

## In East Pittsburgh, a taste of New Orleans

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By Monica Haynes, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Pam Panchak/Post-Gazette

Laurel Turner, left, with help from her daughter, Kizzy Hatcher, runs The Taste of New Orleans restaurant in East Pittsburgh.

When you walk through the doors of Laurel Turner's restaurant, Taste of New Orleans, you can just feel the warmth.

That's before she ever serves up any of her mouth-watering sausage and shrimp-filled gumbo.

Maybe it's the festive ambiance of the place, located on the corner of Main and Center streets in the suburb of East Pittsburgh.

The walls, painted fire engine red and sour apple green, are decorated with Mardi Gras masks and colorful beads, framed pencil drawings of the French Quarter and personal photos taken of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina.

More than likely that warm feeling comes from Ms. Turner, a petite woman with a big smile, who has brought not only her recipes from New Orleans but the love of family and community that are a part of the city's culture.

But remember, whether it's the gumbo, jambalaya or the red beans and rice, Taste of New Orleans' food is "well seasoned, not hot!"

Customers are informed of that fact via the restaurant's takeout menus, which tout platters of Sweet Cornbread, Lausat Smooth Potato Salad and Wings Over New Orleans Chicken Wings or Joe Wright's Pork Chops (named for her uncle) for \$12.50.

Each platter also includes a choice of red beans and rice or "low down dirty rice."

The jambalaya and gumbo can be had for \$4 and if there's enough room, you might want to sample the bread pudding for \$3. This Southern treat is filled with plump juicy raisins and really doesn't need anything extra but you can get it drizzled with rum sauce for \$1 more.

The restaurant's motto is "We Ain't Playin', We Cookin'," and they're not lying about that.

Ms. Turner orders the smoked sausage she uses in her jambalaya and gumbo from New Orleans. She gets her spices and red beans from home as well.

She runs the colorful eatery, which opened in May, with an assist from her daughter Kizzy Hatcher, Kizzy's husband Marvin Hatcher, and friend, Niecy Shepherd, who handles the front counter. Sometimes even 5-year-old grandson Kizmin and 3-year-old granddaughter Markia help out.

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### More information

Taste of New Orleans will be closed until Feb. 13 while the family visits New Orleans. Located at 514 Main St., East Pittsburgh, its regular hours are noon to 9 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

Phone: 412-823-9076.

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"Customer, Mom-Mom!" they yell while running to the back to get their grandmother.

As word has spread about the Taste of New Orleans, customers from as far away as Johnstown and Butler have made their way to East Pittsburgh. Catering jobs have increased as well, the most recent being a Mardi Gras event two weeks ago for Carnegie Mellon University.

Speaking of Mardi Gras, Ms. Turner and her family are heading back to New Orleans for next week's legendary festival -- Tuesday is Fat Tuesday -- and to celebrate her 50th birthday.

"It's more of a reunion with the brothers we haven't seen in a while," she said.

The family made its way to Pittsburgh in September 2005 amidst the chaos of Hurricane Katrina.

"We left that Sunday when they said it was mandatory that we leave," Ms. Turner recalled.

The Turners first stopped in Texas, where they watched television in horror and sadness as their beloved city was washed away.

"We lost everything -- everything," Ms. Turner said. "All we could do is look at each other and look at the television ... We cried."

"I cried, too, Mom-Mom," Kizmin interjects. "I always cry for New Orleans."

Ms. Turner's New Orleans roots go back several generations, so seeing the destruction of the city, she said, "it's like death, like when you lose someone like your mom, your dad ... Our house, our neighbors, our elders that were on the block. You can't imagine it unless it happens to you."

After the pit stop in Texas, the family packed up their Nissan Quest and headed to East Pittsburgh where Ms. Turner's brother, Bishop Arthur Brown, heads the Manna From On High Ministries. "It took us 24 hours 'cause there were so many people just going different ways," she said.

She still is troubled by the way some of her fellow New Orleanians were portrayed by the media.

Blacks were often shown as looters while whites were presented as survivors. But everyone was trying to survive, she said.

And not everyone in the now infamous 9th Ward was poor, she added. Her family members owned homes as well as land.

"It's not about material things," Ms. Turner said. "Our lives were spared. It's not about what I lost, it's about what God is gonna give me."

Well, what He's given Pittsburgh is a Taste of New Orleans that's definitely worth the trip.

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