Eat your way through Louisiana and savor its specialties on this culinary adventure

By Barbara Gibbs Ostmann

Your assignment, should you decide to accept it, is to eat your way through countless pralines, gumbos and jambalayas in search of authentic Louisiana cooking. The risks include an expanded waistline and possible addiction. The benefit: a heightened appreciation for a truly American regional cuisine—not to mention a terrific vacation experience.

Discovering the foods of Louisiana is no Mission Impossible. It's one of the prime reasons people visit the state. As Joe Cahn, an oracle of New Orleans cookery, puts it, "People have been coming here just to eat for hundreds of years."

He knows what he's talking about when he says that if you come to Louisiana to enjoy the food, you should "wear elastic clothes." The search for Louisiana cuisine begins for most people in New Orleans, the most food-oriented city in the United States. New Orleanians have a passion for the table.

"Food is our entertainment," says Cahn, who founded the New Orleans School of Cooking in 1980 and sold it five years ago.

Boiled crawfish (top) is a delicacy in Louisiana. /Louisiana Office of Tourism photo. Chef Kim Kringlie (left) making some beignets at the Rural Life Museum in Baton Rouge. /Carolyn Thornton photo

THE SOUTHERN TRAVELER
Hall preserves sports history of Louisiana

The balls, bats and clubs are silent now, but the contents of the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame once created quite a noise in the world of sports.

The hall, located on the campus of Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, features sports memorabilia from some of the greatest athletes of all time. Baseballs, footballs, jerseys, golf clubs, photographs, and other items from the more than 170 athletes who have been inducted into the hall of fame are on display.

Some of the most remarkable figures in American and even world sports are included in the hall, including Terry Bradshaw, Lou Brock, Ron Guidry, Archie Manning and "Pistol" Pete Maravich. A portrait of each hangs in the hall.

Summer offers a great time to visit when new inductees are enshrined. Joining the hall this year include football greats Everson Walls, Warren Braden and John Petition, basketball star Luke Jackson, golfer Pat Browne, women's basketball star Eun Jung Ok, and hurdler Bill Hardin.

This year's induction will be June 26-27 and will include a Friday night reception, golf tournament, a tour of Natchitoches, a reception at the Hall of Fame, and the induction banquet and ceremonies. Call (318) 357-6467.

Discover a treasure chest of fun at Contraband Days celebration

Legend has it that the French gentleman pirate Jean Lafitte buried his contraband treasure somewhere along southwest Louisiana's plentiful waterways in the early 1800s.

Visitors today may not be able to find his loot, but they can discover a rollicking, swashbuckling good time during Contraband Days in the city of Lake Charles. The celebration—which remembers Lafitte and the era of buccaneers who once sailed the area's lakes, rivers and bayous—has grown into a 12-day extravaganza of festivities.

The festival, which will be held April 28-May 10 this year, opens as Lafitte's buccaneers sail into Lake Charles, storm the Civic Center sea wall, toss the mayor and city officials into the lake and proclaim two weeks of fun and frolic under pirate rule.

Then begins a non-stop array of events that clamor for your attention: outdoor concerts, parades, bathtub races, beach games, sailboat regattas, fireworks displays, a waterski show, children's events, crawfish races, a limbo contest, art displays, choral competition, a lighted boat parade, sporting events, a carnival and more.

Admission is $2 per person. For additional information, call (318) 436-5508 or the Southwest Louisiana Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-456-7252.

Leap to Jackson, Miss., for dazzling international ballet competition

Some create art with paint, others with sculpted marble and stone, still others with the written word. But more than 100 artists from around the world will converge on Jackson, Miss., this summer to create true beauty with their bodies.

The 1998 USA International Ballet Competition, one of the world's most prestigious dance events, will feature young professional and amateur dancers from around the world in a two-week "olympic-style" competition. From June 13-28, they will vie for gold, silver and bronze medals, cash awards and scholarships.

Opening ceremonies will feature a colorful Parade of Nations, the lighting of the competition flame and a performance by the Boston Ballet. Then through three rounds of exciting competition, the dancers will amaze audiences with their graceful movements, energetic leaps and defiance of the laws of gravity.

For many of the young dancers, the competition is a springboard to careers with the best international dance companies.

The mission of the USA International Ballet Competition, which is held in Jackson every four years, is to provide an opportunity for dancers to test themselves against recognized international standards of dance excellence and to showcase their technical skill and artistic talent. The event also provides a forum for communication and intercultural exchange.

In addition, other events enhance the competition, including an International Dance School, art exhibitions, dance-related workshops and clinics. Also, a contemporary dance ensemble and ballet dance troupes from across the country will perform.

The competition will be held in the Thalia Mara Hall in downtown Jackson. Tickets range from $6 to $70. For details, call (601) 355-9853. For tickets, call (601) 973-9249.
to pursue other projects. "We eat just as much when we're full as when we're hungry. Our stomachs have no say in the matter. The brain does. The brain sends a message: 'Tell stomach to make room—we may never pass this way again.'"

Bernard Guste, proprietor of Antoine's, the 158-year-old grande dame of New Orleans restaurants, echoes Cahn's enthusiasm.

"We love to talk about food—it's what we do all day long. We're always looking forward to our next meal."

**Tasting the Crescent City**

A good place to begin your exploration of Louisiana cuisine is at one of two cooking schools that offer classes designed to give visitors a taste of Creole and Cajun cooking. The New Orleans School of Cooking and Louisiana General Store, housed for many years in the refurbished Jax Brewery, moved to new facilities at 524 St. Louis St. earlier this year. Three-hour demonstration classes, which include recipes and lunch, are offered Monday-Saturday for $20 per person.

The Cookin' Cajun Cooking School, in the Creole Delicacies Gourmet Shop in the Riverwalk Festival Market, offers two-hour demonstration classes, with recipes and lunch, Monday through Sunday, for $17.50 per person.

The oldest part of New Orleans, the French Quarter, is the most European town in the United States. The 90 city blocks are packed with food establishments, among them some of the best praline shops in the world.

Pralines make great gifts for the folks back home, and provide sweet fuel for your sightseeing activities. Extensive taste-testing by this writer has narrowed the field to three French Quarter vendors: the Old Town Praline Shop on Royal Street, Laura's Candy and Creole Gourmet on Conti Street, and The Praline Connection, with outlets on Frenchmen Street and South Peters Street.

Be sure to make time for a stop at the famous Cafe du Monde in the historic French Market for a cup of chicory-laced cafe au lait and some beignets (square, doughnut-like pastries liberally doused with powdered sugar). This mecca is open 24 hours a day.

Another food must in New Orleans is a muffuletta, an Italian sandwich that consists of a round loaf of bread filled with olive salad, salami, ham, cheese and garlic. Central Grocery and Progress Grocery, both on Decatur Street across from the French Market, are home to some of the best muffulettas. Central Grocery is unofficially credited with the invention, and local foodies deem them to be the best. As the Central Grocery sign says, "imitated by many, but never duplicated."

Enjoy a muffuletta while sitting on a bench watching the world go by in Jackson Square, or stow one in your cooler as you head out of town on the next leg of your culinary exploration of Louisiana.

For more information, contact the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau at 1-800-748-8695.

**North to St. Tammany**

Leaving New Orleans, take the 24-mile Lake Pontchartrain Causeway to St. Tammany Parish. The quaint towns of the north shore area are filled with cozy B&Bs, restaurants that rival those in the Crescent City, and bustling historic districts.

**Hungry festival-goers "picking crabs" at the Bayou Lacombe Crab Festival in Lacombe, north of Lake Ponchartrain. ©Donna O'Daniel. St. Tammany Tourist Commission.**

Abita Springs, famous in the 19th century for its curative artesian springs, is once again a popular destination. The Abita Brewing Company uses the legendary spring water for its brews. Free tours and beer tastings, including old-fashioned root beer made with cane sugar, are offered on Saturday and Sunday. The Abita Brew Pub serves casual fare and special draft beers.

Those who prefer wine can head to Pontchartrain Vineyards and Winery, north of Covington. Situated on 50 acres of rolling countryside, the winery produces French-style table wines. The tasting room, which opened last November, includes a terrace overlooking the vineyards. Tours and tastings are offered Wednesday through Sunday.

Food lovers won't want to miss the many parish festivals. For instance, the Bayou Lacombe Crab Festival, June 26-28, held under the moss-laden oaks in Lacombe Park, features crab prepared in many ways, including soft-shell crab po' boys.

Seafood is also the main attraction at the Greater Mandeville Seafood Festival, July 3-5, in Mandeville Harbor. In its 20th year, this fest features seafood dishes, arts and crafts, concerts and fireworks.

Beer lovers will want to mark their calendars for the first Saturday night in November for the annual Great Louisiana Beerfest in Covington. The beer tasting features more than 100 domestic and international brews.

For more information, call the St. Tammany Parish Tourist & Convention Commission at 1-800-634-9443.
West to Plantation Country

Your next stop is Baton Rouge, the heart of Plantation Country and starting point for the Great River Road. Baton Rouge is home to the tallest state capitol in the nation. The view of the Mississippi River from the 27th floor observation deck is spectacular.

Fortunes were made on the indigo, sugar and cotton plantations that line the river, both north and south of the city. For a better understanding of plantation life, visit the Rural Life Museum & Windrush Gardens. The outdoor folk museum interprets the working side of an 1800s plantation, with more than 20 buildings, including slave cabins, a schoolroom and a grist mill.

Just south of Baton Rouge is Gonzales, which bills itself as “the home of the friendliest people on earth: where you’ll never meet a stranger and never leave hungry.” One dish you’re likely to eat there is jambalaya, explains Anita Young, director of the Gonzales Welcome Center. Gonzales is, by state legislative act, the “Jambalaya Capital of the World.”

The 31st annual Jambalaya Festival and Cook-Off is May 29-31. Competitors vie for the title of world champion jambalaya cook.

“It’s a big to-do,” says Young. “The jambalaya is cooked in large iron pots over open fires and stirred with what look like boat oars.”

There is a controversy over jambalaya...
Food is the focus of many festivals in Louisiana

Food is the main ingredient for many Louisiana festivals. Nearly every type of produce is praised, almost every form of vegetable venerated, just about every type of crustacean celebrated.

This spring and early summer, pack your appetite and head to some of these fairs. You can choose from a smorgasboard of savory selections, including:

- Crawfish, also known as mudbugs, will be enjoyed at the Mudbug Madness festival in Shreveport May 21–24. Highlights will include plenty of music, Cajun cuisine, crawfish eating contests, children's activities, dancing and crafts. Call (318) 222-7403.

- You say tomato, I say tomato. Either way, you'll have fun at the Great French Market Tomato Festival in New Orleans. The festival, held in the French Market on June 7 this year, honors the culinary diversity of the tomato with cooking demonstrations, tastings and music. Call (504) 322-2021.

- The Louisiana Corn Festival, June 12–14, in Bunkie begins with a scarecrow contest and features corn cooking, shucking and eating contests. Also features music, crafts and food. Call (318) 346-2575.

- Ruston celebrates the Louisiana Peach Festival with a flurry of activities, this year May 29–June 13. Downtown Ruston comes alive with music, a street dance, arts and crafts, cooking contests and plenty of peach delicacies. Call (318) 255-2031 or 1-800-392-9032.

- During the first weekend in May, the sleepy town of Breaux Bridge bursts into a frenzy of excitement for the Crawfish Festival. Cajun music and cuisine, zydeco music, crawfish races, arts and crafts, a carnival and cook-offs will be featured from May 1–3. Call (318) 332-6655.

- Enjoy juicy blueberries at the Louisiana Blueberry Festival June 26–27 in Mansfield. In addition to the berries, the event features a parade, music, pancake breakfast, arts and crafts, and a street dance. Call (318) 872-1310.

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Not your same ole meat & potatoes

Chances are, most nights you don't sit down to a steaming pile of crawfish for dinner. Too bad.

We do things a little different here in Lafayette, cher. The folks are friendly, the festivals are lively and the cuisine is world-famous. Our unique heritage, a French culture simmering like a gumbo for the past 200 years, makes us seem like another country, only right next door. We call it joie de vivre. You'll call it fun.

Succulent crabs are served at many fairs.
©St. Tammany Tourist Commission

Circle no. 222 on the Reader Service Card.
For a taste of Monroe, visitors can arrange special cooking classes at the Cotton Country Cooking School, conducted by the Monroe Junior League. The Junior League is celebrating the 25th year of publication of its “Cotton Country Collection” cookbook.

For more information, contact the Natchitoches Parish Tourist Commission at 1-800-259-1714, the Shreveport-Bossier Convention & Visitor Bureau at 1-800-551-8832, and the Monroe/West Monroe CVB at 1-800-843-1872.

Mission accomplished
The best way to get to know the foods of Louisiana is to taste them, smell them and listen to people talk about them. After your own fact-finding mission, you’ll understand why Joe Cahn says Louisiana is a place where “we live to eat, not eat to live.”

Please pass the gumbo.

Barbara Gibbs Oostmann, a contributor from St. Louis, enjoyed eating her way through this story.

To plan your Louisiana culinary adventure, stop by your nearest AAA service office for maps, a TourBook, TripTik and more. For a list of offices to serve you, see page 26. You can order free information about Louisiana by turning to page 27. Fill out and send in the Reader Service Card.

St. Bernard Parish
New Orleans’ Most Historic Neighbor

CHALMETTE • MERAUX • VIOLET • ST. BERNARD • CAERNARVON
SHELLBEACH • YSCLOSKEY • HOPEDALE
Festivals, Cultural & Historical Museums, Down-Home Restaurants,
Scenic Bayou Tours, Charter Fishing, and more!

 acre Jungle Gardens and Bird City, which are open daily; admission is $5.50.
For more information, contact the Lafayette Convention & Visitors Commission at 1-800-346-1958.

From the Crossroads to the North
The Crossroads region, which cuts across the center of the state, is a geographic and cultural junction, and its foods reflect that mix, ranging from traditional Southern cooking to Cajun and Creole.

In Natchitoches, however, the must-try food is a meat pie. The best place to sample them is Lazyone’s Meat Pie Kitchen. Established in 1859, this family-owned country cafe serves fried meat pies made with a variety of fillings. Save room for dessert: homemade cream pies.

Northern Louisiana, anchored by Shreveport on the west and Monroe on the east, differs from the rest of the state in that it was settled by second-generation Anglo-Saxon pioneers, moving westward from other states. Because of this cultural difference, you’re more likely to find barbecue, catfish, biscuits and gravy, or grits on the menu than gumbo and jambalaya.

Reflecting its proximity to the Texas border, Shreveport has a definite Tex-Mex accent, but fried catfish is the top local favorite.