



Join hungry chefs as they taste their way through Cajun country in search of the real deal.

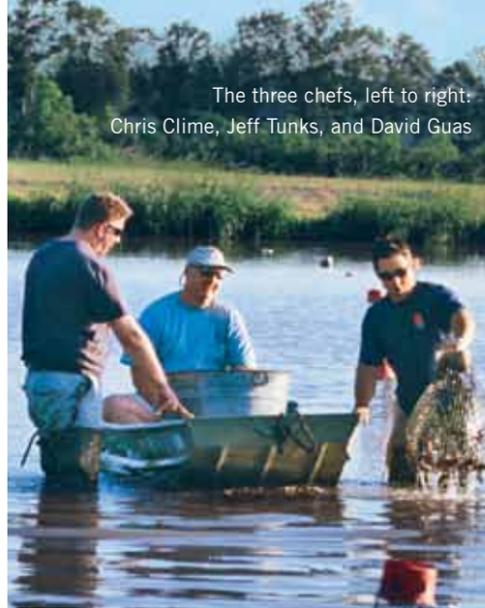
going for gusto

washington cronies on a “fact-finding mission” travel to a remote land known for its sensuous food and music. Sound familiar? No, they’re not congressmen on another dubious junket; they’re three D.C. chefs who believe in going right to the source. In the past, the trio’s quest for authenticity has led them to smoky food stalls and crowded markets all over the world. But for their latest restaurant venture, Acadiana, they’re

heading to southern Louisiana, the heart and soul of Cajun country.

Conceived as an elegant version of a Louisiana fish house, Acadiana basks in its chefs’ Southern exposure. Executive chef Jeff Tunks soaked up the region’s vibrant culinary culture during his tenure at the Windsor Court hotel in New Orleans. There he met chef de cuisine Chris Clime, who’s worked in a number of Southern kitchens. Trumping both of

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The three chefs, left to right: Chris Clime, Jeff Tunks, and David Guas



them, executive pastry chef David Guas actually grew up in the Crescent City and has family out in Vermilion Parish.

For their Cajun gastro-tour, the three have a familiar guide: David's godmother, Janice Macomber, known as Aunt Boo. The chefs meet up with her after a motorboat ride to her fish camp on a bayou near Vermilion Bay. Before long, the rollicking sounds of Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys waft through the screened door along with mouthwatering aromas. "The secret to cooking is to have enough music and enough beer," Boo says. In the best Cajun style, she makes a roux (flour and butter—or another fat—blended carefully over heat) as dark as truck-stop coffee. This becomes the basis for a gumbo with duck and deer sausage donated by hunters. "Watch out, there's still some buckshot in the duck," she warns. For all its complexity, the region's cooking has rustic roots: Traditionally, what went in the pot was whatever you could fish, trap, or shoot.

Even after the group has cleaned up and headed out, it's clear that Boo's gumbo, crawfish étouffée, and other savory dishes will remain the benchmarks for this culinary adventure. Over the next few days, the chefs pause at well-loved restaurants, ordering with abandon. In their wake they leave piles of shells (crawfish, shrimp, oysters), mute testimony to their dedication. At every opportunity they sample gumbo and crawfish étouffée, analyzing and comparing. And they eat signature fare that's hard to find outside Louisiana, from turtle sauce piquante and the fried meat pastries called *pistolets* to boudin sausage stuffed with pork and rice. The rarity of seared, "blackened" fish might surprise Americans who

believe it epitomizes Cajun cuisine. "The food's not as spicy as people think," Jeff says. "It's more about depth of flavor, multilayered tastes."

The tireless crew lingers in Abbeville, a mecca for oyster lovers, to sample fresh-off-the-boat bivalves at Black's and Dupuy's. But they also visit the Pearl Reef Oyster Company plant, where shuckers paid by the sack attack the shells with hammer and blade. In New Iberia they feast at a bare-bones roadhouse called the Guiding Star, where newspaper covers the tables and mash from Tabasco-aging tanks adds zing to the crawfish boil. And they tour the fabled Tabasco factory at Avery Island. "We came down to source products as well as sample dishes," Jeff explains. "We want to re-create Cajun food as authentically as possible." Their itinerary also includes visits to a shrimp processor, a rice mill, sausage makers, and the plant that produces the dark nectar known as Steen's Cane Syrup. They even pull on waders to mingle with mudbugs in a crawfish pond.

At the home of one of Boo's cousins, Todd Travazos, they cap their tour with an astounding buffet of their own creation, serving up fresh oysters and étouffée with rice, plus David's take on a traditional Gateau de Sirop, a luxuriant cake with subtle notes of ginger and black pepper that temper the sweetness. All the culinary research was worth it, they say. "Our biggest compliment is when people from Louisiana tell us they like what we're doing," Jeff says. And in tribute to their favorite Cajun, the three chefs announce that they've already added a dish to the menu at Acadiana. It's called "Aunt Boo's Fish Camp Crawfish Étouffée," and the customers love it.

For recipes, turn to page 168.

Louisiana Crawfish Étouffée

1/4 pound butter
1 cup chopped yellow onion
1/2 cup chopped celery
1/2 cup chopped green bell pepper
1/2 cup chopped red bell pepper
1/2 cup diced tomato
2 tablespoons minced garlic
2 bay leaves
1/2 cup tomato sauce
1 cup all-purpose flour
6 cups crab or crawfish stock
2 pounds cooked Louisiana crawfish tail meat
2 tablespoons sherry
1 cup chopped green onions
1/2 cup chopped fresh parsley
Creole seasoning
Hot cooked rice
Hot sauce

Melt butter in a large, heavy saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and next 7 ingredients; sauté 5 to 7 minutes or until vegetables are tender.

Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, 10 minutes or until mixture is a rich, dark brown.

Stir in stock, and simmer over medium-low heat 45 minutes. Add crawfish, and cook until heated. Stir in sherry, green onions, and parsley. Add Creole seasoning to taste.

Serve over hot cooked rice with hot sauce on the side. Makes 6 to 8 servings.

Gateau de Sirop

1 cup peanut oil
1 1/4 cups cane syrup, divided
1 cup Ginger Water
1 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon hot sauce
2 large eggs
2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons baking soda
3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg

Burnt Sugar Meringue

Combine peanut oil, 1 cup cane syrup, and next 3 ingredients in a large bowl, beating with a mixer on medium speed until blended. Add eggs, one at a

time, beating until blended after each addition.

Combine flour and next 5 ingredients in a medium bowl; slowly add flour mixture to egg mixture, beating at low speed until blended. Pour batter into 3 greased and parchment-lined 8-inch round cake pans.

Bake at 350° for 20 to 25 minutes or until a wooden pick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool in pans on wire racks 10 minutes, remove from pans, and cool on wire racks.

Prick cake layers with a wooden skewer; brush remaining 1/4 cup cane syrup over tops. Spread Burnt Sugar Meringue between layers and on top of cake. Makes one 8-inch cake.

Ginger Water

2 cups water
1/4 cup chopped fresh ginger

Combine water and ginger in a medium saucepan over high heat; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low, and simmer 15 minutes. Strain. Makes 1 cup.

Burnt Sugar Meringue

3/4 cup sugar, divided
1/4 cup water
1/2 cup light corn syrup
4 large egg whites
1/2 teaspoon salt

Combine 1/4 cup sugar and 1/4 cup water in a medium saucepan over medium heat; slowly bring mixture to a boil, making sure sugar dissolves. Cook 8 to 10 minutes or until syrup is a dark amber color. Stir in corn syrup; bring to a boil. Cook, without stirring, until mixture reaches soft ball stage or candy thermometer registers 240°.

Meanwhile, beat egg whites, salt, and remaining 1/2 cup sugar until soft peaks form. Continue to beat, slowly pouring hot syrup in a heavy stream down the side of the bowl, until frosting is thick enough to spread. Makes 6 1/2 cups. 🍌

For info on Vermilion Parish, visit vermilion.org. Acadiana, Washington, D.C.; 202/408-8848 or acadianarestaurant.com.