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The best thing I ever ate (and it's not mine)

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CHEFS TAKE TO THE PLATE
Acadiana's finest kitchen hands tell us where they go to eat. by Anna Purdy
Photos by Robin May

The only thing more exceptional than eating an amazing meal is cooking it, and the only thing better than that is finding a treasure trove of delicacies at other local restaurants when your own livelihood depends on how well you do in the kitchen. To live your life in a professional kitchen you expect long days on your feet, temperatures exceeding 100 degrees, overworked waitstaff and particular patrons all expecting the very best for the very least amount

of time.

That local cooks and chefs are able to escape the heat of their own kitchens and enjoy delectable meals elsewhere in town has helped to create a camaraderie among them, despite that they are fiercely competitive in their respective quests to create exceptional dining experiences for all of us. These men and women are not afraid to shed blood either in the kitchen or out of it in a discussion about where the best poboy or king's cake or pâté can be found.

In many cases, chefs don't typically get to walk out and see people's faces when they take that first bite. They don't see them look to their dining companion and say, "You have to try this," while holding out their forks like train conductors offering a ticket to someplace they've never been and didn't know they wanted to go.

A chef's work is often a thankless job. Some of the most interesting people live their lives swathed in white with a bandana or hat around their brows, occasionally whizzing past the kitchen's entrance, available to a restaurant patron's eyes as readily as a ghost. So as a meager means of appreciation for their hard work, we decided to ask several chefs where they like to patron when they aren't in their own kitchens.

For the record, they had a difficult time picking. So, at times we had to help them settle on a single dish. Chef Gilbert Decourt, for example, said his first

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choice was Village Café, but he could not decide among VC’s foie gras, grouper or scallops; in particular, he liked that the restaurant’s sommelier always nails his wine pairing. Decourt was, however, specific about his love affair with the mussels at Marcello’s, so they got his top billing. Chef Manny Augello had a similar dilemma with Saint Street Inn’s mushrooms en papillote and chicken liver mousse.

Below are some of the food phantoms you rarely see who make what is on your plate so worth your time and money.



MANNY AUGELLO, Jolie’s Bistro
 When you start working in a kitchen as soon as you can pull a stool up to reach the counter, one might think you have a job for life. Augello has taken after his father by loving to live in his kitchen, both at home and at Jolie’s where he has twisted south Louisiana cuisine into new shapes while keeping to his credo of the freshest local ingredients at all times.

HIS PICK: Mushrooms en papillote at Saint Street Inn. “I like it because Mary

Tutwiler’s cooking style and flavors remind me of Julia Child. I imagine that’s what Julia’s dishes would taste like.”

HOLLY GOETTING, Charley G’s

Goetting has been heading up Charley G’s kitchen for the better part of a decade. Her staff is unfaltering and loyal to the restaurant and its testament to classically perfected Louisiana cuisine.

HER PICK: Smoked salmon pizza at Bella Figura. “House-made pizza crust, cream cheese, caviar and capers not to mention it’s baked in a wood-burning pizza oven. Flavor and texture wise, it is a good combination. Also, if I am not wrong, it’s the only restaurant in town with it on the menu.”

RACHEL LECKELT, Catahoula’s in Grand Coteau

If you were to write a romantic comedy and set it in small town Louisiana, Grand Coteau would be your ideal backdrop. And for that initial lovers’ meeting, as well as where they reconcile in the movie’s last five minutes, Catahoula’s would be the setting. Already an established name in local fine dining, Leckelt took over the abandoned restaurant earlier this year. She kept its original flavor and flair while adding some of her own after her years as a chef across the globe.

HER PICK: Eggplant miso at Tsunami. “It’s little bit sweet – flash-fried eggplant and toss it with shrimp in a sweet miso sauce. It’s a great appetizer to split.”



AMANDA MALONE, Petticoat Pastries and Whole Wheatery Eatery

Prepping and serving the menu at the Whole Wheatery Eatery and being the mastermind behind Petticoat Pastries, which supplies downtown’s



Carpe Diem Gelato-Espresso Bar with its non-gelato confections, means Malone never sleeps. But she does make time to eat. After graduating from Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, she took off for the New England Culinary Institute and spent summers working on Cape Cod before settling in New Jersey for 10 years. Malone moved home a few years ago and put her years working as a pastry chef to good use.

HER PICK: Aji shumai at Sakura. “I almost always order the same things, and they are always super fresh and tasty. I have ordered for pick-up and dined in the restaurant on weekdays as well as weekends, and on lazy afternoons as well as bustling busy evenings. And the quality is very consistent, which is awesome because I know there are several different chefs

preparing the dishes at any given time and sometimes it is a packed house. The aji shumai are delicate tiny shrimp dumplings in a super tasty soy."

GILBERT DECOURT, Cajundome food and beverage director

Decourt has been at the Cajundome for nine years using his executive chef and restaurateur experience to bring elegance and refinery to the soirees at the Cajundome. Lavish banquets and charity events are coordinated through his eyes and tastebuds. For many years Decourt worked as the executive chef at City Club before opening his own restaurant, Gilbert's.

HIS PICK: Marcello's mussels: "I'm a mussel freak; I could eat mussels for breakfast, lunch and dinner 365 days a year. Marcello's mussels dish is absolutely awesome. It's simple and classic."

DANNY NGUYEN, Saigon Noodles

Perhaps the newest to the Lafayette restaurant scene, Nguyen learned the tricks of his trade from his accomplished restaurateur relatives in California. Saigon Noodles has been open barely six months and has been a sleeper hit, introducing people to the true flavors of real Vietnamese food.

HIS PICK: Pineapple seafood fried rice at Bangkok Thai: "It's a mixture between Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese cuisine all in one dish. What makes it so distinct is the use of basil in the fried rice."



JUDE TAUZIN, Village Café and POUR

Tauzin is a successful chef, running both POUR and Village Café in River Ranch. Both places are renowned for great wine selections and easy yet elegant style. The café has the feel of an upper-end bistro open for lunch and dinner and also has one of the best brunches in town. POUR, with its amazing varieties of wine available by the taste, the half-glass and the glass, has a slick, modern feel and serves a menu that is smaller than the cafés but no less impressive.

HIS PICK: Turtle soup at Nash's: Boasting a flavor and texture unlike anything else, Nash's Louisiana Swamp Turtle Soup is made with

real turtle meat (you might be surprised to know a lot of restaurants use veal instead) and served with a cordial glass of sherry or port wine. Eat it with piping hot bread. "It's just one of those things that make you feel good," Tauzin says.

COLT PATIN, Louisiana Culinary Institute

Patin is an award-winning chef who recently left Crawfish Town in Breaux Bridge to begin teaching in Baton Rouge. Under his hand, Crawfish Town became celebrated for its adherence to traditional Cajun cooking.

HIS PICK: Chicken and sausage gumbo at Clementine's in New Iberia: "I'm a sucker for chicken and sausage gumbo. If I go somewhere, I order a cup or a bowl. Clementine's has a nice consistency, the flavors are rich and bold, and it's got a nice dark color. It's very good. The meat isn't overcooked or stringy and you get a good bit of meat."



MARY TUTWILER, Saint Street Inn

In a rather surreal exchange, Tutwiler was The Ind's food writer before partnering with another Ind alum, Nathan Stubbs, to open the Saint Street Inn in August. The restaurant is in close proximity to downtown and UL's campus and already has a reputation for offering some of the best seasonal dishes in the city.

HER PICK: Pho at Saigon Noodles: "My favorite food in the world is Vietnamese food. I love pho more than anything. Pho is my comfort food – I eat it when I'm sick or I'm happy. The freshness and the fish sauce flavors, the spices, all the really fine fresh greens that go into it and you can add all the hot sauce you want. The things I love about Vietnam is the deep respect for freshness and a real care for food. So much of their food is heavily fresh, raw foods. I fell in love with it when I went to Vietnam in 1990, and I've loved it ever since."

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[written by TUFFY , November 02, 2011 - 12:53 pm](#)
No one asked my opinion? duh! I am the man with super taste buds. Go to Pat's in Henderson and order a cup of Crawfish Bisque to start your night. Then the broiled crab cakes. This is food to die for!! Then the Snapper and lump crab meat special.(sauce on side) The fantasy meal.

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[written by the original northsidian , November 02, 2011 - 01:38 pm](#)
This was a fantastic article!

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[written by NORTHSIDIAN SHOTGUN , November 02, 2011 - 10:05 pm](#)
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