



NEW ORLEANS

SWEET TOOTH

THE BIG EASY IS A CITY WITH AN UNDENIABLE PENCHANT FOR PUDDING – WHETHER IT’S BEIGNETS, BREAD PUDDING OR BANANAS FOSTER, NEW ORLEANS DOESN’T DISAPPOINT

WORDS: FARIDA ZEYNALOVA

The air is filled with the sweet smell of fried dough and the gentle sound of street jazz at Cafe du Monde. Grappling with powdered sugar, the man to my left is vigorously dusting off his fingertips, throwing puffs of white dust into the air, while the couple in front has amassed a mountain of napkins in an effort to wipe their table clean. The woman behind me, meanwhile, is blissfully unaware that her mouth is almost entirely covered in snow-white powder. Just then, the waiter brings out my order — three beignets and a cafe au lait.

The pillowy, golden, square-shaped doughnuts — deep-fried in cottonseed oil and heavily veiled in powdered sugar — were introduced to New Orleans by French-Creole colonists in the 18th century. Creole was originally used to describe settlers of European (particularly French) descent, but today it commonly refers to people who are a mix of European and African lineage.

Over time, the beignet became to New Orleans what the macaron is to Paris; so much so that in 1986, they were designated the official state doughnut of Louisiana. And it’s here, on the corner of Decatur Street in the French Quarter, that you’ll find the original Cafe du Monde. This laid-back, iconic institution — instantly recognisable by its green and white awnings — has been serving New Orleanians their beignet fix since the early 1860s.

“The trick is to not breathe,” warns the cafe’s vice president Burt Benrud, who joins me for breakfast. “Take a bite, put it down, then you can breathe.”

Despite Burt’s warning, I fall victim to the powdered sugar and it shoots up both nostrils, but I try to pretend otherwise. The dough itself is warm, sweet and comforting. Although the staff are tight-lipped about the ingredient list, the pre-made mix on sale here suggests beignets can be made using wheat, barley flour, sugar, salt and buttermilk.

“In the late 1960s, people kept asking how to make the beignet at home,” he says. “We changed the recipe slightly so we could make a dry mix people could buy and take home.”

Beignets are the perfect breakfast food to me — filling and sugary enough to put a spring

in your step — although Burt insists they’re perfect for any hour. It’s just as well, then, that this place is open 24/7, 364 days a year.

“When you’re done eating at a restaurant and you don’t want to go home, you say let’s go to Cafe du Monde, and continue the evening a little bit longer,” he tells me, looking around to see if he recognises any of the locals.

But it’s only just shy of 10am and the atrium is already raucous. The sound of clanking plates, diners chatting and the band by the entrance pounding out a lively rendition of You Are My Sunshine are all intertwining with one another. The waiting staff, dressed in white and green paper hats, are crisscrossing the floor. They’re clutching trays stacked high with beignets on plates and in cardboard boxes like some sort of delicious game of Jenga. There’s already a line of people, all the way down the road, for takeaway beignets at the small hole in the wall over in the corner.

On my way out, I take a peek at the kitchen at the back, where the cook is cutting then tossing the raw dough into a container of scalding oil. Behind him, piping hot beignets are placed into paper bags, followed by shovels of powdered sugar. I leave Cafe du Monde grasping two things; a better understanding of one of New Orleans’ sweetest traditions and a \$5 (£4.15) box of pre-made beignet mix, which I’m hoping will taste the same back in the UK.

Banana republic

But the sugary landscape of New Orleans is more than just beignets: the Big Easy is just as bananas about another dessert. A sticky, sweet and combustible concoction of sliced bananas, rum sauce, banana liquor, cinnamon and vanilla ice cream — Bananas Foster was first created in the early 1950s by chef Paul Blangé and Ella Brennan, matriarch of the Brennan family who own a string of restaurants in the city. One of them is the elegant and old-worldly Brennan’s, located inside an unmissable salmon-pink building on Royal Street in the French Quarter. By the entrance, the menu reads ‘Home to World Famous Bananas Foster!’ and there’s already a queue forming before the doors are even open at 9am.



Beignets served at Cafe du Monde on Decatur Street

Above: Royal Street in the French Quarter

IMAGES: PAUL BROUSSARD; AWL IMAGES

I pass through the restaurant with its marble pillars and salmon pink leather chairs and take a seat in the leafy courtyard out back, where owner Ralph Brennan tells me that the now-iconic dessert was first created for the businessman and family friend Richard Foster, and it's still, by far, the most popular item on the menu. Why? Well, if we were to ask his late aunt how the dish became so famous, she wouldn't have an answer, he says.

"It just caught on," he tells me. The city has had a penchant for bananas for quite some time; in the early 20th century, the port of New Orleans was perhaps the largest port in the country for the importation of bananas from Central America, explains Ralph.

For breakfast, we order a glut of sweet plates. First up is the Baked Apple — another Brennan's original — with an oatmeal, pecan and raisin crumble, topped off with a brown sugar glaze and a sugary creme fraiche. It's technically a breakfast rather than a dessert, but it definitely tastes like the latter to me. It's both soft and crunchy, the oatmeal and tangy apple perfectly balancing out the sweetness of, well, everything else. I wash it down with a brandy milk punch, made with brandy, heavy cream, vanilla bean and nutmeg, akin to ice cream that's been left to melt. A slice of panna cotta here and a taste of chocolate and mint ice cream there, and then it's time.

The Bananas Foster, the main reason I'm here, is torched tableside; first, the bananas are flambéed in a paste of butter, sugar, cinnamon and banana liquor, then, once doused with rum, the pan is tilted towards the open flame, causing a theatrically tall blaze. The heady mixture is then poured over vanilla ice cream and served; it's warm, gooey and perfectly caramelly. I let it melt into a boozy vanilla and banana soup, my slurping drowning out the jazz music playing over the speakers.

I already feel like a stuffed manatee with an acute sugar overdose, but my Bananas Foster journey doesn't end here. I tell Ralph I'll be heading to the New Orleans School of Cooking that evening, where, as part of a three-course workshop, I'll learn how to make his aunt's celebrated dessert. I'm nervous about his reaction, but it's flattering when others try to recreate it, he tells me. At the end of the day, Brennan's is synonymous with Bananas Foster — this is where it all began.

Breaking bread

Topping off the sugary trinity of New Orleans is bread pudding. There are countless varieties, with creative pastry chefs cooking up hybrids that are part bread pudding and part soufflé (head to Commander's Palace to try this) or even part po'boy (a Louisiana sandwich made with French bread). But to learn how to



make the traditional New Orleans-style bread pudding, I head east to Houmas House in Darrow, 45 minutes' drive from New Orleans.

Here I join executive chef Jeremy Langlois as a 'special guest' in one of his livestreamed demonstrations — each week, he shows followers over on Facebook and Instagram how to make one of his dishes. I throw on my apron; before me are two ring lights and a counter scattered with ingredients like French breads, raisins, milk and a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"We're making bread pudding with whisky sauce today, an absolute Louisiana classic," he tells the camera before turning to me. "But did you know that the first bread pudding dates back to 11th-century Britain?"

It's a dish, he explains, that reflects New Orleans — a hub of different nationalities with traditions and cooking methods all mixed together. Originally considered a poor man's dessert — when families would soak any leftover stale bread in eggs, milk and sugar to make a hearty pudding — it's been elevated to a modern classic, at least locally.

Jeremy tears up chunks of day-old bread, which he says is better for absorbing the custard mix we're about to make. He then hands me a whisk and on we go. For the next 20 minutes or so, Jeremy pinballs between me and the camera; a dash of vanilla extract here and a jug of milk there, and the custard mix is

ready. He pours and squishes it into the bread with his hands before placing it in the oven.

Even though bread pudding has always been popular across the state, the very first recipe in Louisiana wasn't published until the 1800s, when it appeared in a cookbook called *La Cuisine Creole*, written by legendary Louisianian Lafcadio Hearn. "It's considered the Creole cooking bible," he tells me.

As Jeremy continues to regale me with stories of Louisiana's pudding past, he pours the whisky over a pre-made slice so I can try it right away. The taste is nostalgic; a grown-up version of the custard puddings I had at school. As I tuck in, the air gradually intensifies with the warming, saccharine scent of custard and sugar. Thanks to Lafcadio's recipe cementing the bread pudding as a Creole staple, it's a scent, and taste, you needn't go far in Louisiana to find.

HOW TO DO IT

BA flies direct from Heathrow to New Orleans. ba.com Doubles at The Pontchartrain Hotel from \$199 (£163), room only. Doubles at Windsor Court Hotel from \$365 (£300), room only. thepontchartrainhotel.com windsorcourthotel.com

MORE INFO

shop.cafedumonde.com brennansneworleans.com houmashouse.com neworleans.com

IMAGES: JAMES SHAW; WERNER KRUG; GETTY

Clockwise from left: Brennan's on Royal Street; bread pudding soufflé at Commander's Palace; inside at Cafe du Monde



WHERE TO EAT

Cake, pastry, ice cream or pie, New Orleans has enough classic desserts to ensure you'll have a never-ending sugar rush – we pick some of the best in town

For a dessert to share: Mile High Pie

JACK ROSE AT THE PONTCHARTRAIN HOTEL

Don't let its name fool you; the signature dish at Jack Rose isn't actually a pie but a towering, three-layered ice cream — chocolate, vanilla and peppermint flavoured — with a black cookie dough base and topped off with scorched meringue marshmallow and a drizzle of rich chocolate sauce. jackroserestaurant.com

For a classic with a twist:

Bread pudding po'boy
YE OLDE COLLEGE INN

The decadent deep-fried bread pudding po'boy is an entirely unique dessert that's twice earned the 'Best of Show' award at the annual Po-Boy Festival. Owner Johnny Blancher cuts French bread in half and saturates it in a custard and raisin mix, before it's baked and deep-fried and served in a bed of rum sauce. yeoldecollegeinn.com

For date-night: Tarte a la Bouillie
COQUETTE

On the corner of Magazine Street is the cosy, chandelier-laden Coquette, specialising in elevated Southern cuisine. Skip the mains and go straight for the tarte a la bouillie; this traditional Cajun custard pie is dressed up to the nines here with pumpkin, persimmon and shards of meringue all topped off with sage and pepper. coquettenola.com

For serious chocophiles: Doberge cake
MISS RIVER, FOUR SEASONS

This uber rich, multi-layered doberge cake is New Orleans' homage to the Hungarian dobos torte. It was initially created by pastry chef Beulah Levy Ledne, born in Louisiana to Hungarian-Jewish parents. At Miss River, expect layer after layer of chocolate filling and dark chocolate cake, wrapped in a chocolate glaze and topped off with edible gold leaf. missrivernola.com

For liquid dessert:

Frozen bourbon milk punch

BOURBON HOUSE

Dickie Brennan's signature milk punch is made up of Benchmark Bourbon, homemade vanilla gelato, simple syrup and vanilla extract, all mixed in a daiquiri machine and topped off with ground nutmeg. bourbonhouse.com

For day-time relaxing:

Pineapple upside down cake

LA BOULANGERIE

This French-inspired bakery by Link Restaurant Group is a neighbourhood favourite and home to a plethora of cakes, pastries, breads and pies. Keep an eye out for pineapple upside down cake or banana tart — both favourites across Louisiana and the Southern states — whipped up by executive pastry chef Maggie Scales. laboulangerienola.com □

Above: Cinnamon roll at La Boulangerie