French Press serves fresh ‘type’ of dining

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Owner and head chef Justin Girouard declared he has his daughters to thank for the proprietary conquest: The French Press.

“I was living in New Orleans, and my wife, Margaret, came to visit our families with the kids,” explained Girouard, 33, who has the names of his daughters — Scarlett, S, and Violet, 7 — etched in cursive on his forearms. “She was trying to put the kids to sleep, and the car ride helps, and she saw the building.

“She just walked in, and it was in really bad shape.” Girouard said of his future restaurant, his voice reverberating endlessly upward. “It looked very different, but she saw the potential.”

Wrought with authentic rustic simplicity with subtle nods to its printing press past, The French Press possesses a unique and palpable ambiance within its chipped hunter-green walls.

Built in the 1930s, the building, located at 214 E. Vermilion St., was the Tribune Printing Plant building. Its floors are the original concrete slabs, now blackened, ink-splattered and dented. Exposed black pipes leap from the floors and along the heavily textured walls, sharply bending at the staggeringly lofty gold-painted pressed tin ceiling.

The only interior addition is perhaps the smell, a balancing act between freshly brewed Community Coffee and an eclectic array of dishes, reflecting the New Orleans-inspired brunch menu. Kitchen doors swing open into the dining room and hints of scents escape, from the Cane Syrup-drenched Sweet Baby Breesus boudin balls to the Breakfast Sandwich, a bacon-and-egg croissant confection.

According to Girouard, abandoning his home in New Orleans and establishing a restaurant in Lafayette was “a pipe dream,” but after his wife discovered the unique locale with the exposed pipes, everything changed.

“When she saw this building, she was like, ‘I can do that. If I’m going to be in four walls in this spot, I can do it here.’” Girouard put his family’s Algiers Point home on the market, and it sold in one day.

“That was in 2009, when the housing market was at its worst possible point for sellers,” recalled Girouard. “It was unbelievable. Someone called and bought it. Best-case-scenario.”

For three months, while his wife and daughters lived with his parents in Lafayette, Girouard slept on his sister’s couch in New Orleans and drove to Lafayette in his free time to make meetings and engage in the creation of the restaurant.

“The awnings were from the 50s, and they were like those maw-maw awnings that cover most of the window,” said Girouard with a laugh, motioning toward the massive windows at the front of the restaurant, which allows natural light to gently illuminate the room. “The previous owners had taken all that we appreciated out of the building. At first glance, it didn’t look like anything promising, but we, like them, saw the potential in it.

“When they bought it, they refurbished it and exposed all these features,” said Girouard, referring to all of the references to the building’s printing past. “We told them going into this, ‘We don’t want to lower the ceiling.’ A lot of restaurants will do that, especially in the kitchen. We wanted to keep this space big and open, and kind of rustic and industrial, like a New Orleans-style restaurant.”

To maintain all of the Tribune’s original ambiance, only one wall was rebuilt, and that one because of damage.

“The wall, for example, that crazy, green wall, that is original wear and tear from the printing shop,” observed Girouard. “They obviously, painted it once, Lord knows when, and since then it’s degraded to that. We told them we didn’t want to do anything to that.”

A minor miscommunication nearly stripped the space of its gorgeous mistakes. Luckily, Girouard happened to come in during construction and prevent a calamity.

“They were putting in the drop cloth and moldings, and it was just the paint,” recalled Girouard. “I was like, ‘What are you doing? We’re about to paint this wall.’ I was like, ‘No! You’re not painting that wall!’ If I wouldn’t have come that day, that wall would not be like that and The French Press would be a totally different space.”

The gargantuan walls are accentuated with The Museum of Modern Art replicas by Picasso, Manet and Rousseau and by typeface drawers. The building showcases various trinkets relating to the printed page, like the archaic typewriter on the accent table and the ink press tins on the wall. The hostess stand itself is a cabinet of typeface shelves.

Line cook and baker Brettly Wilson confessed he was a strict vegan prior to working for French Press and Saint Street Inn.

“The norm is usually, smaller shop, more artistically lit, following the intense fluorescent lighting of retail stores,” stated Wilson, 24. “Borderline crowded in some instances. French Press feels very large without coming
off as lonely when lacking in patrons. The high ceilings and exposed beams and pipes balance each other out by keeping a sense of elegance and class without feeling off-putting.

“Mostly, it feels unique in that it doesn’t feel strained while everything is as organized and clean as any other location. It still has what could be seen as flaws in its design that really just give it a memorable character.”

“I’ve actually gotten two or three calls from people designing their house or designing their property,” remarked Girouard. “They’re like, ‘Who did that wall for you?’ Mother Nature, really. You can’t replicate that.”