NEW ORLEANS — The hot news here is that there are no more lunch-time lines outside K-Paul's Restaurant. The not-so-hot news is that there's no more lunch. The nation's most celebrated outpost of haute Cajun cooking is now open only for dinner which, since no reservations are taken, means that the 5:30-10 p.m. lines, Monday through Friday, are longer than ever.

Of course, you could cut out and go around the corner to Olde N'awlins Cookery, where a gifted alumnus of K-Paul's, 24-year-old George Rhode IV, has just opened shop and for the moment remains something of a secret. Or try two of the other current crop of food meccas: Feelings Cafe d'Aunoy for things like redfish, moutarde and peanut butter pie, and Savoir Faire, where a knockout woman chef, Susan Spicer, is wowing sophisticates with her classical French dishes.

On the music front, insiders are still flocking to Tyler's Beer Garden, Tipitina's and The Maple Leaf. But there's a relatively new kid on the block, Snug Harbor, which has already achieved star status for its live jazz performances on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays.

Well, cooking and all that jazz, that's the reason you come to New Orleans, isn't it?

Not any more. With the 1984 Louisiana World's Fair opening for a six-month run May 12, a lot of people are bound to start thinking of the Mardi Gras city as the ultimate twoffer: Come for one attraction but collect two.

Actually, you can come for one and collect a whole bag of others. I badly misjudged how many good excuses New Orleans and its neighbors give a visitor for dawdling and discovered that allowing only 12 days to cover the city, Gulf beaches, Cajun Country and the famous plantation houses, as I did, is a recipe for frustration.

Theoretically my pre-Fair dry run should have been a breeze. After all, there is no shortage of tour companies that purport to polish off the city's cheap sights — the French Quarter, the Superdome, the Garden District and Lake Pontchartrain — in three to four hours. Other daily junkets are scheduled to such upriver plantations as Houmas House, Oak Alley and San Francisco and take about six hours. Four riverboats, the Cotton Blossom, Natchez, President and Voyageur offer a variety of trips on the Father of the Waters, the bayous and hidden waterways once used to perfection by the elusive buccaneer Jean Lafitte. There are even day-long Cajun Country tours from the city that eventually put you into a pontoon boat captained by a French-speaking fisherman-trapper who leads you off to see live alligators, giant spiders, kingfishers and other denizens of Louisiana's captivating safari lands.

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Cajun food

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But signing up and letting them produce would have been much too easy. I aimed for something more challenging and quickly got it by staying food-oriented. In short order I learned that Commander's Palace has a new chef; that across the river, at the Cafe Rani in Covington, prize-winning chef Gary Darling has taken to doing a bread pudding du jour; that the Creole-continental dishes at Upperline merit serious examination. I found out that Karen Humphries' and Joe Cahn's New Orleans School of Cooking at 835 Conde St. has just expanded its repertoire and, in addition to two-and-a-half-hour, one-shot classes, now also custom-tailors true cook's tours for groups of 25 or more.

I saw the need to make sure Messina's on Chartres Street still does exceptionally good and exceptionally inexpensive oyster dishes, that Maspero's delivers one of the best sandwich values around, that Delmonico's has the finest turtle soup I ever encountered. By the time I got to Dooky Chase's to sample the seafood gumbo and memorable oyster stuffing (ignore the dismal neighborhood; just concentrate on the quality of the Creole cooking at this preeminent black-owned restaurant), I had already used up seven days and had barely dented the surface of New Orleans' culinary scene.

Worst of all, it was Thanksgiving week and I made the mistake of idly asking one of the reception staff at Soniat House, the newest entry in New Orleans' elegant small hotel sweepstakes, what would constitute a Cajun Thanksgiving feast. His answer: stuffed roast pork flavored with garlic and onions, rice and gravy, candied yams, corn bread, a ton of home grown vegetables and, for dessert, devil's food cake.