

Edited
by Sara Clifton

BRIO

City without a care: The
famous French Quarter



N'awlins

Food, booze and all that jazz

BY PHIL TRIPP

CRADLED in an S-bend of the wide, muddy, slow-flowing Mississippi River, New Orleans is best known as The City That Care Forgot. If it weren't for the levees straddling the banks of the river, New Orleans would be at least two metres under water.

It is this pressure of water power that is believed to be a key factor in why the locals are so restless, especially when Mardi Gras stretches over two weeks in February and the Jazz Festival brings in more than 300,000 people to hear 300 performances in two weekends that overlap April and May.

In contrast, at other times, it appears that "N'awlins" (as the locals drawl) flows as slow as the river itself, with a backbeat in its music like slapping waves on the shore, fed by the fish and crustaceans that inhabit it and populated by a laid-back cultural stew of Afro-Caribbean, Cajun French, Spanish Creole and Redneck good ol' boys and Southern belles — all of whom share a propensity to drink like fish and party at the drop of a hat.

Life begins at dusk. It revolves around eating, drinking and then finding the right genre of music to sway along with. Revelations are inevitable. There are no shortages in picking, discovering or stumbling into the right place and there never seems to be a wrong time since most of the operating-hours signs state "Open from 10 am til ...". You never really sleep in New Orleans, you just collapse in between evenings, often forgetting how you got to bed.

Life in New Orleans is fuelled by various concoctions of alcohol ranging from the simple to the bizarre.

**MUSIC
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The basic brew is a long-neck bottle of Dixie ale complete with Confederate flag, while the more decadent draught is the tarry Voodoo Black, which seems to slither from the bottle or tap. At the top end of the cocktail chain is the litre-size Hurricane, a storm of various high-octane alcohols swirling in a mega-glass seductively shaped like a curved hurricane lamp and pioneered by Pat O'Brien's Bar.

But the beauty of New Orleans' liquor laws is the "go-cup" action, where any bar can pour any amount of booze into a plastic cup for takeaway. Aside from the bars that feature drink dispensers lined up like poker machines, spewing multi-hued daiquiris and margaritas into mammoth plastic cups, there is also the traditional hole-in-the-wall on the street, where beers or cocktails can be passed over the counter.

New Orleans isn't populated by drunks, because most of the drunks are the visitors. With oppressive heat most of the year and surrounding swamps that soak the air, the city is a pressure cooker on the edge of going off. The locals relieve the pressure by dancing: from sinuous writhing to searing guitars and harmonica-driven blues bands; swirling in Cajun two-step syncopation to the accordions and violins of the French swamp crooners; sashaying and boot-scooting in linedance formation to a country rock band; or performing free-form gyrations to honkin' and riffin' bebop jazz combos. These rhythms are the undercurrent that takes over the body, and drives it from the back-street bar to beer barn to basement jazz dive.

Finding music is dead easy in the Big Easy. It seems to pour out of every doorway, even in daytime.



Although Bourbon Street is the epicentre of debauchery, it still harbors some mean overpriced and under-jazzed pubs with unrelenting bands. For traditional freaks who want to see octogenarian legends of jazz, the temple of tunes is Preservation Hall in the French Quarter, followed by the septuagenarians at Mahogany Hall, just around the corner.

The real deal in New Orleans music rotates around rhythm and can be found Uptown in sweaty venues that have served up the sway of such funky groove artists as the Meters, Neville Brothers, Subdudes, Fats Domino and armies of local music metronomes. Then there are the piano professors, starting with the deceased legends Professor Longhair, James Booker and Roosevelt Sykes, through to current idols Allen Toussaint, Dr John, Henry Butler and Ellis Marsalis (father of Wynton and Branford).

Piano bars are epidemic, but one jewel is the Maple Leaf Bar, which consists of an upright 88 in front of a plate glass window, a classic bar and jukebox, a laundromat tucked away for washing the clothes between drinks and sets, as well as a back patio serving up Creole delights late into the night.

The Big Easy: Life begins at dusk, with no shortage of good booze and good music

SEE IT

Seeking out the rosters of clubs is simple with the two free street magazines, *Gambit* and *OffBeat*. *Gambit* is more lofty in its editorial and would most likely point the reader to jazzy outposts like Snug Harbor or Feelings, which are just outside the Quarter. *OffBeat* would lure you to the quirky melting pot of local R&B, Tipitina's, just off the river. House of Blues, at 205 Decatur Street in the Quarter, is a concert hall rather than a music bar where top touring blues bands and world music artists take the stage. The more eclectic and way-out jazz aficionados migrate to The Dream Palace and Reality Grill at 528 Frenchman, a tiny venue on the edge of existential music.

CATFISH AND JAMBALAYA

For that swampy zydeco music and sleazy dancing of Cajun Culture, there are two Uptown clubs that reign in town, and both feature free dancing lessons nightly: Mulates at 201 Julia St, and Michauls Cajun at 840 St Charles Avenue. To help get the hips moving, Mulate's signature dish is a catfish fillet topped with spicy crawfish etouffee, served with jambalaya and coleslaw.

But no musical pilgrimage is complete without a night at the Mid-City Lanes Rock 'n' Bowl, which features some of New Orleans' top bands with the added diversion of classic tenpin bowling in the background. Rock bands alternate with boogie-woogie piano players and funkmasters all week, and nothing is more riotous than watching drunk pink-haired punks bowling to thrash music.

There's another side to New Orleans music for those who need to balance being a sinner on Saturday night by becoming a saint on Sunday morning. Gospel is not the wailing and moaning of black voices: it has a beat, with bands backing up mass choirs that dance, jump and slide in unison across the floor while the preacher sweats, shouts and shakes in the Spirit of the Lord.

For some reason, no one ever seems to tire of the drinking and dancing part of a N'awlins vacation, and that is mostly due to the incredible variety of cuisine that is consistently exquisite, from the smallest soul-food cafe in the ghetto through to art-deco stainless-steel roadside diners, sawdust-floor barbecue shacks and the arenas of crab cracking and fish platters that line the shore of nearby Lake Ponchartrain.

Starting the day either means eggs with artery-clogging fried meats and a white grainy porridge of corn (appetisingly called grits), or the local-style downtown option of Mother's, where one can order a "po-boy"



JEWELL/PAGE/SAGE

Night and day:
Take the mule
cart for a daytime
tour of the French
Quarter, and save
your energy for
dancing all night



PHIL TERRY

sandwich. The house specialty consists of French loaf topped with mayonnaise, mustard, ham, roast beef, pickle, tomato, shredded cabbage and debris, which is the scrapings from the bottom of the roasting pan, soaked in sauce. Uptown at the Riverbend end of the tram line is Camellia Grill, which features chili cheese omelettes, pecan waffles and killer freezes or milk shakes.

The midday meal usually consists of red beans and rice with smoked sausage on Mondays (to absorb the weekend poisons), and something deep-fried for the remainder of the week to prepare for the next onslaught. True locals either buy a brown paper bag of cayenne boiled crawfish (our yabbies, also called mudbugs there) or they head to the Marble Bar at the Acme Oyster House in the Quarter or Felix's across the street, where teams of shuckers fill trays with raw oysters as big as a fist.

With such replenishment for breakfast and lunch, dinner tends to come late. Louisiana cooking relies on triads of foods — onions, celery and capsicum as the base vegetables; red, black and white pepper as the root spices, and the crustacean combo of shrimp, crab and oysters. The Holy Trinity of French-influenced Creole cooking shrines are Arnaud's, Galatoire's and Antoine's in the Quarter (all formal restaurants), while



Great restaurants...

French Quarter: Acme Oyster House, 724 Iberville St; Antoine's, 713 St Louis St; Arnaud's, 813 Bienville St; Eddie's, 2119 Law Street; Emeril's, 800 Tchoupitoulas; Galatoire's, 209 Bourbon St; K-Paul's, 416 Chartres Street; Mother's, 401 Poydras Street.
Uptown: Camellia Grill, 626 S. Carrollton Ave; Commander's Palace, 1403 Washington Ave; Uglesich's, 1238 Baronne St.
Metairie: Corley's BAR-B-Q, 4243 Veterans Memorial Blvd.

bars ...

French Quarter: Pat O'Brien's (for hurricanes), 718 St Peter Street; Port of Call (best jukebox and burgers), 838 Esplanade; Preservation Hall (for traditional jazz), 26 St Peter Street.
Uptown: Maple Leaf Bar (for laundry and piano), 8316 Oak St; The Columns Hotel (for happy hour), 3811 St Charles Avenue; Tipitina's (for soul), 501 Napoleon Avenue; Mid City Lanes Rock 'n' Bowl, 4133 South Carrollton.

and somewhere to stay ...

Melrose Mansion, 937 Esplanade Ave, New Orleans. Tel: 0011-1-504-944-2255.
Audubon Cottages, 727 Rue Toulouse, New Orleans. Tel: 0011-1-504-561-5858.

Commander's Palace in the Uptown area is the breeding ground of many chefs that have crossed over into more daring and spicy Nouvelle Orleans cuisine.

For visitors trying to dine at cooking master Pau Prudhomme's popular Cajun restaurant, K-Paul's, be warned that the line starts at 5pm. There was room for only 60 diners when Prudhomme opened the restaurant 20 years ago. Now the 1834 house has been expanded to accommodate 200, and the wait is still two hours. The wait is even longer at the cable-TV Food Channel's raging Cajun chef Emeril LaGasse's restaurants, Emeril's and NOLA. Signature dishes include such combinations as a double-cut pork chop with tamarind-glazed sweet potatoes in a green mole sauce, or blood-sausage stuffed quails with crawfish tails and wild mushrooms.

Sooner or later, all of the food, drink and dancing will make you collapse. The two best hotels for my money are the Audubon Cottages and Melrose Mansion, an 1884 Victorian Gothic respite on the fringe of Quarter. For sheer luxury and pampering, these two cannot be beaten. The Melrose has a turret, dormers, stained-glass windows, a steeply pitched roof, Corinthian columns, and largely proportioned rooms furnished in 19th-century Louisiana antiques, including canopy beds and four-posters. It also has spa baths, with monogrammed robes and towels, but the nicest touch is the selection of wines and cognacs, served every afternoon and evening in the plush downstairs sitting room.

The Audubon cottages are actually seven suites that occupy a large chunk of a city block, situated around a central courtyard and pool with fountains, private gates and walled gardens. They date from 1800. Cottage number one is where nature artist John James Audubon painted his famous *Birds of America* book series. The bright yet lush patios outside the cottages — where breakfasts are served by waiters who make the two-block trek from the nearby main hotel — are in contrast to the dark, wood-grained rooms that make the interiors womb-like period pieces, shutting out all light and noise. The rooms are big, the baths elegant and the ambience is pure South.

Sure, New Orleans does boast some daytime activities, from exploring the French Quarter, or taking the horse-drawn buggy to view the ironlace balconies, or cruising down the river on a paddlewheel steamer spotting alligators. But the reality is that the Big Easy is a city for night people. The most difficult part of a holiday in New Orleans is waking up, confronting the final daylight, and then leaving.

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