

RESTAURANT REVIEW: French Quarter Cafe

The Crescent City in the Flower City

By James Leach

Green beans. My childhood nemesis. My grandmother's recipe required beans cooked with bacon or fatback until they turned dark, almost grey, and nearly dissolved. Even thinking about them now makes me gag just a little bit. Imagine my horror, then, when a dish of very darkly cooked green beans was placed in front of me at the French Quarter Café last week. And then try to picture the huge grin that spread across my face when I tasted them - tender without being reduced to goo, full of flavor, seasoned with garlic, salt, maybe a dash of cayenne, and just a bit of red bell pepper for color and an added shot of sweetness. I finished the whole dish and then considered asking for more, but that would have meant leaving behind the sweet potato casserole, or the last bit of Sicilian chicken, or the maque choux, or, heaven forbid, eschewing a cookie to round out the meal.

Only open for six weeks, the French Quarter Café on Arnett Boulevard already has the cozy feeling of a neighborhood institution. The warm, friendly dining room has little touches that make it feel just a bit like a tea parlor or your grandmother's living room, and



Just about any of the Cajun dishes on the menu of the new French Quarter Cafe will curb your Creole cravings.

the service is attentive and helpful without feeling intrusive or fussy. The real triumph is the food: simple, honest, straightforward - the sort of food your mother or grandmother would cook if she happened to be from New Orleans.

Self-educated chef-owner Neciah Brown, a Rochester native, offers a wide array of Creole dishes, preserving the rich flavors without the creamy heaviness that often goes hand in hand with Creole food. There are po'boys, etouffee, gumbo, and jambalaya,

dirty rice, brabant potatoes, and Natchitoches meat pies. And there are also delicious sides, like Brown's mother's sweet potato casserole, sweet potato fries, and those eye-opening green beans. And then there's the chicken.

It's hard to get me excited about chicken, but I'll make an exception for Brown's Sicilian Chicken (\$6.95). Sicily is a long way from New Orleans, but Creole cooking is a mélange of the cuisines that found their way to New Orleans over the years, and a sizable number of Sicilian immigrants added their own traditions to the pot. Thus, Sicilian chicken: pieces of chicken pan roasted with garlic, olive oil, rosemary, and white wine. The combination of searing the chicken to lock in the flavors and then finishing it in the oven produces a bird that is perfumed with the garlic and rosemary, meltingly tender, and swimming in a flavorful gravy that begs to be mopped up by the crispy cubes of brabant potato the chicken is served with.

The key to Creole cooking is roux - a mixture of butter and flour cooked over low heat, which is used as the base for any of the classical French sauces you care to name. Creole cooking takes roux to another level, cooking it to a chocolate-brown color just this side of being burned. It's a dangerous game to play with your food, and one of the marks of a good cook is how dark and flavorful he can make his roux. The roux that forms the base of Brown's smoked chicken and sausage gumbo (\$3.25 for a cup, \$4.75 for a bowl) is a very rich, dark-chocolate brown with a deep nutty flavor that only comes from roux cooked long and slow. The gumbo is thick with pieces of spicy andouille sausage

and shreds of tender, buttery-tasting smoked chicken in a broth full of tiny bits of the vegetables that went into the stock. With rice, this could easily have been a meal on its own. As an appetizer it was a wonderful way to open up the palate for good things to come - like Brown's shrimp etouffee.

The roux in Brown's shrimp etouffee (\$8.95 for a full portion, \$5.50 for a half) is a bit lighter than I would have expected. It thickens a rich red-orange sauce full of red bell pepper, onion, and celery (the "trinity" of Creole cooking), along with a healthy dose of cayenne pepper and a sprinkling of chopped parsley that helps to tie the dish together. The shrimp arrive cooked perfectly, tender and flavorful despite the potential for them to overcook in the piping hot sauce on the way to the table. A generous helping of rice in the middle of the dish allows you to make sure that none of the fragrant, spicy sauce escapes.

There are several very good fried items on the French Quarter Café's menu, and all of them are surprisingly light-tasting and delicious. Brabant potatoes (\$3), which the menu bills as New Orleans' answer to french fries, are golden brown and crispy outside, fluffy inside and perfectly seasoned. The sweet potato fries (\$3) are even better. It's nearly impossible to get sweet potatoes to crisp in the fryer without coating them, and Brown hasn't even tried. Instead, he allows the natural texture of the sweet potato to carry the day, turning out a fry that looks like it was baked and cooked to a point where the natural sweetness of the yam comes out. Seasoned with a bit of salt and a generous dash of cinnamon sugar, these were a

favorite on all three of my visits. Similarly, Brown's deep-fried catfish (\$7.95) is evidence of his mastery of the medium: the cornmeal crust is thin yet crispy, and so uniform that it creates an envelope in which the flaky white fish steams in its own juices.

The menu offers a bewildering array of sides, but one (in addition to those green beans) is worthy of special mention: Brown's sweet potato casserole (\$3) is not Creole, but it is wonderful. The sweet potatoes are mashed and then topped with a crust of pecans, brown sugar, butter, and coconut. Based on a recipe given to him by his mother, the casserole is sweet enough to be a dessert, but has enough substance to stand up as a side dish to the spicy entrees. But just because the casserole is good enough to stand in for dessert, you should not miss out on Norell Brown's cookies.

Virtuosity must run in the Brown family, because his brother Norell makes some of the best cookies I've ever tasted. The buttery, chocolaty goodness of his chewy chocolate fudge cookies was topped in my book only by his chocolate raspberry cookies. The flavor of raspberries balanced with the chocolate in a cookie that was sweet, but not overwhelmingly so. Washed down with a glass of the French Quarter's frankly addictive sweet tea (or, in my case, several glasses), you'd be hard pressed to find a better, or more comforting, conclusion to a meal anywhere in the Flower City.

French Quarter Café
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