

BATTER of New Orleans

Wake up to fruit beignets, pain perdu
and other Big Easy breakfasts

by Dani Friedland

There is a tale, perhaps apocryphal, about breakfast beverages in New Orleans. They say the water wasn't safe, so many people would drink Champagne or wine with their breakfast. Those who bothered to boil water ended up making coffee. And that's why you'll find wine and cocktail pairings—as well as legendary coffee—on many breakfast and brunch menus in the Big Easy.

Fortunately, the food can stand up to whatever's in the glass—or mug.

TRADITIONAL TEMPTATIONS

Some breakfast foods have been standing up to strong coffee for centuries. Take calas: beignets made with leftover rice first made by slaves, notes Bryon Peck, executive chef of Elizabeth's in New Orleans. Old fashioned calas batter was made with cane syrup, eggs and flour; all ingredients Peck uses in his waffle batter. So instead, at Elizabeth's, his waffle batter is an integral part of the calas, served with powdered sugar and a side of cane syrup (\$5.50, recipe, p. 107).

Another popular brunch item draws from the New Orleans tradition of pralines—in this case, praline bacon (\$6, recipe, p. 107). It took years to get the recipe down, Peck says, explaining that

it's important to degrease the bacon and let it cool completely between blanching and baking it, or else the bacon finishes cooking before the praline caramelizes.

THE CREOLE DEAL

In Chicago, Chef-Owner Jimmy Bannos of Heaven on Seven took inspiration from coastal shrimping communities for a hearty start to the day. He says they would buy bacon, render the fat, then catch and cook “breakfast shrimp” and serve it with grits.

His shrimp and grits (\$11.95, recipe, plateonline.com) is a bit more elegant, thanks to grits made with Parmesan and Asiago. The grits contrast with crunchy shrimp that get a quick bath in hot sauce. Sautéed onions and shiitake mushrooms join them atop the grits, as well as some ham “to Creole-ize it,” Bannos says.

“I don't think I've ever eaten a Cajun dish that had a hollandaise on it,” Chef-Owner Justin Girouard of The French Press in Lafayette, La., says, noting that his French Press Benedict (\$14.50, recipe, p. 105) is more Creole.

The dish starts with a black bean crab cake, a roasted tomato hollandaise and crab meat with a cornbread-crust fried poached egg. Girouard poaches the eggs,



then cools them completely before frying them quickly in cornbread crumbs. The result is a warm, liquid egg whose yolk pops dramatically when the fork breaks through the crackly cornbread crust.

In New Orleans, Executive Chef Lazone Randolph at Brennan's has been serving eggs Hussarde (recipe, plateonline.com), another twist on the classic eggs Benedict, for decades, just as the late chef Paul Blange taught him. Two crisp



Cajuns have their own version of fried rice, called RIZ JAUNE, for which leftover white rice is cooked in bacon fat with ham, parsley and onions and served at breakfast or brunch.



French Press Benedict,
\$14.50, Chef-Owner
Justin Girouard, The
French Press, New
Orleans, **RECIPE**, p. 105.

toast rounds form the base of the dish, with warm Canadian bacon and *marchand de vin* sauce, then the classic poached eggs and hollandaise.

EAT DESSERT FIRST

If Executive Chef-Co-Owner Kevin Gillespie of Atlanta's Woodfire Grill served breakfast, he could menu his star dessert: banana *pain perdu* (\$8, recipe, plateonline.com). After all, the dish flaunts his favorite breakfast foods: bananas and bacon. For the dish he tops banana bread *pain perdu* with caramel, candied bacon, and ice cream. The banana bread absorbs some, but not all, of the *crème anglaise* custard, and the result is a dessert with a cakey center and a French toast texture on the outside. And since the dish is a derivative of breakfast, Gillespie says the transition from dessert to the morning wouldn't be hard: just lose the ice cream and change the caramel to syrup. "We'd keep the bacon, of course," he says.



BRUNCH

is said to have been created in New Orleans at Madame Begue's for Catholic church-goers in the 19th century who had fasted until after Sunday mass.

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No discussion of Cajun and Creole breakfasts would be complete without the beignet. At Tupelo Junction Cafe in Santa Barbara, Calif., Owner Amy Scott's menu of American fare with a Southern twist includes cinnamon apple beignets with *crème anglaise* (\$8, recipe, plateonline.com). With a moist ricotta center, and batter spiked with Granny Smith apple pie filling, it's a delicious way for guests to start their day—no matter what they're drinking.

Dani Friedland has never met a beignet she didn't like. For recipes from this article and more, visit plateonline.com.



**Calas, \$5.50, praline
bacon, \$6, Chef Bryon
Peck, Elizabeth's, New
Orleans. **RECIPES**, p. 107.**