



The well done and the rare: Seersucker suits may be frequent sights in Galatoire's, but menus aren't. How many of each can you spot in this picture?

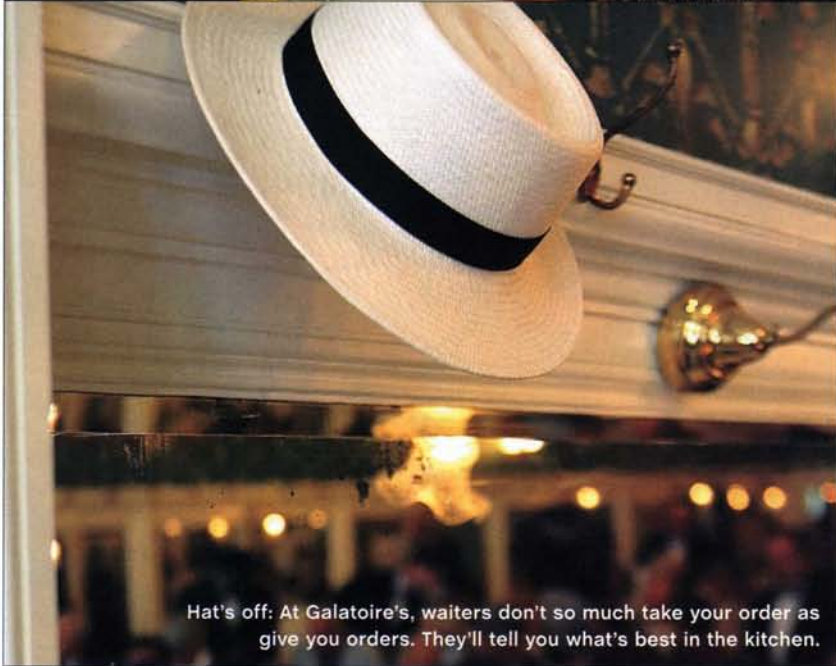


An Immovable Feast

So much has changed in New Orleans in the year since Katrina hit. Yet one thing remains constant. Friday Lunch at Galatoire's is as big a party as ever. Joseph Guinto visits the restaurant that change forgot.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHAD WINDHAM





Hat's off: At Galatoire's, waiters don't so much take your order as give you orders. They'll tell you what's best in the kitchen.

Bourbon Street has not yet been hosed down. It is 11 a.m., and it is hot, steamy, and, therefore, fetid. Yet streams of natively dressed people — some alone, some in groups — are flowing past overflowing trash cans, T-shirted tourists, and grimy dive bars, headed toward the elegant wood, glass, and brass entrance of 209 Bourbon Street. This is the home of Galatoire's restaurant, a 101-year-old institution in a city of old institutions.

Here, ladies wear dresses. Black-and-white, polka dot, tulip-shaped dresses. Teal-and-russet silk dresses. Gold A-line dresses. Floral sundresses. And hats. Hats everywhere. Big, floppy, frilly hats. Gentlemen wear jackets or suits. Seersucker suits. Dark blue, gray, light blue, blue-gray, tan. Even chartreuse.

Dozens of these well-appointed people, myself included, have crowded into the entryway and bar of Galatoire's waiting for the restaurant to officially open for lunch. Well, not just lunch. Friday Lunch. Capital "L." Where you live, Friday lunch, small "l," is a six-inch turkey on wheat with chips. Or maybe a nice pasta salad. Here, in a city of old traditions, Friday Lunch is a decades-old tradition where cocktails bookend a multicourse, possibly hours-long meal. This ritual is observed at several swanky restaurants in town, but it is done best at Galatoire's, where regulars can outnumber tourists 10 to 1. "It's not at all unusual for someone to go to Friday Lunch and stay right through dinner," Bryan Dupepe, general manager of the Hotel Provincial in the French Quarter, warns me. "Then you get in a cab and go home." Dupepe's dad, Bryan Sr., is here inside Galatoire's today with a cadre of his pals. They, too, have dressed up.

They don't do this because they have to — there is no strict dress code at Galatoire's for Friday Lunch. Yet today, even after Katrina, even with parts of New Orleans still in a shambles, people



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put on their Friday finest here. They do so because that is what has always been done. And some things, especially in New Orleans, especially now, are best left unchanged.

11:20 a.m.

THE LIST

It is 11:20 a.m. and people are standing tailored-shoulder-to-tailored-shoulder in the waiting area outside the main, ground-floor dining room of Galatoire's. There are likely 170 patrons here. The dining room holds only 140, tops. "If your name is not already on this list, we will get to you next," maitre d' Arnold Chabaud calls out. "We're going to seat the people on this list and this list only."

Turns out there is one thing that has, thankfully, changed at Galatoire's in its 101 years. The List has replaced The Line. From its earliest days, Galatoire's did not accept reservations. Founder Jean Galatoire simply wouldn't have it. Not for you, not for me, not even for Charles André Joseph Marie de Gaulle, the president of the French republic. So the dapper patrons used to line up down Bourbon Street waiting for their turn.

Today, it's still first-come, first-served. Except, that is, for the second-floor dining room, which accepts reservations and where exactly no regular ever sits for Friday Lunch because that is not how it has always been done. If you're not on Chabaud's list when seating begins at 11:30, get ready to wait. At least an hour. Maybe longer. This, he will tell you, is out of his control. Tables will turn when patrons are ready to leave, and no one can say when a Galatoire's patron will be ready to leave Friday Lunch. So, as soon as they enter the door, the regulars rush to Chabaud to get on the list and get a waiter — Richard, John, Bege. To have a specific waiter is to be what they call a *preferé*, a very regular customer. Waiters take good care of their *preferés*, and some *preferés*, in turn, have retained the same waiter for decades.

Getting the waiters back was as important to reopening Galatoire's after Katrina tore through town as was repairing the damage left by the storm. Katrina battered Galatoire's 170-year-old building, tearing open parts of the roof. It's still not totally fixed, although you'd be hard-pressed to notice. The French Quarter didn't flood, but the levee fail-



"For the entire time we were closed, we paid everyone on our staff who had been with us for more than a year because they're really the heart and soul of Galatoire's."



Nice Beard: A James Beard Award medallion hangs behind Galatoire's V.P. David Gooch (in seersücker).

ures all over town knocked power out for weeks, leaving food to spoil, ruining Galatoire's custom-made refrigerators in the process. All the refrigerators had to be remade, replaced, and reinstalled, a process that took months. Four months, to be exact — the longest closure in Galatoire's century in business. Worse, the staff, especially the waiters, who many have described as more important to Galatoire's than the chef, were scattered all over the country. It took weeks to find them all, and months before the restaurant was again fully staffed. About three-quarters of the pre-Katrina staff have now returned, a remarkably high number compared with other hospitality businesses in New Orleans.

"We decided to reopen fully, unlike many other restaurants that opened with limited menus and hours," says Melvin Rodrigue, the general manager of Galatoire's — the only nonfamily member to ever hold that designation here. "For the entire time we were closed, we paid everyone on our staff who had been with us for more than a year because they're really the heart and soul of Galatoire's."

11:33

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEGE

"So, what are ya' drinkin'?" It is now 11:33 a.m. The dining room has opened, my dining companion and I have made The List, and Francis Xavier Bege, our waiter, is demanding to take our cocktail order. I am not actually accustomed to drinking at this hour. But I figure I could get used to it. Half the tables have been seated, and almost all have already been cocktailled. Sazeracs — the local concoction of rye whiskey, bitters, simple syrup, and Herbsaint, a New Orleans-made pastis-style liqueur — are everywhere. Champagne is everywhere else. Corks are popping.

Bege, as everyone calls him, is in his 60s, yet he is a relative newcomer among Galatoire's tuxedoed servers. He is a Yankee, from Philadelphia, and has worked here only seven years. Longtime waiter John Fontenot, by comparison, has been here for 35. Fontenot has watched children grow to adults over countless Friday Lunches — which are big for birthday celebrations — and Saturday dinners and Sunday brunches, all of which are the best time to find locals, or, at least, nearbys. At Galatoire's, if you're

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A good start: soufflé potatoes

“Our chef, Ross Eirich, could be a celebrity chef. But we try to stick to the tradition as much as we can. Anytime we make a change, our customers have a fit. They don’t like change.”

from Mississippi, you’re local enough. Fontenot is a Cajun, and he sounds like it. This is especially noticeable when he tells jokes to the customers. (Fontenot does not mind “going blue.”) Bege may or may not tell such jokes, but he will certainly describe the best dishes of the day, whether customers ask or not.

Préférés ask. On my first trip to Galatoire’s, I dined with a regular who told me, “I don’t think I’ve seen a menu here in years.” Unlike Bigfoot or a good Jessica Simpson movie, Galatoire’s menus do exist. But given that the menu lists more than 100 items with nary a description, you’d need to have an encyclopedic knowledge of classic French-Creole foods to know what you were ordering. So no one bothers with menus. Never have.

Instead, first-timers order by waiter recommendation, and *préférés* order by recommendation or repetition. The basic menu at Galatoire’s has not changed in 101 years. Dishes like softshell crabs or oysters en brochette or fried eggplant or creamed spinach have pretty much always been here. “If you look at the menus from a century ago,” says Jyl Benson, co-author, with Rodrigue, of the

Galatoire’s Cookbook, which was published last year, “you’ll see that they’re almost identical to what you can order at Galatoire’s today.”

1:30

MR. GOOCH AND LAVENDER AIR

It is now 1:30 p.m., which means nearly two hours have passed since we took our seats. Almost everyone who was part of the first seating is also still here. By this point, Bege has guided — or rather, commanded — us through two traditional appetizers. Both are fried. The first, soufflé potatoes, are puffed potatoes, twice fried and thin as a sheet of paper, yet crispy. They come with a tarragon béarnaise sauce, and everyone here gets them first so as to buffer the sting of rye whiskey consumed before noon. The other is a sampler plate that includes oysters en brochette — deep-fried oysters wrapped in bacon. I would eat a glass bottle if you deep fried it, but breaded bivalves wrapped in smoked pork belly are considerably more appealing.

We are sitting in the back of the restaurant, the kitchen behind me. In front of us is a long, shotgun-style room,

antique mirrors on each side. The tables are covered in white linen. The floors are an elegant black-and-white tile. The walls are wallpapered, blue with gold fleur de lis. The ceiling fans — it is the South, and one does need a ceiling fan — have brass light fixtures. Much of this is original to the restaurant, dating all the way back to the first day Jean Galatoire opened the doors at 209 Bourbon St.

Jean had come to America in 1876, leaving his home in Paradies in southern France where Galatoires have lived since the fifth century. Jean worked in Chicago and Alabama before buying out Victor’s restaurant in New Orleans and founding Galatoire’s. Jean’s nephews, Leon and Justin, soon joined him, and their direct descendants — the fourth generation — run the place today. Those are deep family roots to have in a business, especially in the restaurant business. But this is a city of deep family roots, and also a city that cares a lot about its restaurants.

“I’ve looked at the ledger books from the earliest days of the restaurant,” says David Gooch, the current vice president of Galatoire’s — the grandson of Leon Galatoire, and the great-grandnephew of Jean Galatoire, “and the same family names that are in those books are the names of many of our customers today.”

Everyone, me included, seems to refer to Galatoire’s V.P. as “Mr. Gooch,” which seems odd given that he’s not that old — just 60 — and not physically intimidating. He is soft spoken, has an oval face, wears round, wire-rim glasses, and owns his share of seersucker suits. Maybe it’s the family connection. He is, after all, one of the highest-ranking descendants of the founding Galatoires. Some 27 family members today have a stake in the business. Eight serve on a board of directors. Several others work in the restaurant. Mr. Gooch has been here ever since he got out of college and did a tour of duty as a platoon commander in Vietnam.

I ask him if he hasn’t been tempted a time or two to shake things up a little — not to go so far as to put “pillows of lavender air” or “watermelon foam” on the menu, but just to modernize a bit. Mr. Gooch stares at me for several seconds with a look that seems to say: Did you not hear that we won the James Beard Award — the Oscar of the restaurant industry — for outstanding restaurant

in 2005? I suddenly understand why people call him Mr. Gooch. "Well," he finally says, "we do wine dinners every summer where we offer different things. And our chef, Ross Eirich, could be a celebrity chef. But we try to stick to the tradition as much as we can. Anytime we make a change, our customers have a fit. They don't like change."

That's just one of the things that's made the impact of Katrina so distressing to New Orleanians. They do not like change,

yet change may have been forced on them. Except, of course, at Galatoire's. Here, change is not done. Consider just a few things that have prompted the restaurant's regulars to "have a fit."

- Accepting credit cards.
- Installing a computer system that waiters use to track bills and send orders to the kitchen.
- Reopening the second floor, which had closed during World War II.

► Purchasing an ice machine and discontinuing the chipping of ice by hand from a block.

► Opening, late last year, a Galatoire's offshoot named Galatoire's Bistro, in Baton Rouge.

"I am not happy about the Baton Rouge branch," says Kenneth Holditch, a New Orleanian by way of Mississippi who co-authored a book about Galatoire's, *Biography of a Bistro*, and who now runs Holditch's Heritage Literary Tours. "Miss Yvonne Galatoire Wynne [Justin Galatoire's daughter, who died in 2000], who was Galatoire's as long as she was alive, always said, 'My father did not like change, and I don't like change.' And I don't like change either."

2:20-ish

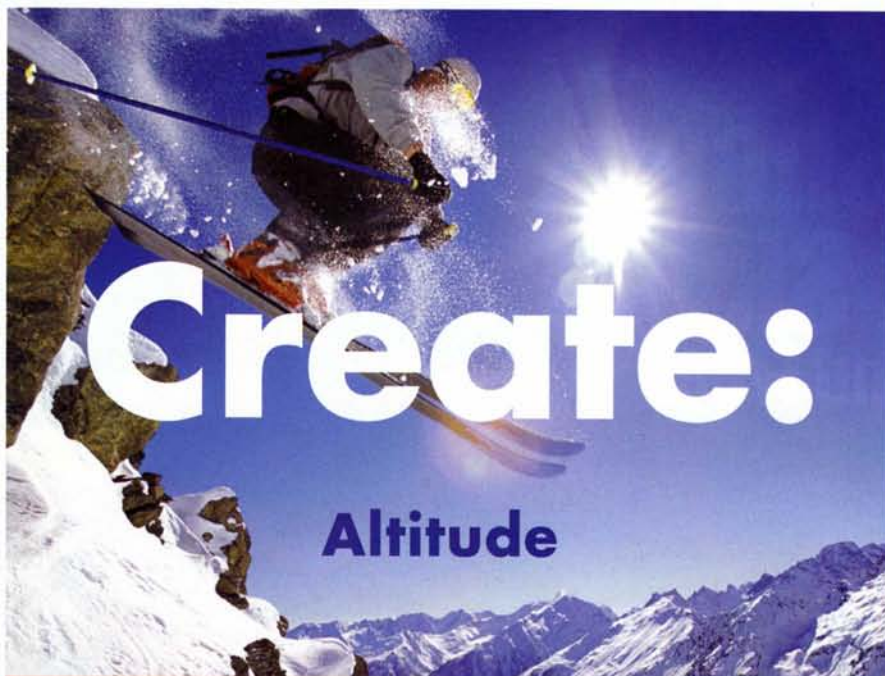
FIFI MAHONY AND THE LIPSTICK

It is now sometime after 2 p.m. and our entrées have arrived. So have a couple of glasses of pouilly-fuisse, which are following in the footsteps of a Sazerac, a champagne cocktail, and an entire bottle of Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin champagne. I'm having the broiled pompano topped with jumbo lump crabmeat. It's no pillow of lavender air, but it is bathed in clarified butter, then broiled, then topped with the lemony concoction known as meuniere butter.

The party is now in full swing all over the restaurant and at my table. For reasons I cannot fully explain, I have taken to calling my dining companion Peaches. She, instead, insists I call her Fifi Mahony. Neither is her name. The latter is actually the name of a wig shop in the French Quarter. In any case, she returns from the ladies room with the pronouncement, "There was either a very drunk woman or a very drunk man in there right before me." Why? "Because the seat was up." Think about it.

In the ladies room she has also encountered a 70-something woman from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who has lost her lipstick. Fifi Mahoney (I'm implored to use the full name) offers her own, and the older woman tells her that she's been coming to Galatoire's since she was a little girl. "Richard has always been our waiter." Well, maybe not always. Richard Smith, a large, brusque character, started working at Galatoire's in 1960. According to Holditch and his *Bistro* co-author Marda Burton, Richard stayed four years, left for two decades, and then has been back for 22 more.

In the main dining room, there is no music. You wouldn't be able to hear it anyway over the din of conversations. Truly.



Create:

Altitude

above sea level; angular height
of a celestial body; above the
horizon; great height or summit

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New York's Balthazar has nothing on Galatoire's. In fact, Galatoire's at full throttle may be the noisiest and most boisterous of all the restaurants that style themselves after Parisian fin de siècle brasseries. You can easily imagine Toulouse-Lautrec posterizing the scene here like he did for the Moulin Rouge. I have almost a complete view of the restaurant and only two tables I see don't look joyful — the couple beside us drinking iced tea and the table of 20-something girls who are all wearing oversized sunglasses. Indoors.

Then again, even though there's a party going on behind the doors of Galatoire's, and, indeed, even though there's a party starting up all around the French Quarter at this hour, I'm well aware that just a few miles away, things are not so festive. So I ask Bege about the purple-gold-and-green wristband he's wearing. It reads "Rebuild/Rebirth." He tells us where to buy one. He also tells us that he's living in a FEMA trailer. His home in Lakeview was in sight of the 17th Street canal, whose levee failed. The area flooded fast and deep, deeper, in spots than the Lower Ninth Ward. But Bege is not feeling sorry for himself, nor is he leaving. "You should see how bad it hit in Missis-

sippi," he says. "It's rough there. For New Orleans, I think if we can just get through this hurricane season, we'll be OK. I keep answering my phone by counting down the days we have left — '47 days to go and the levees are still holding.'"

3:15

FLAMING COFFEE!

We have nearly reached the fourth hour of lunch. It is 3:15 and Bege has served our last course — sweet, brandy-laced, flaming coffee. He lights a silver bowlful of "café brûlot" so close to our faces that I check to make sure my eyebrows aren't gone.

Before that show began, I asked Bege how — after everything that's happened in New Orleans — all of these people could possibly manage to have all of this fun here. "They're in denial," Bege says. He doesn't seem to be making an indictment. It's simply an observation. "In here," he continues, "things are different."

I hate to differ with a man who has served me Sazeracs, champagne, white burgundy, and flaming coffee. But things are actually not different. They are, in fact, the same as they have always been. Galatoire's is a different experience from, say, life

inside your FEMA trailer. Sure. But things inside 209 Bourbon St. have not markedly changed from the way they were before Katrina, or, indeed, from the way they were before Betsy or Camille or, you know, World War I. Well, minus the hand-chipped ice. And the fact that things aren't different at Galatoire's today is exactly why so many people are having such a good time in here, despite the fact that both hell and high water have come out there.

"Galatoire's has brought a sense of normalcy to our customers," Rodrigue says. "They've been coming here since their grandfather brought them or their Aunt Sally from the Mississippi Delta or whatever it was. This is where they felt familiar. This is where they found normalcy. That's why it was important, when we reopened, for us to come back as we always were with everything we have always offered. Anything else would not have been familiar to our customer base, and they wouldn't have accepted change."

They would certainly not. Because some things are best left unchanged. ☺

Joseph Guinto owns no seersucker suits.

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