Variety of cuisines makes dining out a real pleasure

By BETTYE EPPES

Congratulations. You made a lucky move. You came to an area where almost everybody loves to cook and the local pastime is going out to eat. Good food is more than a major focus. It is almost an obsession.

Unlike most areas of the country, South Louisiana has an indigenous cuisine. It's a lively, enticing blend of Cajun and Creole influences makes this indigenous cuisine one of the liveliest, most interesting in the world.

In addition to her own native cuisine, Baton Rouge has a large number of ethnic restaurants. These add depth and resonance to rich mosaic that is the possibility of dining out in Baton Rouge.

Its colorful, varied collection of restaurants makes Baton Rouge dinners discerning diners. Their discriminating, unforgiving palates just won't allow a bad restaurant to stay in business here for long. That's why, in this city where the good restaurants outnumber the bad, the question is not "Where can we go to eat?" It is instead "How can we decide where to go?"

Deciding "where you'll eat is easy once you realize that no matter what your mood, Baton Rouge has a restaurant to match it.

Beginning at the very top, Chalet Brandt (7655 Old Hammond Hwy.) sits on the creme de la creme of Baton Rouge. It is a very fine European-style restaurant where classic Continental cuisine with a Louisiana flair is served in an ambiance of worldly sophistication.

Chalet Brandt owner/executive chef Charles Brandt is a restaurateur par excellence. He is in the early morning market for fresh produce every day and is in the restaurant kitchen cooking thereafter. But be assured that Charles Brandt keeps an eagle eye on the customers out front at Chalet Brandt.

Charles Brandt's motto is: Nothing but the best. His menu's specialties feature Persian Gulf caviar, North Sea salmon, specialty seafood fresh from the waters of the world, the finest produce, plus berries and fruits from remote, exotic lands.

Service at Chalet Brandt is formal, impeccable, equal in excellence to the kitchen.

Chalet Brandt has been awarded a four-star rating by Mobil for 12 consecutive years. It deserves the honor. Dining at Baton Rouge's premier restaurant is more than having a meal. It is a world-class dining experience.

Also of excellence in Baton Rouge is Maison Lacour. Baton Rouge's most romantic restaurant.

Maison Lacour is the realization of a dream. Owners John and Jacqueline Greaud dreamed of and collected ideas for a restaurant of their own as they traveled the world. When their travels were over, they settled in Baton Rouge.

They obtained a lease on a little cottage at 11025 N. Harrell's Ferry Road, decorated it in the romantic country French style, and developed our area's most intriguing menu.

Maison Lacour cuisine is based on classic French methodology. It is perfected in Jacqueline Greaud's unique personal style. Dishes that are not to be missed are Parisian brioche (a cream soup with a traditional French temperamental and a fiesty South Louisiana soul), the hot, fabulous bread that Jacqueline makes fresh daily, the seafood cobbler (seafood sauce in a light, flaky pastry); crawfish or shrimp in sauce Baton Rouge; the menu of specials; and every dessert, especially the house's specialty ice creams (green tea and French custard ice creams are personal favorites.)

Call a favorite friend and lunch at Maison Lacour. You'll both be glad you did. And remember. The bread at Maison Lacour alone is worth a special trip; all the rest of the menu is lagaffe.

Steak lovers will be ecstatic in Baton Rouge. Ruth's Chris Steak House (4836 Constitution) offers the very best steak in the world. Thick, juicy and tender cuts of prime beef are cooked exactly as ordered and served up on sizzling hot platters. Steak at Ruth's Chris is simply, the best.

Juban's (3739 Perkins Road) bills itself as a Creole restaurant. That's okay by me, and it shouldn't intimidate you. Juban's serves superior food in a restaurant exactly like dozens of cafes in Paris. It's grilled seafood is wonderful, its desserts are scrumptious, (don't miss the bread pudding and milk high pie), and its bar is truly special.

The bar's huge skyline is great on sunny days and is even better during a rain. The skyline sounds as if it were made of tin - go there late on a rainy afternoon, get some hot tea, lace it generously with Armagnacs, then sit back and relax. Good company. Falling rain. And the wail of the six o'clock train. It's mellow.

Chez Paris should be high up on the list of must-visit restaurants. Owner/chef Philippe Parola is Parisian. He came to Baton Rouge, experienced the diversity and excitement of his cuisine, then decided to stay and develop a menu that blended the best of Louisiana's indigenous cuisine and classic French cuisine.

The result is a restaurant where the very freshest seafood and local produce are paired with elegant sauces. Soups at Chez Paris are delightfully unique; they are evocative of French classics but have that unmistakable South Louisianash dash of difference. Finished dishes are pictures at Chez Paris and desserts are imaginative and innovative. Chez Paris just may be the best kept culinary secret among Baton Rouge's dining out cognoscenti. It is a personal favorite.

Serop's is a Lebanese restaurant with a menu adjusted to the American palate. Salad dressings often have the cool, refreshing hint of mint; beef and lamb dishes have the exotic and unmistakable blend of Middle Eastern spices; desserts are small, delectable treats such as baklava.

Serop's makes the best fried shrimp in the world; its hummus is heavenly; the spanakopita is superb; the vegetarian plate is so good we can't believe it is ultra-healthy, and the beef and chicken shawarma give new meaning to the word sandwich.

Middle Eastern specialties such as grape leaves, kibbe, falafel and Turkish coffee abound at Serop's. But they are rendered in a lighter, more American style.

Service at Serop's is able and attentive and the kitchen can be depended upon to get the food out efficiently, even when Serop's is packed, as it almost always is at lunch and on Friday night.

To complete the list of a baker's dozen of special Baton Rouge restaurants try: Ralph and Kacoo's (8110 Bluebonnet) for the city's most diverse seafood menu; Louie's Cafe (299 W. State St.) for a bite of the eclectic campus life at a real cafe; Mulata's (3232 Bluebonnet Rd.) for a spicy serving of Cajun dishes and desserts; Gino's (4543 Bennington) for some of America's best food a la Northern Italy; Mama Brava's (in Cordtana Mall) for great calzone and pizza done New York style; and the China House (7165 Greenwell Springs Rd.) for this area's finest authentic Chinese specialties.

I couldn't close out a piece on Baton Rouge dining without mentioning Lafayette's Landing. It's out of town, across the Sunshine Bridge at Donaldsonville. But getting there is but a 25-minute drive, and a pleasant one that puts visitors in the vicinity of many historic plantation houses.

Lafitte's Landing is owned by Chef John Folse, the never-failing entrepreneur who personally took Louisiana's indigenous cuisine all across America, to Europe, even to Russia and deep into the heart of Communist China.

Chef Folse and his able number two chef Kim Kringle have developed a menu that could keep a diner eating happily forever and ever. To miss the Lafitte's Landing experience is to miss out on Cajun and Creole dishes at their finest.

Should you find yourself having trouble making friends in our city, just ask your neighbor or fellow worker for suggestions on where to eat. Food is sure fire ice breaker in our food-loving city.