

bon appetit

5 Ways to Use Pumpkin



Pumpkin-Walnut Flapjacks



Pumpkin Shrimp Curry



Spiced Pumpkin Salad



Spiced Pumpkin Layer Cake



Pumpkin Soup with Gruyere

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The Capital of Cajun Country: Lafayette, Louisiana Travel Guide

In Lafayette, Louisiana, a new batch of homegrown chefs is digging deep into the region's robust culinary roots. The payoff is rich for traditionalists and trend-seekers alike

BY Brett Martin

PHOTOGRAPH BY Tara Donne

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Duos Cajun Corner

It's long been one of the South's great stomach-stretching pleasures to eat outside of Lafayette in South-Central Louisiana, to burn a tank of gas or two zigzagging through Cajun country. Maybe in search of the ultimate link of boudin (that pale, ricey, spicy sausage that's debated here with ferocity) or to down plump gulf oysters at Shucks! in Abbeville. Or, perhaps, to tuck into mounds of rice topped with pork backbone stew at Poche's Market & Restaurant in Breaux Bridge.

But, for all that, Lafayette itself—a city of 120,000 about a two-and-half-hour drive from New Orleans—has held less culinary allure. Sure, there are local spots like T-Coon's, which on Mondays offers rabbit smothered in thick peppery gravy, and The Original Don's Downtown, a fry-heavy seafood house, which serves a fine, clay-colored crawfish bisque. But, as a friend born and bred there told me, "A lot of times,

it's a Chili's kind of town."

That is changing. In the past few years, a wave of new eating has rippled through Lafayette—propelled largely by chefs and entrepreneurs returning home and finding a bevy of sophisticated mouths to feed. At Pamplona, a tapas restaurant, there's a rack of artisanal bitters perched behind the bar, and at Jolie's Louisiana Bistro, they're carving ice balls for cocktails and curing charcuterie. If it sounds like Lafayette has laid welcome to only the most precious end of the artisanal food revolution, consider Jolie's truly beautiful dish: the head and fatty, flavorful collar of a speckled trout whose body has been used in an entrée. It's battered, deep-fried, and served sticking straight up, accompanied by a dish of spicy red rouille. It is as complete an expression of nose-to-tail eating as you'll find anywhere.



Fried trout head at Jolie's Louisiana Bistro

None of this was happening in Lafayette as recently as five years ago. "These are Cajun hotshot kids, coming back and doing tradition with a twist," says Leah Simon, who herself spent two decades in New York and Los Angeles before returning home. That was in 2007, when, hearing that locals were driving an hour to Baton Rouge for sushi, she and her sister, Michele Ezell, opened Tsunami Sushi. Now, anticipating the needs of discerning travelers, they have renovated a former department store into Buchanan Lofts. The beautifully designed apartments, rentable by the night or longer, are situated around the corner from Genterie Supply Co., a newly opened and unapologetically hip menswear store.



Ross Fontenot, co-owner of Genterie Supply Co.

Few embody the new movement better than Justin and Margaret Girouard. The couple grew up in Lafayette, and both wound up in New Orleans soon after high school. Justin started out as a dishwasher at Stella!, Scott Boswell's formal, audaciously modern French Quarter restaurant, eventually rising to executive sous-chef and general manager. After a stint in Provence, the couple's thoughts turned from France to Lafayette. Despite warnings from some dubious friends, they opened The French Press in an old print shop, with Justin in the kitchen and Margaret running the front of the house.

Now, on a weekend morning, it seems as though the entire city is gathered there for brunch. Hungover bearded types mingle with church families, both eager for dishes like the Sweet Baby Breesus—slider-size biscuits filled with bacon, fried boudin, and Steen's cane syrup. Girouard taps into his fine-dining roots on Friday and Saturday nights, when the white tablecloths come out and the dishes reflect the creativity you'd expect from his highfalutin education.

When I first visited Johnson's Grocery almost a decade ago in the small town of Eunice, about an hour from Lafayette, the meat market was still in the building it had occupied since 1948. On the lawn was a small sign, painted in red: "Hot Boudin Today." Wallace Johnson and family closed the store in 2005, but his daughter Lori Walls has revived the name in downtown Lafayette as Johnson's Boucanière, with an identical sign out near the sidewalk. There, she produces cayenne-loaded links of boudin as well as a menu of smoky barbecue; this is a place where it's entirely reasonable to see "smoked turkey sausage po-boy" listed under "Light Sandwiches."

And then there's Jean Duos, with his fierce belief in recreating traditional Cajun meats at his Duos Cajun Corner in Opelousas. His parents owned a fruit stand on the desolate crossroads he now occupies about 30 minutes north of Lafayette. Before setting up shop, he ran a "dirt service," the hardest and messiest end of the construction business. Now he and his wife, Mia, sell the meat he once made as a hobby: smoked rabbits and pig tails, thick lengths of andouille, hot cracklin's, and fine burgers topped with slab bacon. Of course there's boudin: rough-cut, bound in a skin that pops when it meets the teeth, and tasting of liver and pork. "Everybody puts too much damn pepper in their boudin, because it's supposed to be 'Cajun,'" Duos says. "But Cajun has nothing to do with too-spicy."

Duos's parents, he says, were put out of business by big-box stores, but he feels safe. "Walmart can sell fruit," he says, holding up a piece of sausage. "But Walmart can't do this."

By far the most high-profile homecoming is that of Donald Link, from nearby Crowley, and his business partner and fellow James Beard Award winner, Stephen Stryjewski, who have opened a branch of their wildly popular New Orleans restaurant, Cochon, in Lafayette's south end, on a picturesque stretch of the Vermilion River.

The huge restaurant is decorated in the same coolly modern, country-meets-Scandinavia style as its big-city counterpart. The menu, happily, is nearly intact, featuring dishes that have become classics: the oyster-and-bacon sandwich (a BLT taken on a Gulf Coast road trip); the eponymous *cochon*, a crisp disk of salty, chewy, slow-roasted pulled pork, served over turnips and cracklin's; and the selection of pickles and vegetable sides that make Cochon Lafayette a sneakily good choice for vegetarians, even if the occasional house-made Slim Jim turns up in their cabbage.

Just over three decades ago, Paul Prudhomme brought his brand of Cajun cooking to the world at his legendary New Orleans restaurant K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen; this is Link and Stryjewski reversing the process, to the great benefit of all involved. As more visitors and natives have found, it turns out Lafayette is a nice place to linger.



Combo platter at Poche's Market & Restaurant

The Cajun Lexicon

Essential vocabulary for the Cajun-country explorer.

BOUDIN This spicy poached pork sausage can be found almost everywhere—in gas stations, general stores, and restaurants. Go ahead, try 'em all.

CRACKLIN'S Fatty pieces of pork that have been rendered until the skin is super-crisp; eat them straight out of the paper bag they're drained in.

ÉTOUFÉE Not as fancy as it sounds: a peppery, saucy preparation that's typically paired with crawfish or shrimp and served with a side of steamed rice.

ZYDECO Crowded dance floors, addictive beats, funky washboards, and accordions? Yep. You saw *The Big Easy*, right?

The Cajun Weekend

Cajun country is filled with treasures, but they come in limited quantities. Below, our picks for a four-day getaway.

THURSDAY Don't miss the spicy sausage stew special at Poche's Market & Restaurant.

FRIDAY Tonight and Saturday nights only, French Press chef Justin Girouard adds ambitious dinner dishes, like escargot-and-crawfish ragout.

SATURDAY Indulge in Bloody Marys and boudin-stuffed *oreilles de cochon* at Café Des Amis's popular Zydeco Breakfast.

SUNDAY Tom's Fiddle & Bow hosts folk and Cajun musicians the first Sunday of every month on a porch with a view of Bayou Fuselier.

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