a new disc to spin.

At the end of the night, when Martin brings out dessert, she stays out and tells the story behind the meal, which is simply a chapter in her own. Her presence in the small space outweighs her petite frame and slim figure as she talks about the simple abundance she was raised on. “We had so much seafood, and so many crabs, we’d have them for breakfast. I thought that was normal,” she says.

One of her most popular desserts, strawberry-soda-infused Pop Rouge ice cream, is based on the treat she and her family sold at their ice cream stand during the annual (now defunct) Lagniappe on the Bayou festival. “I’m really serving my childhood here. It was so basic, but so good. I think the simplest food is the best food,” she says. With a heartfelt “thanks for coming,” the event is officially over, but a few guests hang around, finishing the bottles of wine they brought (the supper club is BYOB), and peppering Martin with questions that she happily answers.

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But eating is the vehicle for effective delivery of her message, and Martin’s energy spikes when she talks about the foundations of her food. “I’m pretty obsessed with ingredients, their source and seasonality,”





MARTIN'S VERSION OF GUMBO IS A SAVORY STEW LADEN WITH LOCAL SHRIMP.



Martin's taking locavore to a new level, serving not just Louisiana shrimp but shrimp her cousin caught from one stretch of water in one bayou, "where the best, sweetest shrimp come from."

she says. "Kinda insane about them, really. When I put a dish out, I want to see every person who contributed to it—the farmer, the baker, the fisherman, the butcher."

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Sourcing so hyper-local means tuning into Mother Nature's rhythms. Amid the indulgence New Orleans is known for, Martin preaches restraint. Her message isn't about teetotaling or portion control, but timing. "We need to learn to let food go when its time is over, and to enjoy fully the next thing coming in season," she says.

It's a concept that's in her blood and was pressed into her head every hour she spent cutting okra, peeling and "headlessing" shrimp, and canning blackberries alongside her family in Chauvin. "I've spent so much time talking to them, taking down not just their recipes and methods, but the memories associated with them, and what I've found is this thread of connection in the traditions. And a loss of culinary culture and identity that's happening everywhere. It's not just about me and my family and one place."

Yet Mosquito Supper Club is rooted in one place: a tiny sliver of solid ground, a low, flat land being swallowed by the water that is its life, but will also be its death, a home Martin returns to every Sunday she's able to have a meal made by her mother's and aunts' hands. Holding on to it all the only way she knows how is her driving force. "You can dwell on the negative, or you can turn it around and shine a light on what is beautiful, what is left, and illuminate and save that," she says. "That's what I'm trying to do."