

OUR LOUISIANA

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PANORAMIC PARK VIEWS

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In Acadiana, where nearly every family boasts of at least one great cook, people are very discerning when it comes to dining at restaurants that claim to serve authentic regional cuisine. The competition is stiff in this neck of the woods, since most gifted home cooks can make a duck and oyster or a chicken and andouille gumbo that tastes better than those gumbos served at some of the famous old-line New Orleans dining establishments. I have come to this conclusion after judging numerous culinary competitions in New Orleans over the past 20 years.

LANDRY'S: A NEW IBERIA GEM

acclaimed chef Alex Patout returns to his roots





Although New Orleans is replete with extraordinary chefs and great restaurants of national acclaim, it is rare to find an authentic Cajun eatery in the Big Easy. In fact, I only know of two that I would recommend, although the dishes served aren't representative of what most of us grew up eating in Acadiana.

Prior to the 2005 storm that devastated New Orleans, there was a restaurant in the French Quarter that served authentic Cajun cuisine for 16 years. It was one of my favorite places to take visitors, and was owned by award-winning Cajun chef and media celebrity, Alex Patout.

Chef Patout is the real deal. He owned the elegant Alex Patout's Louisiana Restaurant that flourished until the levees broke after Katrina. I recall going there on Friday evenings when the place was packed. After the storm, Patout closed his French Quarter restaurant and moved to Miami, where he ran a New Orleans-inspired bistro situated in a two-story mansion.

Chef Patout has been at the forefront of championing Cajun cuisine since 1978, when he opened his first restaurant in New Iberia. He became a nationally celebrated media personality and was invited to cook for the President of the United States (whose guests included the President of France and the Prime Ministers of Great Britain, Italy, Germany, and Japan), and he was named as one of the top chefs in America by national magazines. He also developed a successful line of Louisiana products during that time.

I am happy to report that chef Patout has returned to his hometown of New Iberia and is the executive chef of Landry's Cajun Seafood and Steakhouse, located near beautiful Jefferson Island (only one exit away from New Iberia's hotels; go west to the corner of Highway 90 and Jefferson Island Road).

Landry's is not to be confused with the enormous national Landry's Seafood House chain that originated in Katy, Texas, in 1980 (there are three locations in Louisiana and many others in several states). There is only one Landry's Cajun Seafood and Steakhouse. Like chef Patout, the locally owned Landry's in New Iberia is the real deal. It has been a family-operated restaurant since opening in 1969.

You will find such time-honored favorites as crawfish bisque (a superb house specialty), fabulous duck and oyster gumbo, an outstanding chicken and sausage gumbo made with a dark roux, delicious crawfish pies and crawfish etouffée, wild catfish court bouillon, smothered

okra, a wonderful spicy maque choux, shrimp and crabmeat eggplant casserole, slow-fried chicken topped with Maw Maw's Cajun stew gravy, wild Atchafalaya Basin frog legs, stuffed crabs and crab cakes, and bell peppers stuffed with eggplant and ground meat; they at once reminded me of the kind of home cooking I grew up with in Acadiana.

The authentic Cajun dining experience at Landry's has been kicked up a notch since chef Patout's arrival. He is a stickler for sourcing only the freshest seafood and locally grown produce. You will be able to find some of the specialties he served at his New Orleans restaurant, plus the extensive array of menu items offered for lunch and dinner.

The prices are very reasonable. I highly recommend sampling chef Patout's new multi-course tasting menu, which is priced at a mere \$35 (you would pay twice this amount in New Orleans for the same meal). It includes crabmeat Maison, crawfish bisque, a petite soft-shell crab, Cajun smothered roast duck, and homemade bread pudding with rum sauce or homemade lemon cheesecake.

From the à la carte menu, I recommend sampling the charbroiled oysters, Cajun stuffed mushrooms, and the fried alligator as appetizers; among the entrées, try the delicious grilled fresh whole catfish, stuffed flounder, crabmeat au gratin, and the amazing soft-shell crab-Cypremort Point topped with lump crabmeat and a corn cream sauce. The steaks are tops.

This is a fun place to take friends while visiting Acadiana. Every Friday and Saturday night, there is live Cajun music provided by some of the top bands in the area. The Grand Buffet is offered on Friday and Saturday nights only. The extensive offerings include items from the Friday-only lunch buffet, which is referred to as "Cajun camp cuisine" and includes fried catfish, shrimp gumbo, wild catfish court bouillon, shrimp and corn bisque, and a whole lot more. The Grand Buffet also includes fresh boiled crabs served with boiled corn and new potatoes. There is also a newly expanded "Maw Maw's" lunch buffet that offers an extensive array of excellent Cajun fare at bargain prices.

Owners Dave and Grace Landry are among the smiling faces that welcome regulars at the door like old friends. The service is warm and friendly, and you can "pass a good time" on the dance floor. Landry's is situated in a large, rustic Acadian-style home flanked by a picturesque gazebo overlooking a pond. The utterly charming restaurant is located on Highway 90 at Jefferson Island Road; 337-369-3772. ➤