

# Soul food

For a true taste of the Deep South, explore Louisiana's West African, European and Native American flavours, writes **Monica Meade**

**1**he way you can tell someone's from Louisiana, versus if they're not: you ask them if they do a double boil," says Beau Hays, owner of BeauxJax Crafthouse in Shreveport. There's an entire space dedicated to giant crustacean cooking pots just beyond the kitchen of this independent Cajun and Creole restaurant. They're a staple in Louisiana homes too, and on the Friday before Easter every year, they're fired up for a backyard crawfish boil to mark the beginning of spring.

Legend has it the crawfish here are descendants of the Canadian lobster, a foodie tradition introduced by exiled Acadians from Nova Scotia as they made their way south in 1764. Adapting to living amid the waterways and wetlands of the US mainland's rainiest state, the French colonists – nicknamed Cajuns for short – soon realised the conditions were perfect for farming these mudbugs. Breaux Bridge in Louisiana is now recognised as the Crawfish Capital of the World.

It's one of many ingredients central to Louisiana's year-round festivals, dinner table gatherings and creative restaurant menus that represent a history of resilience, adaptability ➤

Southern crawfish boil

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Brent Hofacker

# DESTINATIONS

THE US | LOUISIANA

5  
OF THE  
BEST

## Must-try foods



Shrimp gumbo

**Gumbo** is a rich roux-based stew with West African roots.

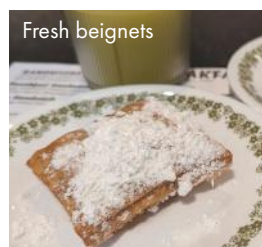
Cajun-style gumbo has a darker, richer roux, while the Creole version can contain okra and tomatoes.

**Turtle soup** is a Creole delicacy with tender cubes of common snapping turtles in a velvety and sweet yet tangy broth.

**Jambalaya** uses the holy trinity – green bell peppers, celery and onions – as a base to create this Cajun and Creole dish. For the latter, this meaty one-pot meal often includes tomatoes and shellfish.

**Crawfish étouffée** is made with juicy crawfish tails drowning in a herby, buttery gravy served on a bed of rice.

**Beignets** are square, sugar-dusted doughnuts with a slightly chewy outer layer and a steaming-hot fluffy centre.



Fresh beignets



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Chef Jay Steiner leads a Vermilionville cooking demonstration; Commander's Palace; Atchafalaya Basin airboat tour; food truck at Rhythms on the River in Lafayette

**PICTURES:** Monica Meade; Commander's Palace; Explore Louisiana/Cameron Gatt; Lafayette Travel/Denny Culbert



and community. Mardi Gras may be fleeting but the vibrance and expression of generational values, identity and pride can be found in food, music and art, no matter what the season.

### SHREVEPORT: SPICE AND SOUL

Weaving around the stalls of the Red River Revel festival, there are misty morning shots of egrets paddling in the Bayou for sale, along with handmade homewares and crispy fried boudin balls made of spiced sausage meat. It's a nine-day non-profit festival that has been showcasing the creativity of downtown Shreveport since 1976.

Beyond the main attractions – which include Shreveport Municipal Auditorium, where Elvis rose to fame, and the buzzing East Bank district – independent businesses in Shreveport and neighbouring Bossier City are thriving.

Growing around Orlandeaux's Café – one of the oldest African American family-owned restaurants still operating in the US – is a blossoming community of up-and-coming chefs and nearly 80 Black-owned restaurants. Many are family-run and use simple ingredients to create hearty Creole and West African-inspired dishes with a twist, infusing classic flavours with contemporary flair and Texan barbecue influences.

Initially, Creole was the name for people and culture native to Louisiana, largely of Spanish, Portuguese or African descent. One-pot cooking for dishes such as

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jambalaya is taken straight from West African cooking traditions, while beans, spices and wheat were brought to the US during Spanish colonisation.

### LAFAYETTE: CAJUN COUNTRY

“I was getting real excited about the soul food, I hadn't tried it before,” says chef Jay Steiner during a cooking demonstration at Lafayette's living history museum, Vermilionville. “Then they bring us fried pork chops, smoked greens, black-eyed peas and cornbread. It was the same food that my mom cooked for me and that she learned [to cook] from her mother in Louisiana.”

As Jay rustles up a Cajun jambalaya and corn maque choux (a sweetcorn and pepper dish), he tells us the core of Creole and Cajun cooking is the ‘holy trinity’ of green bell peppers, celery and onions. It was the Acadians' adaptation of French staple *mirepoix* (diced onions, carrots and celery), but using resources more easily available in their new surroundings.

Next is a guided tour of Vermilionville to learn more ➤



ABOVE: Classic Creole-style architecture in New Orleans PICTURE: Monica Meade

about Acadian, Creole and Native American culture and life. This historic district features original 18th and 19th-century houses, textiles and tools, along with a garden filled with medicinal plants.

Later at the Atchafalaya Basin Landing & Airboat Swamp Tours – as we explore the vast expanses of wetland – I can see why rice dishes caught on here, given its frequent flooding and having the heaviest rainfall in the mainland US.

Lafayette is also home to the only Tabasco factory in the world, another local innovation taking the tabasco pepper, which originated in Mexico but thrived in the humid Louisiana climate, and preserving it for all-year-round enjoyment.

### NEW ORLEANS: CREOLE CUISINE

Lining the streets of New Orleans are buildings dressed in shades of peach and lime with lace-like wrought-iron balconies. There's a nostalgic air around the city, with streetcars that have been running since 1835, connecting the Mississippi River to the speakeasies

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of boozy Bourbon Street, the resting place of 'voodoo queen' Marie Laveau and the New Orleans Museum of Art.

In the birthplace of jazz and cocktails, you'll also find the humble beginnings of the po'boy. These must-try saucy baguettes are a tribute to streetcar operators: when these 'poor boys' were on strike, cafes would give them to-go sandwiches for free, packed with whatever meats were left over.

New Orleans is also the main hub of Creole cooking, distinguishing itself from Cajun cuisine thanks to lower spice levels and elevated ingredients such as shrimp, oysters and crab, which were easier to source in the city.

Commander's Palace restaurant encapsulates the soul of Creole hospitality, pairing live Louis Armstrong tunes with turtle soup and Creole bread pudding at its jazz brunches. If you want to indulge in Creole back home, a hands-on experience at Mardi Gras Cookery School provides the know-how.

This city has always been an ever-evolving foodie hotspot, and I'm told by New Orleans Secrets food tour guide Mark Aspiazu there's currently an emerging vegan scene. You can find restaurants offering fusions of Creole with all sorts of global cuisines; from African-American Chinese baked treats to Vietnamese-inspired po'boys and French Creole oysters Rockefeller.

From north to south, no two dishes are the same in Louisiana; every cook sprinkles a bit of individuality into the pot. It's a place of variety with recipes and techniques learned in family kitchens and remade for the sake of history and culture, rather than strict rules and recipes. Unless it's crawfish – no one messes with crawfish. **TW**



### LOUISIANA

- Highlight the seasonal festivals and events as bonus experiences during a trip.
- Explore diverse dining options, which include family-run restaurants, farm-to-fork ingredients, fine dining, street food and cosy cafes.
- Book a cookery class to learn new skills and flavours.
- Explain the variety of cuisines that can be enjoyed here, with West African, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese and Native American influences.
- Promote tasting tours to discover local favourites alongside iconic eating spots.

### BOOK IT

**Purely Southern USA** covers the state's highlights on an eight-night Taste of Louisiana self-drive from New Orleans to Natchitoches. BA flights from Heathrow, arrival transfers, car hire from day three and room-only accommodation are included, from £1,499 June-September or £1,199 October-March, based on two sharing. [puresouthernusa.co.uk](http://puresouthernusa.co.uk)

**Journeyscape's** 16-day tour, Cowboys and Cajuns, Mansions and Music, combines Texas with Louisiana. Highlights include a Tabasco Factory tour in Lafayette, a French Quarter walking tour and Cajun or Creole cooking class in New Orleans, and a journey through the bayous of Lake Charles. Prices start from £3,820 based on two sharing, excluding flights. [journeyscape.com](http://journeyscape.com)