Restaurant: Making crawfish season memorable

by Angel Fontenot

If you've found yourself at a cozy little nook in the backroads of Rayne, sitting at a table with family or friends, shooting the breeze and anticipating the steaming boiled crawfish that you are about to enjoy, you're at Hawk's restaurant. Let me just fill you in on a little secret...you've come to the right place!

If you're a typical Louisianian, you look forward to crawfish season every year, which can begin as early as November, depending on the climate, and usually ends in June. On that note, now would be an excellent time to visit Hawk's to experience their boiled crawfish or any number of seafood dishes. Let's not forget, they also serve dessert, including a delicious bread pudding, which is made daily. If you should decide to try the boiled crawfish, you can order it mild, hot or extra hot; most customers like theirs hot. It can be ordered as an appetizer, which equals 1.75 lbs. It can be ordered as a main meal, of course, and would equal either 3.5 lbs. or 5 lbs. Not in the mood for those famous crawdads? Let me suggest a fried shrimp plate, a shrimp soup or maybe a fried catfish plate.

Owners Anthony and Jennifer Arceneaux have taken these beloved freshwater crustaceans to a higher level of cuisine...the delicacy. How did they do it? They purged their crawfish and have been doing so since 1983, the year Hawk's opened for business.

To date, the Arceneauxs are the only people in the restaurant industry to purge their crawfish. Purging is an extensive cleansing process in which hand-picked crawfish are placed in wells filled with fresh, underground water and circulated in the wells for 24-48 hours in aerated water. After this process is complete, the crawfish are then boiled, seasoned and served (to each patron's delight).

What are the key components of a delicacy? A delicacy should be rare and luxurious, delicate, and usually expensive. Hawk's food is rare because not only is it offered during a short season, it is the only seafood that is purged. We're not just talking crawfish here; they purge their shrimp, too.

This leads me to my next point: because the food is

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purged, it makes for a much more luxurious taste. The seafood tastes cleaner, with its natural flavors enhanced by spices, and not just covered by them. Crawfish are, in fact, delicate, as 10-12 percent of them is lost in the purging process.

And expensive? Well, Anthony does admit that his crawfish is a couple of dollars more per pound than other restaurants. However, he explained that much more time and labor is involved in preparing his crawfish than those of other restaurants.

"Part of the allure of this restaurant is that it's so far out of the way; it's like a best-kept secret," said Anthony.

The restaurant was originally opened by his father, L.H. "Hawk" Arceneaux. Hawk raised and sold crawfish initially. In the early 1980s, Texas A&M University did a study on the process of purging, and Hawk traveled to Texas to learn about the process. He came home and, shortly thereafter, opened his boiled crawfish restaurant at a time when only a handful existed.

If you're looking for a crowd, try visiting Hawk's on a Friday or Saturday night.

If you want a quieter dining experience, try visiting on a Thursday night. The restaurant is open Wednesday through Saturday from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., and Sunday from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Hawk's Restaurant is the only known restaurant where seafood is purged before seasoning and cooking, something, said owner Anthony Arceneaux, which makes the food more flavorful and delectable.

(BNP/Dawna Waterbury Photo)