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The Taste of New Orleans Cafe

By Angelique Bamberg and Jason Roth

Location: 514 Main St., East Pittsburgh. 412-823-9076

Hours: Tue.-Thu. 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; Fri.-Sat. 11 a.m.-9 p.m.

Prices: Sides \$2-4; platters \$12.50

Fare: Family-style Creole

Atmosphere: Storefront takeout, with memories of New Orleans

Liquor: BYOB

Smoking: None Permitted

Since James Street Tavern closed a couple years back, we've missed the taste of New Orleans cuisine in Pittsburgh. Or, should we say, what passed for New Orleans cuisine this far removed from the source. Truth be told, we'd never had the real deal, cooked by natives and served with the presumption that we'll eat it just the way they make it, with no unnecessary adaptations for the Pennsylvania palate.

When the Turner family blew in on the winds of Hurricane Katrina, the Big Easy's loss was Pittsburgh's gain. Out of seven boys and two girls growing up on Lausats Place in the Ninth Ward, all but one were rooted in New Orleans; the exception became a minister in East Pittsburgh who threw a lifeline to his sister, her daughter and grandchildren after their homes were devastated by Katrina. Like so many immigrants, they didn't bring much material wealth, but they had with them culinary riches to spare -- and share.



Laurel Turner, with her jambalaya, gumbo and bread pudding.

Thus, on a Main Street that most Pittsburghers never see, you can find a neon streetcar and The Taste of New Orleans Café. The menu is simple, focused on the classics of Creole cuisine: fried chicken, pork chops, jambalaya, gumbo and rice. Half of the twin storefront is dedicated to takeout, with a few tables in the bright red-and-green-painted space on the other side. Laurel Turner told us that many customers arrive for takeout, but stay to enjoy the hospitality, and we don't doubt her for a minute. This family operation, with a couple of helping hands from friends, is as comfortable and welcoming as your own family kitchen. Also, you won't want to miss the chance to learn about the characters named on the menu, from Pop's red beans and rice to Joe Wright's pork chops and AB fried biscuits.

The menu's main feature is platters whose side dishes are as substantial as their entrees: a choice of either pork chops or wings, served with red beans and rice, dirty rice, jambalaya or broccoli-cheese rice, plus sweet cornbread and Lausats smooth potato salad. That last item is unique, and represents family history. Turner and her sister objected to their mother's chunky potato salad, and were told that, if they would dice the potatoes finely, they could have something smoother. They did, and the results are deliciously different: a traditional potato salad that looks like mashed potatoes, with the creamy mustard flavor pervading every bite and no big bland chunks of potato getting in the way.

More traditional items were every bit as delicious. Most notably, the incredibly juicy, flavorful and crispy-coated pork chops transported Angelique into an exalted state of porcine reverence normally occupied by Jason. Meanwhile, the wings, Southern-fried, not Buffalo-style, were crisp and well seasoned on the outside, if not perfectly tender within. Jambalaya, filled with chunks of sausage and

medium-small shrimp, was well balanced, savory and, true to the proclamation on the menu, well seasoned, but not spicy. Turner clarified that her cooking is Creole, not Cajun, which explains the absence of fiery peppers. The rice in the jambalaya was tender, not mushy, avoiding the most common failing of the dish.

The rice was just as successful with red beans, which Turner, in deference to vegetarians, cooks without the traditional ham hock, and which contained a distinctive flavor we could not identify. When we asked about it, we were told with a smile and a conspiratorial pat on the shoulder, "Not all the ingredients are from here." A taste of New Orleans, indeed.

Gumbo, perhaps the definitive Creole dish, embodied the seasoned-not-spicy credo, awakening every taste bud without punishing any of them. As with the jambalaya, sausage and shrimp were plenteous enough that we enjoyed one or both in every bite. But instead of a dense pilaf of rice, a thick, savory broth made us think that if warmth had a taste, this would be it.

The tragedy of Katrina hasn't ended, as New Orleans and its citizens still struggle to recover and redefine themselves for fresh start. From this distance, it can seem difficult, if not impossible, to really help. Happily, a small but delicious way to participate in the recovery has appeared in East Pittsburgh, and you'd be doing yourself a favor if you took the opportunity. Well-seasoned food and a warm welcome await.

JR:



AB:



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