Heard it at the Grapevine

Cynthia and Dickie Breaux bring their way with a café to Donaldsonville.

By Josh Caffery
Photos by Terri Fensel

Cynthia and Dickie Breaux, who transformed an abandoned hardware store in downtown Breaux Bridge into the Café des Amis, a haven for lovers of art, conversation, food and zydeco, have gone to the aid of yet another quaint Louisiana town. The Grapevine Café and Market, which opened a few weeks ago in downtown Donaldsonville, is another embodiment of the Breaux' spiritual zeal for the arts and life in small-town Louisiana.

"It started out as just a coffee house," says Cynthia Breaux, a blue-eyed, energetic woman who punctuates most of her sentences with fluttering hand gestures. "But people just swarmed in on the first day. Now, we're pretty much gone back to the Café Des Amis format with breakfast, lunch and dinner."

Like the Café Des Amis, the Grapevine Café and Market is built inside the renewed hunk of an old brick building on a central downtown drag. Unlike Bridge Street in Breaux Bridge, Railroad Avenue is surrounded by a sprawling downtown historic district that boasts more than 600 historic buildings. Bordering on one side by the Mississippi and on the other by railroad tracks, the historic district is severed from the bustle of service stations and highways on the other side of town.

Decaying shotgun houses with azalea-speckled yards squat next to ornate homes with white spires that shoot up above the heavy leaves of surrounding magnolias. It almost seems like a little chunk of New Orleans' Garden District was sliced off and transplanted to the middle of the sugar cane fields 50 miles down the Mississippi. And according to Stevie Graugnard, a local expert on the history of Donaldsonville, the resemblance to New Orleans is more than just a...
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As the story goes, a certain engineer by the name of Bartholomey LaFon was hired by town father William Donaldson to design the layout of what is now the Historic District of Donaldsonville. Other notable projects taken on by LaFon include the design of the Ice House and the Louisiana State Capitol.

Long before LaFon set to work on the land, however, the area had been settled as a trading post. This region, where Bayou Lafourche (Fort Bayou) flows off the Mississippi, was a hub for Choctaw Indians as well as the earliest European settlers and explorers. LaFon wrote about Bayou Lafourche in his journals, which were in turn studied by Iberville and Bienville as they returned to explore the bayous of Southern Louisiana.

Today, a $30 million replica of Bienville's vessel may come to dock on the Mississippi at Donaldsonville and hopefully bring some folks to the languid streets of this tiny town.

"This whole avenue could be like a little Montmartre Street," says Dickie Beaux, referring to the cultural district in Memphis. A former Louisiana state legislator, Beaux's passion for the arts is tempered by his understanding of the way things work in the paper world of bills, permits, deals and Louisiana politics. While he has the easygoing, jazzy manner of any good Cajun politician, he seems to possess another quality painfully absent in Louisiana politics: vision.

"Historic buildings have their own spirit," says Beaux, smoking a Marlboro Light at one of the sinker-cypress tables handmade for the Grapevine Café. "This guy walks in last week, and we didn't know this, but he said this building used to be the local tavern, where they served breakfast, lunch and dinner," he adds. "This is where everybody came to socialize. For two years, we tried to visualize what we wanted this place to be. First we wanted a coffee house, then a place for African artifacts, and it just didn't want to work."

From the number of people dining at the Grapevine on this blustery March day, it seems that the spirit of the building has finally been appeased. Almost every table is taken and sweet young waitresses float around the sunny room, bringing creamy layers of white chocolate bread pudding and steaming café au lait to hungry-eyed patrons.

Our waitress was particularly polite, in fact, and was very gracious when I accidentally put creamer instead of sugar into my iced tea, bringing me a fresh drink free of charge and even managing not to laugh at me, though it must have been hard. The menu at the Grapevine is basically the same as the Café Des Amis, featuring Beaux's unique combinations of Cajun and Creole dishes. A couple of surprises await fans of the Café Des Amis, however, such as the Bananas Foster Waffle for breakfast and the Tuna Muffuletta for lunch.

The walls of the Grapevine are the original bare brick, smoothed down and cleaned, and the floors are covered with vaguely circular patterns of ancient tile that the Breaux family, who were once known as the "Old Chateau," once decorated. Windows in the front and one side of the main room allow long bars of sunlight to stretch out across the tiles. The food is so good that I refuse to deify it with my pen, but will leave that task to the professional food critics who will surely soon be streaming into Donaldsonville from across the South.

Even the bathrooms are evidence of the Breauxes' singular way with a restroom. A small plaque invites customers to contribute to the "Ode de toilette," a large white square of drawing paper affixed to the wall directly in front of the commode. A box of drawing markers sits on a stand against the wall next to a mirror.

Amid declarations of love, indelible scribbles and weighty epigrams, a simple unsigned sentence written in slanted, thin black ink jumps out: "Thank you for coming to Donaldsonville."

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