

Seafood WITH SOUL

Making a Southern splash with
Cajun and Creole seafood and shellfish

by Dawn Reiss



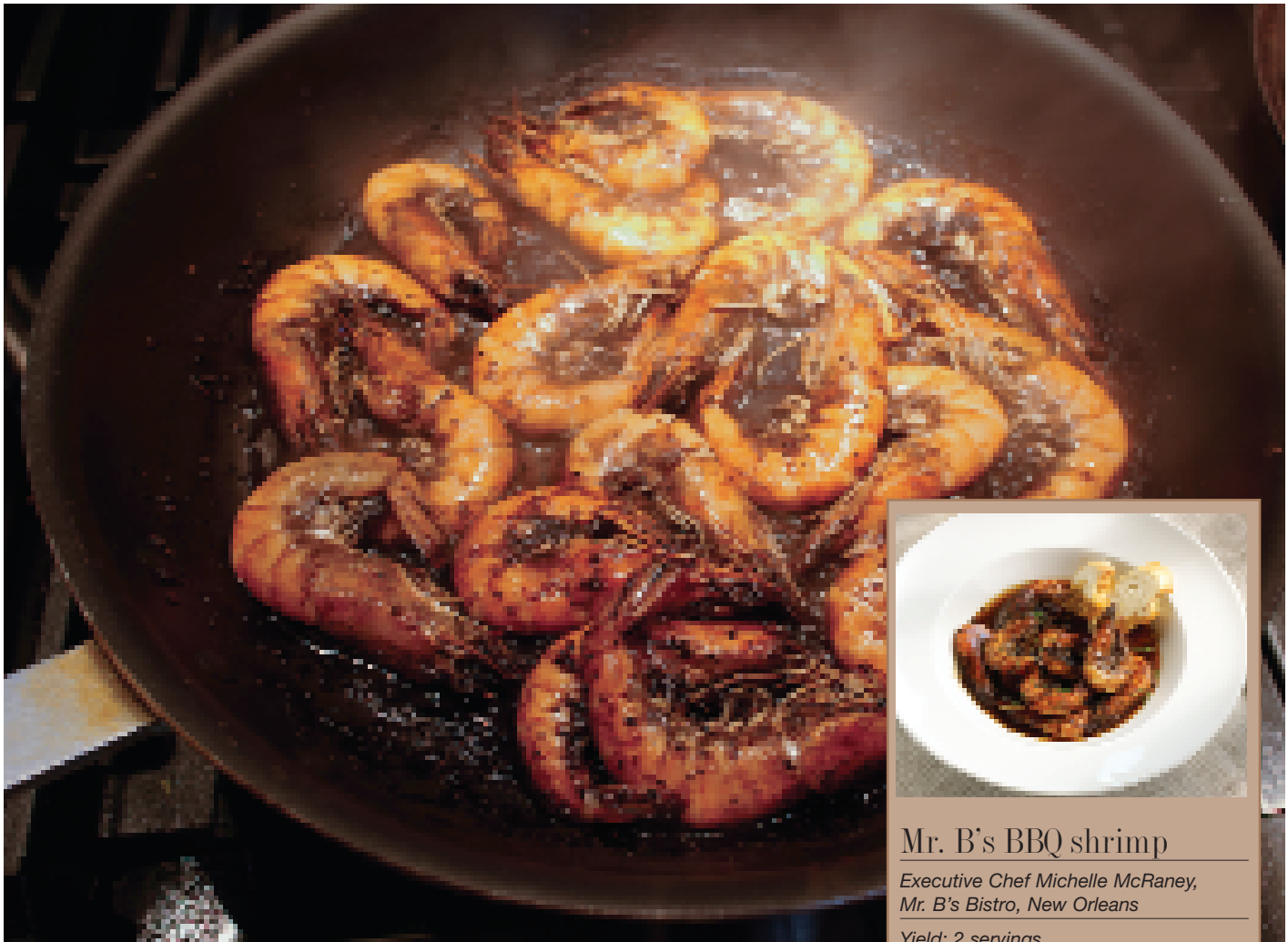


For people who love Cajun and Creole food, the holy trinity is a culinary journey paved with onions, bell peppers and celery. But just as important—and possibly as much of a spiritual experience—are the iconic seafood dishes, from down-home to elegant, that make the most of Gulf seafood and illustrate the many cultural footprints on these cuisines.

Cajun food is about simple one-pot dishes. The “table in wilderness-style” began as a creative adaptation by Acadians, hunters and trappers who used local vegetables and herbs to create dishes like red beans and rice, jambalaya, crawfish boils and smoked meats. Compared to their aristocratic Creole counterparts, this was living off the land.

“Think of Cajun as the country cousin of Creole,” jokes Chef John Besh of New Orleans’ Restaurant August. “Cajun dishes have a lot of history from their Acadian ancestry; they are old French recipes for simple food made very consistently. It’s like Cajun dishes have been left in a time capsule because they haven’t changed a lot. Creole foods developed flavors from the Spanish, French, Africans and Portuguese.

Fried oyster and black-eyed pea salad with jalapeño-garlic vinaigrette, \$11, Chef-Co-Owner Susan Spicer, Bayona, New Orleans. RECIPE, p. 95.



Mr. B's BBQ shrimp

Executive Chef Michelle McRaney,
Mr. B's Bistro, New Orleans

Yield: 2 servings

Menu price: \$26;
food cost/serving: N/A

Shrimp, jumbo, head-on, unpeeled	16 each
Worcestershire sauce	1/2 C
Lemon juice, fresh	2 TBS
Freshly ground black pepper	2 tsp
Black peppercorns, cracked	2 tsp
Creole seasoning	2 tsp
Garlic, minced	1 tsp
Butter, unsalted, cold, cubed	1 1/2 C

1. In a large frying pan over medium-high heat, combine all ingredients, except butter, for approximately 2 minutes, until shrimp turn pink. Reduce heat to medium; add butter, in small batches, allowing each addition to melt completely.

2. Remove pan from heat. Divide shrimp evenly among 2 bowls and serve with French bread.

It became the perfect storm because New Orleans is a port city with a lot of trade, and anyone who came here wanted to assimilate," he adds.

One of Besh's favorite dishes is his elegant take on a French crawfish boil, *façon chez Bruno*, made with brandy and black truffles (\$16, recipe, p. 100). After toasting the crawfish with Armagnac for a "beautiful nutty aroma," Besh combines it with fresh cream from his local dairy. He simmers the mixture for five to seven minutes and tops it with shaved black truffles and tarragon.

barbecued shrimp

was created at Pascal's Manale in New Orleans as a Creole-Italian take on shrimp scampi.

"Any crawfish dish flambéed in cream and smothered in brandy is going to be amazing," he admits.

Chef-Partner Michael Vignola of New York City's Gravy also puts his spin on the classics. "I have no desire to be authentic, like making grandma's fried chicken recipe. I'd never succeed," he says. "It's about taking dishes and making them new and flavorful."

During the summer, he's "always looking for something light and visually appealing, like a piece of fish." That desire inspired Vignola to come up with raw Cajun red snapper with pickled okra (\$12, recipe, p. 96), where the fruitiness of the snapper comes alive with blackening spices and pickled okra. "I call it conscious Creole and Cajun," he says.

Asian influences

Like Vietnam, Louisiana once lived as a colony under French rule.

Chef Cynthia Vu-Tran of Cafe Minh in New Orleans knows both lands, having grown up in Vietnam where her father was a fisherman and her mother was a farmer. As a child and young teenager in Vietnam, Vu-Tran grew and sold vegetables. After living in Malaysia for a year, she moved to New Orleans at age 15.

The Vietnamese population in New Orleans is estimated to number 25,000, having spiked when many Vietnamese fled their country after the rise of communism following the Vietnam War. Catholic organizations helped many Vietnamese get to America, and New Orleans, with its similar hot, humid climate and large Catholic population, became one of the largest hubs for this influx of refugees.

Both Vietnam and New Orleans were greatly influenced by French-style cooking, something Vu-Tran carries on today in her Vietnamese-French-Creole fusion cuisine. Both cuisines do a lot of simmering and slow cooking in one-pot meals, and use fresh, locally grown produce. Some experts say the crayfish boil with its lime juice, salt and pepper sauce is similar to Vietnamese *muoi tieu chanh*, which means salt, pepper and lemon.

Vu-Tran remembers the taste of her first crawfish (after figuring out how to eat it):

"It was so buttery from the fat from the head," she says. "I had a couple more, and thought 'this is just awesome.' I've loved crawfish ever since."

These days, one of her favorite dishes is bouillabaisse, given Asian touches from lemon grass and fish sauce added to the traditional mixture of fennel, saffron, shellfish and fish.

"Asian seasonings are so good with vegetables, which is why we marry together Asian and Creole with seafood here in New Orleans," she says.



Cajun snapper with chiles, crispy beans, picked okra and citrus jus, \$12, Chef-Partner Michael Vignola, Gravy, New York City. RECIPE, p. 96.

BARBECUE WITH BUTTER

"Most people think Cajun and Creole food is all spicy, super-heavy, fattening or fried, but it's not," says Chef-Co-Owner Molly McCook of Fort Worth, Texas' Ellerbe Fine Foods. McCook was born and raised in Shreveport, La., and goes to New Orleans several times a year for an afternoon mint julep.

Yes, she admits there are indulgent elements, but McCook says cooking Cajun and Creole style is more about using fresh ingredients in true farm-to-table fashion, coupled with feeding your body seasonally.

That said, her New Orleans-style barbecue shrimp uses butter as a

base, making it much richer than the traditional ketchup and vinegar sauce that most people associate with barbecue. The shrimp are slow-cooked in butter for three hours with the holy trinity so that everything melds together. Lemon juice and beer help to "brighten it up and break the butter in your mouth so you can taste all the flavors," she says.

McCook, who's named two of her dogs Etta (for étouffée), Cassie (for cassoulet), still remembers the aroma of her grandmother's bread pudding filling the air, and having a big pot of gumbo with the first winter chill.

"Most of my dishes remind me of New Orleans," McCook says.





French crawfish boil (façon chez Bruno), \$16, Chef John Besh, Restaurant August, New Orleans. RECIPE, p. 100.

the heads on to give it extra flavor.

This peel-and-eat shrimp is like eating boiled crawfish, and anyone who takes a turn at the table with it needs to wear a bib, followed by clean-up with lemon and hot water. “This isn’t a glamorous dish,” Brennan says. “Some people come out filthy and some people don’t even have a splash on them. I’ve seen some people come in and use a knife and fork to de-head and peel their shrimp. But most people put on their bib and peel away. Some even lick their fingers because it’s just plain delicious,” she says.

THE HALF SHELL

Oyster dishes, like oyster stew, oysters

Dunbar, deviled oysters, Bienville or even roasted oysters have always been a big part of Cajun and Creole cuisines along the Gulf Coast.

Executive Chef-Co-Owner Todd Gray of Todd Gray’s Watershed in Washington, D.C.,

says he has always loved oysters.

Holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas were traditionally spent shucking and roasting oysters on the grill while watching football. “We’d all hover around the grill, since oysters don’t travel well,” he says, “with a fork in hand.”

It’s a tradition that inspired Gray’s baked oysters (\$11, recipe, plateonline.com), which he tops with spinach, pancetta and Gruyère.

The dish starts with shucked Chincoteague oysters that are returned to their shells. The oyster liquor is mixed with flour and water, then combined with pancetta, shallots and spinach, topped with Gruyère and seasoned panko breadcrumbs and then baked.

“It has nice flavor layers,” Gray says.



“When you combine Cajun and Creole cooking, it encompasses an entire population, from aristocrats to the poor, from butter to braises.”

Just as with McCook’s shrimp recipe, you won’t find any barbecue in Mr. B’s BBQ shrimp (\$26, recipe, p. 32).

“No, there’s no barbecue used in the dish,” says Managing Partner Cindy Brennan. “We called it barbecue shrimp years ago, and it still confuses the world.

“It’s not a fancy pants dish,” she jokes

about the restaurant’s signature dish, created by Chef Gerard Maras in the early 1980s and continued by current Executive Chef Michelle McRaney.

“It’s simple: You start with high quality Gulf shrimp,” she says. Six or eight large shrimp are sautéed with lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce, garlic and seasonings, while butter is mounted in until it’s reduced to a creamy sauce that “tastes like pure velvet,” jokes Brennan, who says the key is cooking the shrimp with

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from butter to braises.**



Redneck Rockefeller
oysters, \$12, Chef
Jonathan Lundy,
Jonathan's at Gratz Park,
Lexington, Ky.
RECIPE, p. 98.

"The saltiness and brininess of the oyster, the richness of the Gruyère, earthiness of spinach, the saltiness of pancetta and crunch from the breadcrumbs."

The cooking of the Louisiana Creoles tends to lean more toward classic European styles adapted to local food-suffs," says Gray. "The techniques were perfected in Europe, he says. "They utilized scraps of cheese, and incorporated the flavors of Italian pancetta and Swiss Gruyère with local ingredients."

Creole has been a foundation in American cooking for more than 100 years," Gray says. "It's one of the regions where American cooking started

and has become a major part of the American repertoire of cooking."

Susan Spicer of New Orleans' Bayona jokes she was trying to put a healthy spin on her city's fare when she created her fried oyster and black-eyed pea salad (\$11, recipe, p. 95). She coats the oysters in thyme-scented cornmeal, flash-fries them and places them atop julienned

celeriac, spinach and black-eyed peas, and dresses the plate with a jalapeño-garlic vinaigrette. "It tastes like oyster stuffing," she says.

Jonathan Lundy of Jonathan's at Gratz Park in Lexington, Ky., was also trying to be funny when he came up with his



Redneck Rockefellers: oysters baked with homemade pimento cheese and country ham. The cheesiness and saltiness coupled with olive oil, onions and oysters, makes it a playful rather than sophisticated concoction (\$12, recipe, p. 98). "The whole idea of the dish was to poke fun at the hillbilly redneck," says Lundy, who got his culinary start in New Orleans, where he worked with Emeril Lagasse in 1991. "When I first started running it, my wife didn't think it was funny," he says.

Lundy kept it on the menu, because he says, just like Cajun and Creole food, "pimento cheese is a southern non-preentious thing you eat and share."

Dawn Reiss' favorite seafood dish is a spicy bowl of gumbo with the holy trinity. For recipes from this article and more, visit plateonline.com.