

TRAVEL AROUND THE SOUTH

Christmas in New Orleans

Experience 19th century traditions and a futuristic light show in the Crescent City.

By Tracey Teo
For the AJC

In 19th century New Orleans, it was not uncommon for those returning from midnight mass on Christmas Eve in the predominantly Catholic city with French roots to sit down to a lavish meal prepared by servants or caterers.

Derived from the French word for awakening, Réveillon dinners were a French Creole tradition, featuring labor-intensive delicacies, such as oyster bisque, game pies made from duck or quail, fish stuffed with lemon and herbs and daube glace, an artfully molded beef aspic served on toast. A variety of wines and cordials all were part of the elaborate banquet that went on into the wee hours.

Over time, American Christmas traditions replaced French Creole holiday customs, and by World War II, the Réveillon dinner had been discarded like last year's wrapping paper. But in the '90s, a group of French Quarter restaurant owners revived the tradition as a marketing and tourism tool.

The Crescent City loves an excuse to celebrate, and now dozens of restaurants offer Réveillon menus that have been adapted to modern palates and dining customs. Here are two; no need to wait until Christmas Eve to indulge. Réveillon dinners typically appear on participating restaurants' menus after Thanksgiving and through New Year's Day.

Ralph's on the Park

Ralph's on the Park is where locals go for Réveillon dinner. Originally built as a coffee house in 1860, this restaurant offers scenic views of City Park and a laid-back alternative to the hubbub of the French Quarter.

Ralph Brennan, president of the Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group, was among the French Quarter restaurateurs who revived the Réveillon tradition more than 30 years ago.

Going back in culinary time wasn't easy, he said.

"We worked with the Historic New Orleans Collection (a museum and research center dedicated to the history and culture of New Orleans) to find out more about the dishes that were enjoyed for the occasion," Brennan said.

New Orleans is a sea-food-centric city, and it wouldn't be Christmas without shellfish. Ralph's on the Park serves crab-crusted fish on a bed of crab fat rice (rice with crab roe) and shrimp velouté, a venerable Creole dish loved by locals and a revelation to visitors.

For the meat course, filet mignon with a decadently rich foie gras demi-glace is the last word in luxury gastronomy.

A dessert of bourbon pecan pie comes with a choice of traditional coffee or New Orleans' famous chicory coffee.

Tujague's

Tujague's, a fixture in the French Quarter since 1856, is the second-oldest restaurant in New Orleans and among the oldest in the country. A couple of years ago, this doyenne of French Creole cuisine moved upriver from 823 Decatur St., its home since



The French Quarter in New Orleans offers a different kind of celebration for the holidays. PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAUL BROUSSARD



Jackson Square in New Orleans gets decorated for the holidays.

1914, to 429 Decatur St., but it preserved its distinctive Old-World ambience by bringing along its sepia-toned photos of celebrity diners and quirky collection of vintage liquor bottles.

Executive chef Gus Martin only has been at the helm for a year, but he's an old pro at Creole cuisine and has cooked in many of the city's most revered kitchens, including Commander's Palace.

His thoughtfully curated, four-course Réveillon menu honors the spirit of Christmas past but doesn't feel like a relic of a bygone era.

"I try to evolve the old classics for a modern world," Martin said. "I put my stamp on it, but it has the same bones as the old classic dish."

Take the Gulf fish Bienville, for example, one of our entree options.

"I use the Bienville topping (a sauce similar to béchamel but with the addition of egg yolks, heavy cream, trout,

shrimp and crab) as the base for the fish and elevate the dish with the blue crab butter sauce around it," Martin said. "I modernize it with a nice light salad on top of the fish and fried new potatoes."

Turkey is the centerpiece of many American holiday parties, but Tujague's offers a posh poultry alternative — roast duck.

Today, duck is more commonly featured in Cajun cooking, the rustic cuisine of southwest Louisiana, but despite not being part of the Creole repertoire, food historian Williams said duck likely made an appearance on 19th-century Réveillon tables.

"Part of the reason duck was a treat in the past was that it was not available all year round," Williams said. "You would only have duck during their migrations."

Another advantage of duck over turkey — the giblets are a delicacy. Martin folds duck liver foie gras into the mashed potatoes.

For dessert, forget figgy pudding and tuck into a delicate crème brûlée or apple spice cake topped with eggnog ice cream.

Other holiday attractions

Fine dining is one reason to visit the Big Easy during the holidays, but there's an array of events to fill you with Christmas cheer. Many are as over-the-top and distinctive as the city itself.

Luna Fête is a festival of lights, art and technology at the new Convention Center Pedestrian Park. It goes beyond traditional Christmas displays and features large-scale art installations animated with colorful lights and electronic music.

The use of video mapping projections transforms ordinary buildings into canvases of sorts, while creating the illusion of multi-dimensional movement.

A larger-than-life waterfall is so realistic you almost expect a

splash. The world's largest butlerly seems to drop from the night sky. Even the pavement beneath your feet may suddenly illuminate, transporting you to an enchanted land of the artist's imagination.

Celebration in the Oaks, an annual drive-through lights festival in City Park, is proof that a winter wonderland can exist in the South. New Orleanians dreaming of a white Christmas are wowed by illuminated displays of whimsical snowflakes and Christmas trees.

The park's ancient live oak trees, some of the oldest in the world, sparkle with thousands of lights, and a range of imaginative displays comprise everything from swans swimming on the lake to a fierce dinosaur.

A walking tour also is available and includes access to the seasonal Carousel Gardens amusement park.

Here, Santa has a competitor called Mr. Bingle. The iconic snowman with an ice cream hat was the 1940s creation of the shuttered Maison Blanche Department store on Canal Street. For many locals, it wasn't Christmas until he appeared in the window.

The Ferris Wheel provides a bird's eye view of the glittering holiday landscape.

In the French Quarter, see Jackson Square decked out in all its holiday glory. Elegant red bows adorn flickering gas lamps at the entrance, and Christmas lights shine from the perfectly manicured shrubbery. There's no one-horse open sleigh, but a horse-and-carriage ride is a magical way to enjoy the soft glow of the holiday lights and take in the French and Spanish architecture in the city's oldest neighborhood.

Those inclined to channel the religious aspect of early Réveillon traditions are welcome at St. Louis Cathedral, perhaps the city's most recognizable landmark. Completed in 1794, it's the oldest cathedral in continuous use in the United States. Attend a service or take a guided tour to learn about the cathedral's history and architecture.

IF YOU GO

Accommodations

Four Seasons Hotel New Orleans.

A riverfront luxury hotel in the Central Business District. \$395 and up. 2 Canal St., New Orleans. 504-434-5100, www.fourseasons.com/neworleans

Virgin Hotels New Orleans.

A 238-room hotel that opened last year in the Warehouse District. \$300 and up. 550 Barronne St., New Orleans. 504-603-8000, www.virginhotels.com/new-orleans

Dining

Ralph's on the Park. Réveillon dinner \$75.

900 City Park Ave., New Orleans. 504-488-1000, www.ralphsonthepark.com

Tujague's. Réveillon dinner \$64. 429

Decatur St., New Orleans. 504-525-8676, www.tujaguesrestaurant.com

Activities

Luna Fête. A free light, art and technology festival. Dec. 15-18. 6-9 p.m. nightly. Convention Center Blvd., New Orleans. www.artsnworelains.org

Celebration in the Oaks. A holiday light festival in City Park. Driving tour \$40 per vehicle. Walking tour \$35 per person. Hours

vary. Nov. 24-Jan. 1. 1 Palm Drive, New Orleans. www.celebrationintheoaks.com

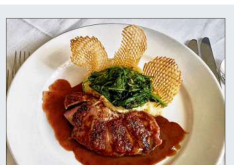
St. Louis Cathedral. 615 Pere Antoine Alley, New Orleans. 504-525-9585, www.stlouiscathedral.org

Southern Food & Beverage Museum.

11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday-Monday. \$10-\$50. 1504 Ortha Castle Hale Blvd., New Orleans. 504-569-0405, www.southernfood.org

Tourism Information

New Orleans & Company. 2020 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans. 800-672-6124, www.neworleans.com



Pan roasted duck with foie gras mashed potatoes on the Réveillon menu at Tujague's. COURTESY OF TUJAGUE'S