

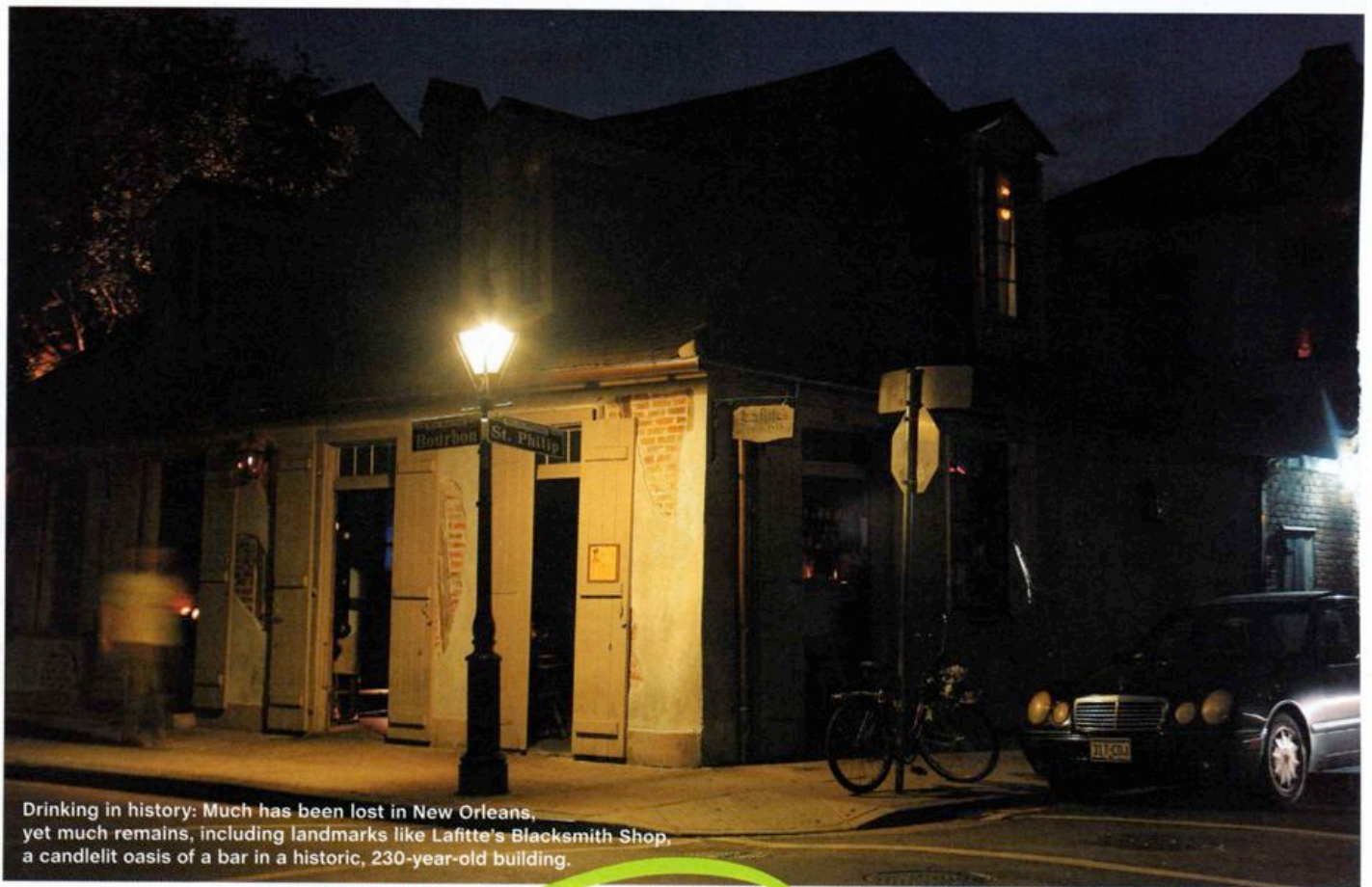
# ReNew Orleans

Even as the arduous post-Katrina cleanup continues all over New Orleans, tourist spots have been spruced up and are already warmly welcoming visitors. And those who come to the Crescent City are finding the good times rolling again.

BY JOSEPH GUINTO • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHAD WINDHAM







Drinking in history: Much has been lost in New Orleans, yet much remains, including landmarks like Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, a candlelit oasis of a bar in a historic, 230-year-old building.

rior, which included newer, somewhat sturdier doors, hasn't exactly spruced up the place. Heavily weathered timbers and antiquated bricks are still evident, even on the inside, which, at night, is lit almost entirely by candlelight. Then again, that's just what makes this a special swillery. People come from all over the world to moisten their mouths amid such shabby-chic-ness.

As such, Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop always seems to be open. Certainly its doors are. Even though it is located on a lonely end of Bourbon Street far from the girls going wild, you'll find people here into the wee, small hours of the morning, gathered in the back singing with a piano player who knows too many Elton John songs, or in the front where they bend elbows by the unlit fireplace and the always-open doors. Right now, though, Lafitte's is quiet save for the hum of the Voo-Doo daiquiri machine. It's a quarter to three and, to paraphrase a Sinatra song, there's no one in the place except me, my imbibing companion, a waitress who is scurrying around, getting ready to leave, and Chuck the bartender. And the doors are closed, with us inside. I can

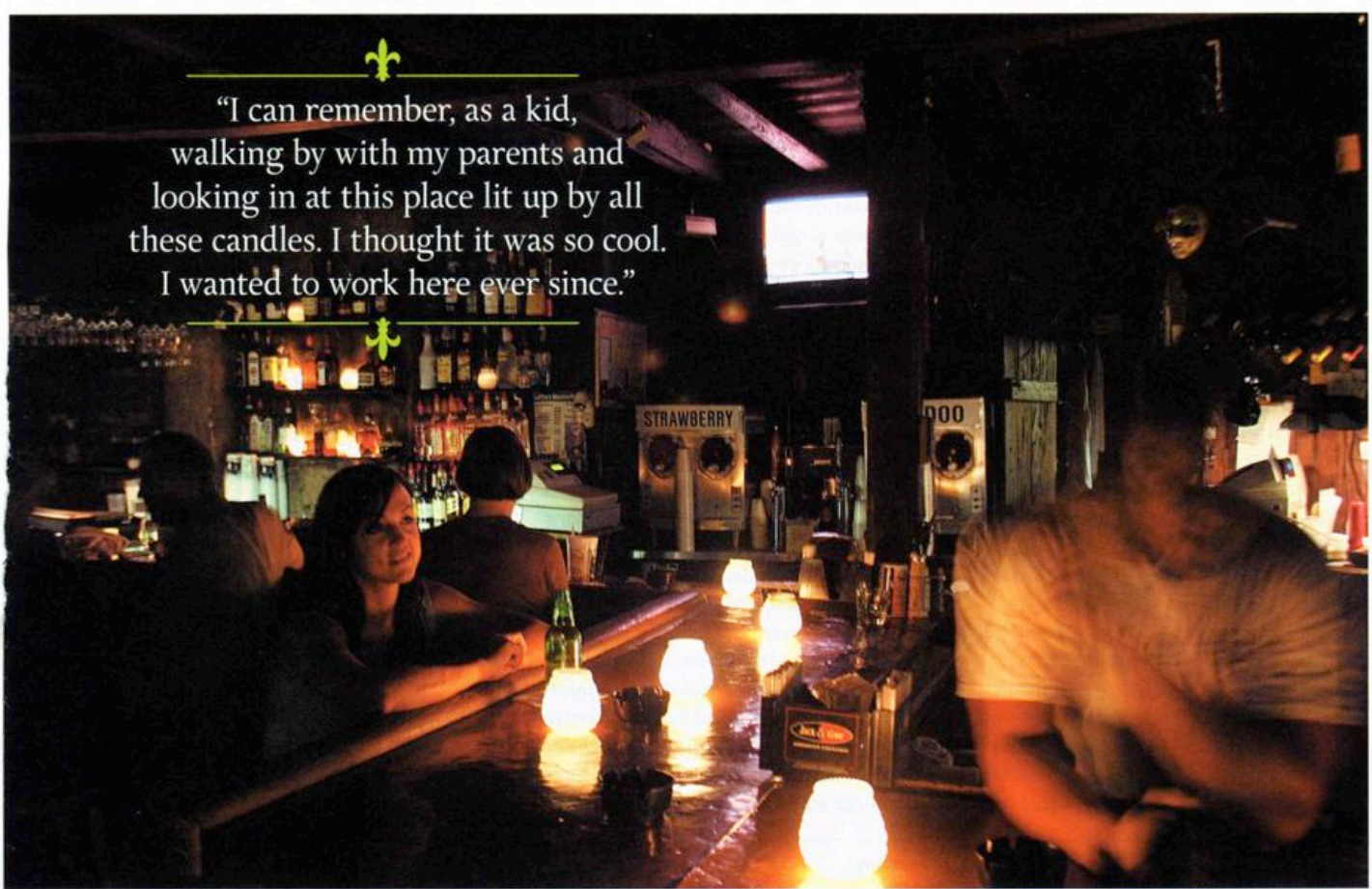
hardly believe my bleary eyes.

As we finish the last sips of our Canadian Club, Chuck explains, "These days I'll usually stay open until most people clear out. If we've been slow, I'll close. Lately it's been slow." Lately it's been slow everywhere in New Orleans. The hurricane that hit the city's residents so brutally, killing some 1,500 and driving tens of thousands — perhaps hundreds of thousands — out of town for good continues to subvert the efforts of residents, government, and business owners to get things back to normal. Indeed, there are plenty who believe that there will be no such thing as normal in New Orleans for a long time to come. If ever.

For visitors, the signs of this struggle are, while somewhat apparent, not always in-your-face obvious. But today, workers, especially in the tourist trade, are scarce, in part because housing is even scarcer. Several neighborhoods — the Lower Ninth Ward, Lakeview, and the suburban St. Bernard Parish — are still in ruins. FEMA trailers dot the landscape. Some schools and hospitals are still shuttered. And day-to-day life for those who have returned to the Big Easy is unusual, at best. There are insurance claims to deal with, government

Well, this is a first. Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop is closed. The doors of the self-proclaimed oldest bar in America, or, that is, the oldest building to house a bar in America, are shut tight. In the decade that I've been regularly visiting New Orleans, I've never seen this. I wasn't even sure the doors actually worked. Lafitte's, at 230-something years old, may be historically significant, one of the few remaining French colonial *brique entre poteaux*, or brick-between-posts buildings, but it's also as haggard as Bourbon Street at the end of Mardi Gras. The walls, to put it technically, are out of plumb. Said less technically, it's slanty, like, everywhere. Even a 2003 face-lift to shore up the exte-

“I can remember, as a kid, walking by with my parents and looking in at this place lit up by all these candles. I thought it was so cool. I wanted to work here ever since.”



funds to try and access (some \$25 billion in federal money is making its way south right now), a constant stream of contractors to stay on top of. Even the simple things aren't simple. Trash pickup is sporadic, and mail service is downright random. "We just started getting magazines again — in July," one local tells me almost a year after Katrina buckled New Orleans' levees. "I don't know which subscriptions have expired and which haven't."

All of this and more has added up to change New Orleans. Sober it, maybe. But that doesn't mean the Crescent City's party is over. Far from it. In many quarters, particularly the French one, thousands of residents and business owners are fighting to make sure the good times roll again. And they are. In my first trip back since the hurricane, I had such a good time that I found myself feeling guilty about it. Most of the stores, restaurants, and hotels that a typical tourist would frequent are open for business, and the food is as great as ever, the drinks as strong, and the stores as quirky. This was not completely unexpected. The city's resurgence, especially in areas like the French Quarter, Uptown, and

the Marigny, has been trumpeted since Mardi Gras. But I found one thing I had not anticipated. Among the people who rushed back as soon as the city opened their ZIP code to repopulation, there is an undeniable, almost palpable sense of hope for the long term. There's pessimism, sure. But from bartenders to waiters to shopkeepers to hotel proprietors and everyday residents, many who live and work here are convinced that New Orleans will soon be back to something close to normal — the "new normal," as they're calling it. For these optimists, bringing the city back in whatever small way they can has become almost a calling. They figure that, in a country increasingly homogenized with the same old strip malls and McMansions, New Orleans is too important to lose. And each in their way is working to make sure that it won't be lost. I found their optimism in the face of all the disturbing news that's come out of the Gulf region to be every bit as intoxicating as the Voo-Doo daiquiri at Lafitte's.

**Walking up the** stairs to suite 324 at the Hotel Provincial, I feel as if I'm coming home. I stayed in this very same suite in

early August 2005, just three weeks before Katrina came ashore. It's a one-of-a-kind space in this family-owned hotel. A long, narrow hallway joins a large bedroom and separate living area. Exposed brick walls, a fireplace, French doors that open onto a small balcony overlooking a courtyard, and even a wet bar give the suite, which sits on the site of an 1800s herb garden that supplied a nearby military hospital, the feeling of a small apartment. On my 2005 visit, while sitting in the living room and feeling very much like this was *our* place, my wife and I had a serious conversation about relocating from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans permanently. This year, we had the same discussion. But it wasn't as serious.

Still, it's good to be back, even amid the new normal. Funny thing is, I doubt most first-time visitors would even catch on to how New Orleans has changed — a remarkable tribute to the efforts returning residents and business owners have put into restarting their all-important tourist trade. To be sure, Katrina's influence is inescapable. A constant stream of reconstruction-related radio ads blares from souvenir shops, and hard-hat work-

ers are as commonplace as red beans and rice on a restaurant menu. On my way out of CC's Coffee shop on Royal Street one early afternoon, I passed a burly contractor from Michigan talking to a couple of local workers. "I just drove down to the Lower Ninth," he told them. "That place just breaks your heart." "Oh, yeah?" one of the locals replied. "You should see Chalmette."

Even with those subtle reminders, the tourist trade is largely back online. Three-quarters of all the hotels in the New Orleans metro area are open, according to the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington, D.C. That includes nearly all the large hotels in the city and most of the smaller hotels. The French Quarter's best-known attractions, Jackson Square, Preservation Hall, St. Louis Cathedral, and the French Market among them, are also open. Old-school, pricey eateries like Arnaud's, Antoine's, Galatoire's, and K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen are back in business. So, too, are many of the other well-known bars and less expensive res-

taurants: Café du Monde, Napoleon House Bar and Cafe, the Old Absinthe House, and the Acme Oyster House. Outside the Quarter, the music clubs along Frenchmen Street in the Marigny neighborhood, which was largely spared from flooding, are as busy as ever. In the Garden District and Uptown, where flooding was also not severe, business is brisk. Tourist numbers in Uptown may be depleted because the St. Charles Avenue Streetcar isn't yet running, but locals are crowding the eclectic stores along Magazine Street, either replacing lost possessions or just keeping up with the fashions. Meanwhile, Uptown restaurants like Lilette, La Petite Grocery, and Table One Brasserie are drawing full houses for their modern takes on the Creole, Cajun, French, and Italian cuisine that made New Orleans famous.

Of course, there are some exceptions. As of this writing, the fabled Commander's Palace was still closed for an extensive renovation. (It was scheduled to reopen by mid-October.) Several restaurants have chosen the same renovation route. Those

that weren't able to make storm repairs and reopen in time for Mardi Gras or Jazz Fest closed for a longer term, allowing insurance money to roll in and buying time to renovate while avoiding the typically slow summer season. And some restaurants and bars, whether because they're short on staff or cash or both, aren't keeping the same hours. Others have shut down completely.

On our first day in town, my wife and I walked past the Olde N'Awlins Cookery, a tourist-friendly restaurant just off Bourbon, and found a "For Sale" sign hanging



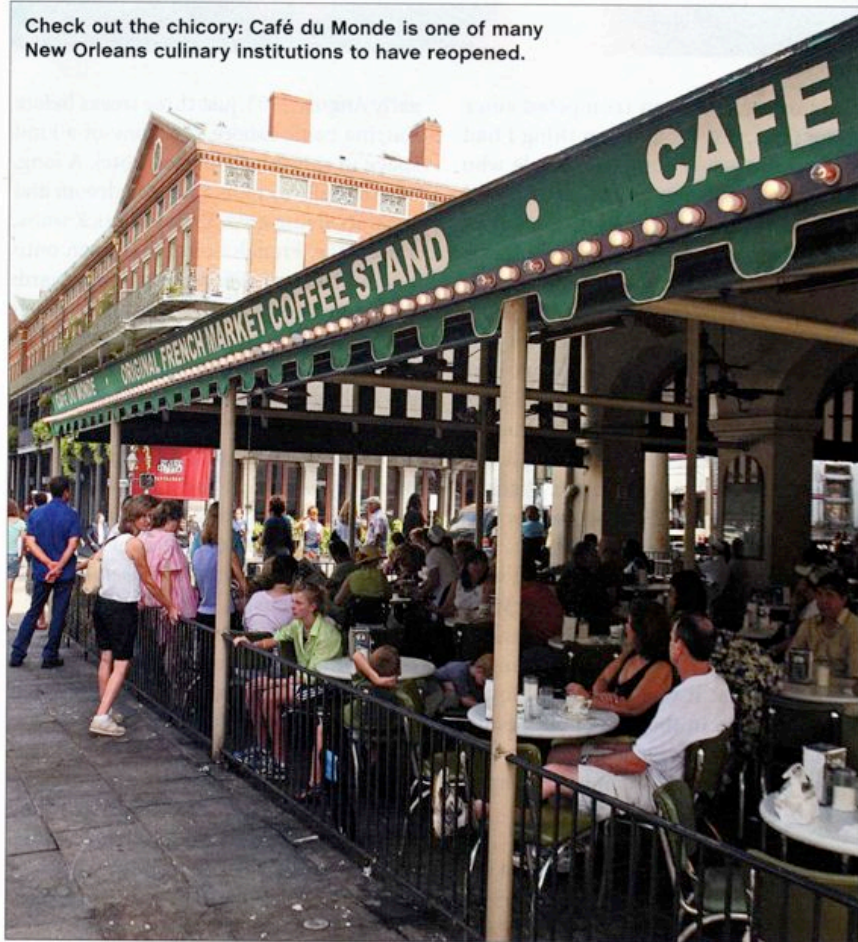
"It's OK to come to New Orleans. That's the message I'd want to leave you with, that I'd want everyone to get. The city that you've always loved is still here. So if you want to help and you don't know how to help, coming here is really helpful. Come to New Orleans and have a great time. It's OK. We want you here."



in the window. Years prior, on our first visit to New Orleans — it was our honeymoon — this was the first restaurant we ate in. And, later, on a return trip, we ate here again, sitting beside one of the oddest groupings of people I've ever laid eyes on. I'd tell the whole story — it involves partial nudity — but this is a family publication. Those were the weird and better days before Katrina, though. After the storm hit, the Cookery's 74-year-old owner, Mike Lala, remained on the premises, pistol in hand to discourage looters. While siphoning gas from one of his cars to fuel up another, he suffered a heart attack and later died upstairs from the kitchen. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that two days passed before his body was removed. His longtime girlfriend, who was also standing guard at the restaurant with the couple's young son and a plethora of pets, has understandably decided not to reopen.

Knowing this and seeing the "For Sale"

Check out the chicory: Café du Monde is one of many New Orleans culinary institutions to have reopened.

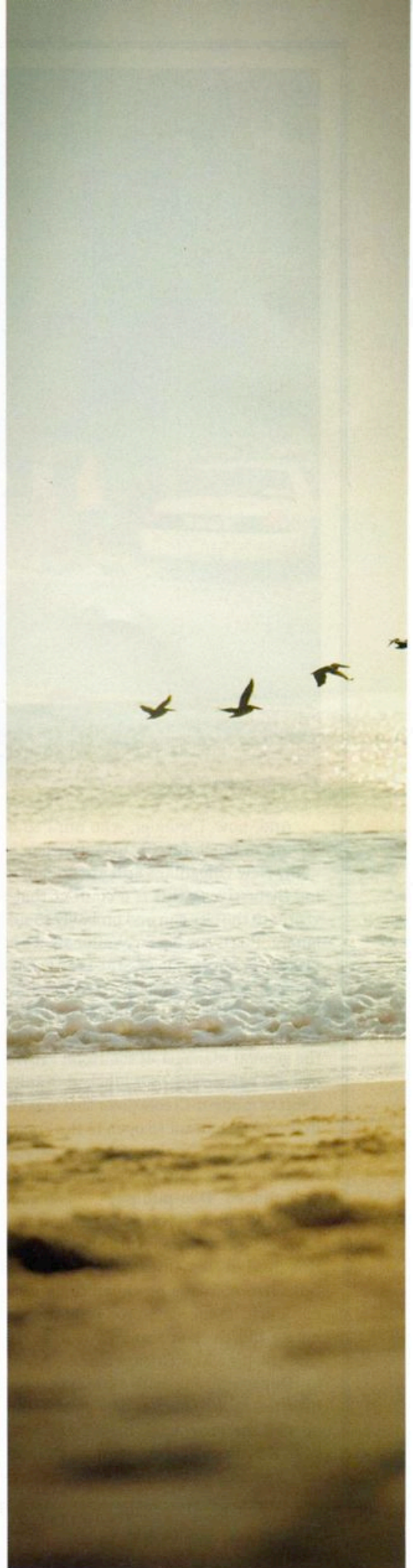


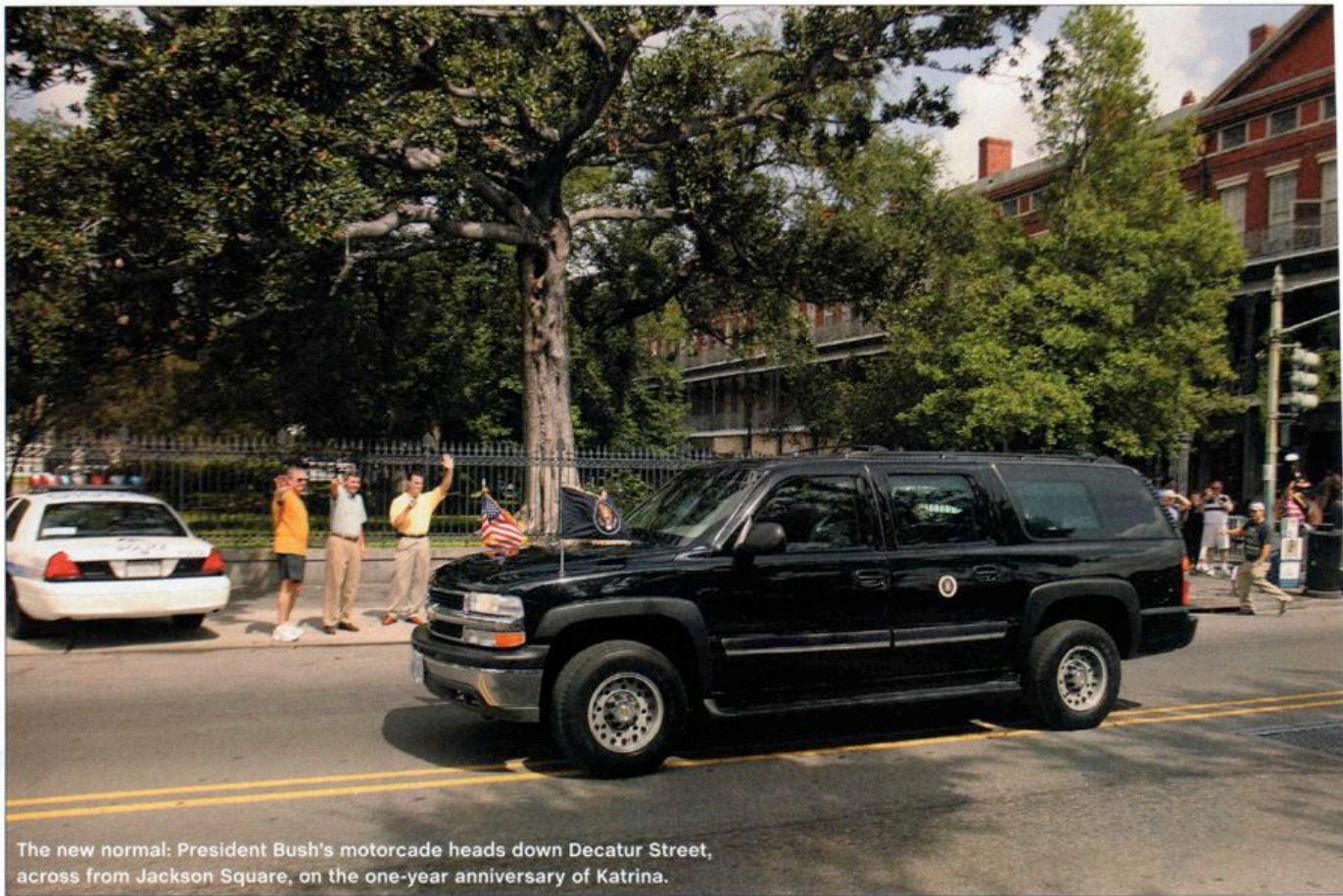


**Southern hospitality:** Bryan Dupepe, general manager of the family-owned Hotel Provincial in the French Quarter, is one of many local business owners who say tourists are key to recovery.

sign depresses me. But I have come to New Orleans having already admonished myself not to get sad. And even though I spend the first two days of my trip seeing my favorite places, hearing great music for free, eating the almost obscenely good jambalaya at Coop's Place and the sticky sweet Banana's Foster at Arnaud's, drinking Sazeracs at lunchtime, and so on, I frequently have to remind myself to stay cheery. Because when I spy the blue tarps that cover the roof of the Ursuline Convent, the city's oldest building, or the flat-

tened homes in the Treme, on the edge of the French Quarter, I think back to watching the weeks of Katrina coverage on TV and the mix of helplessness, anger, and sadness it filled me with. I am loath to admit that I cried in those days, not just because it seems so unmanly, but because my suffering was nothing compared to the people who were living it. I felt bad for them, sure, but I had a roof over my head, clothes in my closet, and not a single family member or close friend in peril. Who was I to be getting all weepy?





The new normal: President Bush's motorcade heads down Decatur Street, across from Jackson Square, on the one-year anniversary of Katrina.

And, now, I wonder, who am I to be having so much fun in this city when so many New Orleanians still are not enjoying themselves? This is a conflict that a visitor to the city can and probably should ignore. This is the Big Easy, after all. It's no place to cry in your beer. Still, I can't shake the feeling that I shouldn't be living it up quite so much. I mention this conflict on my third day in town to Bryan Dupepe, the general manager of the Hotel Provincial. We're meeting over lunch at Stanley, a sort of modern-Creole diner that was the first new restaurant to open in the French Quarter after Katrina. Dupepe — who has one of those fun New Orleans names, pronounced "Doo-puh-pay" — is a good person to talk to if you want to know how business owners are faring after Katrina. He's lived in New Orleans all his life, and talks like it. When he called to confirm our lunch, he asked, "So you want to meet me for 12 o'clock at Stanley?" Not "at" 12. "For" 12. It's a New Orleans thing.

Dupepe grew up with a family that was invested in the Quarter. His grandfather opened the Provincial in 1961, the same year that Preservation Hall was founded. The hotel was passed on to Dupepe's

father, aunt, and uncle, who expanded it by buying several 1800s-era buildings. Now, a third generation runs the hotel, represented by Dupepe. As we eat, a stream of Quarterites, including members of the Vieux Carre Commission, a preservation group that prodded Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop into its face-lift, come by to say hello to Dupepe. "It's like old home day in here," he says. New Orleanians are still reuniting, even a year after the storm. In some cases, people left and didn't come back for months. Dupepe left, too, about 36 hours before Katrina hit. "We'd gotten all of our guests out, and I was going to stay to protect the assets," he says. "My dad rode out Betsy and Camille at the Provincial. We'd never closed before. A lot of people felt that way about hurricanes here, especially the old-timers. They figured if they survived Betsy, they could survive anything. But Betsy wasn't anything compared to Katrina. So I got out."

That's just my problem, I tell him. Even though I'm enjoying my time at his hotel, I know that there's a difficult story behind most of the doors in this city, whether they were soaked in floodwaters or not. And I feel guilty about that. Dupepe sets me

straight. "We've had a rough time in New Orleans, and we've still got a lot of work to do," he says, digging into an omelet. "But it's OK to come to New Orleans. That's the message I'd want to leave you with, that I'd want everyone to get. The city that you've always loved is still here. So if you want to help and you don't know how to help, coming here is really helpful. Come to New Orleans and have a great time. It's OK. We want you here."

**St. Peter Street** has suddenly filled with music. A brass band is leading a wedding procession away from Chartres Street and St. Louis Cathedral and down to Royal Street. Tuxedoed groomsmen in tails wave white hankies in the air, and bridesmaids dance behind them, trying not to get too much schmutz on the bottom of their dresses. The streets of the French Quarter, though, are all about schmutz. Though the Quarter didn't flood after Katrina, it's still as earthy as ever. Turning onto Royal, the procession stops at Toulouse Street so the bride can climb down from the horse-drawn carriage she and her new husband have been riding in. Groomsmen take turns danc-



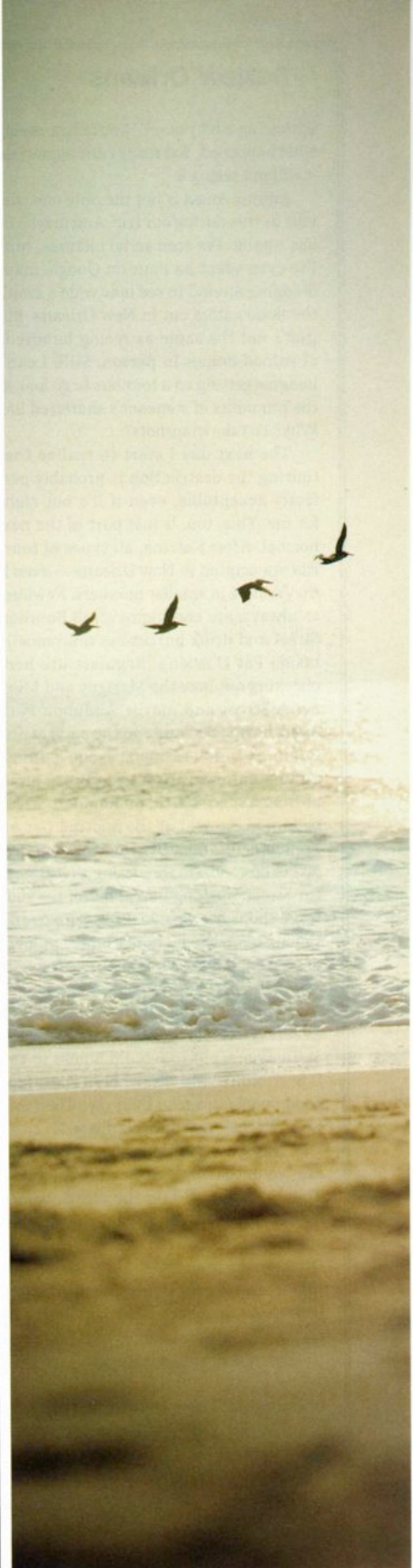
ing with her as the band plays. A ring of dirt quickly forms around the bottom of her dress. Well, you only wear it once.

This is just one of about 1,400 weddings taking place in the city each quarter, about 30 percent more than were held in a typical quarter before the levees broke. With more weddings comes, of course, more children. The city's birth rate is up, even though population is down. Why? Who knows? Maybe people are looking for something stable in a place that's gone topsy-turvy. Maybe the newlyweds and new parents are displaying not only their commitment to each other, but to this historic city, too. We can only hope.

I, however, am doing a bad job of committing to a stroll down Bourbon Street where revelers are spending their evening collecting beer and beads. I'm here during the slow summertime, but even for summer the crowds are thin, especially up on the balconies overlooking the street where beads usually rain down on passersby year-round. That's depressing me, too, even though I never spent much time catching beads on Bourbon in my prior trips. So my wife and I duck into the Bombay Club, a semi-swanky bar a block

off Bourbon that caters to grown-ups and specializes in proper martinis — made with gin. Here, Johnny Angel is crooning to Louis Prima's "Just a Gigolo." There's almost a full house, although clearly most have not come to listen to the singer, a guy who grew up on Staten Island but relocated to New Orleans during the swing music boom of the late 1990s. Still, he's entertaining, even if we do spend most of his set trying to figure out if the girls seated near us are from the East Coast. "They're not wearing any lipstick," my wife notes. "Southern girls wear lipstick when they go out." She would know.

After his set ends, Johnny Angel — I assume this is not his real name, but I don't bother to ask for clarification — makes the rounds of the bar, thanking people for coming out. "So, you guys are locals?" he asks us. (Must have been the lipstick.) I admit, grudgingly, that we are not, which gets us to chatting about the state of the city. "Have you gone out to see what the hurricane did to the neighborhoods yet?" Johnny, or whoever he really is, asks. We have not, I tell him. I feel weird — actually, I may have said "icky" — about being a tourist to devastation. "It's not being a tourist," Johnny says,





appearing a bit put off. "You're just seeing what happened. You really can't appreciate it without seeing it."

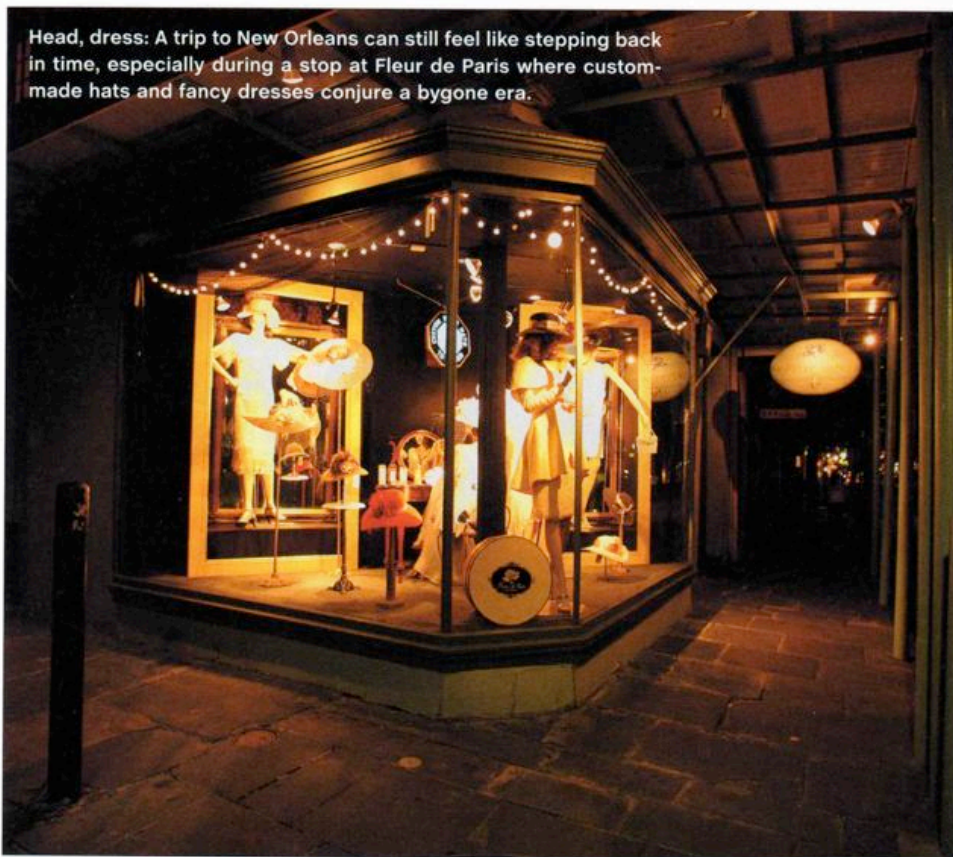
Johnny Angel is not the only one who tells us this during our trip. And maybe he has a point. I've seen aerial pictures, sure. I've even spent an hour on Google maps dragging around to see how wide a swath the floodwaters cut in New Orleans. But that's not the same as seeing hundreds of ruined homes in person. Still, I can't imagine getting on a tour bus to go look at the remnants of someone's shattered life. Why? To take snapshots?

The next day I start to realize that touring the destruction is probably perfectly acceptable, even if it's not right for me. This, too, is just part of the new normal. After Katrina, all types of tourists are coming to New Orleans — even if they're here in smaller numbers. Newbies, as always, are coming to stroll Bourbon Street and drink hurricanes unironically inside Pat O'Brien's. Regulars are here checking out how the Marigny and Magazine Street and maybe Audubon Park fared, having cocktails on the patio at The Columns Hotel, eating at Jacques-Imo's, and listening to the Tremé Brass Band at Donna's Bar & Grill on Rampart Street or Linnzi Zaorski at the Spotted Cat on Frenchmen. And still others are coming just to do good. I'm wandering along Decatur Street, ducking in and out of the souvenir shops between Jackson Square and Canal Street, when I notice large numbers of teens and adults in matching T-shirts. These T-shirted groups have been coming here for months: Their mission is not to eat Oysters Rockefeller "for" 12 o'clock at Tujague's, but to rebuild homes in the Lower Ninth and elsewhere. These are good people to spend their own time this way. But they, too, have conflicts.

I walk past one group of teenagers who are "voluntouring" with a church group. They've assembled on the street, where a chaperone is telling them that they're about to get an hour to explore the French Quarter on their own. He admonishes that if anyone sees something during this time that has an "adult theme," they're to turn away. "This is serious, guys," he says. "It could affect your spirituality."

**It's good to know that things are still weird in New Orleans. You've got teenagers walking down Bourbon Street shielding their eyes. You've got me feeling guilty**

Head, dress: A trip to New Orleans can still feel like stepping back in time, especially during a stop at Fleur de Paris where custom-made hats and fancy dresses conjure a bygone era.



that I'm not hammering dry wall in St. Bernard Parish, or, well, whatever it is you do with dry wall. And you've got Chuck behind the bar at Lafitte's. This is Chuck's dream job, which seems weird enough. But to make it more bizarre, he owes the gig, in part, to Katrina.

"I grew up in New Orleans," says Chuck, who evacuated the city about 18 hours before Katrina made landfall, with his girlfriend, her children, and just a box of vanilla creme Frosted Mini-Wheats to eat. Yes, everyone in New Orleans has a storm story. "I can remember," Chuck continues, "as a kid, walking by Lafitte's with my parents and looking in at this place lit up by all these candles. I thought it was so cool. I wanted to work here ever since." Problem was, the popular bar was fully staffed each time Chuck came looking for work, understandable given not only Lafitte's historic home, but also its perfect location. It's close to the spots on Bourbon that most tourists hit, yet far enough away from the classic rock joints and souvenir shops to be one of the few quiet bars on the street. (It's also the perfect midway drinking point between, say, clubbing in the Marigny and a 4 a.m. eggwich at the 24-hour bar/restaurant Déjàvu. But I'm guessing not everyone has

used Lafitte's for this purpose.) There may also be no other bar in the city as well-protected. Cops on horseback make regular appearances late at night at Lafitte's — often coming inside on their mounts. (This is likely a respectful nod to the bar's principal owner, the sheriff of neighboring St. Bernard Parish.) Point being, business here, for good reason, has always been brisk and staff turnover low. Katrina changed that. And not just at Lafitte's. Tens of thousands of workers in the bar, restaurant, and tourism industries haven't returned to the city.

Remember what Dupepe said? That coming to New Orleans is really helpful? This is what he meant. Most of us aren't Oprah. We're not going to build a housing development or create high-paying jobs in New Orleans. But a few hundred bucks spent having fun? Maybe it'll at least start to bring back more workers to the city as some of the thousands of jobs that floodwaters washed away return.

And that'll help Chuck keep his dream job. "Man, as soon as they called my ZIP code I came back here," Chuck says of his rapid return to New Orleans. "I didn't want to be anywhere else. There's no other place like New Orleans."

This is our fourth and final night in

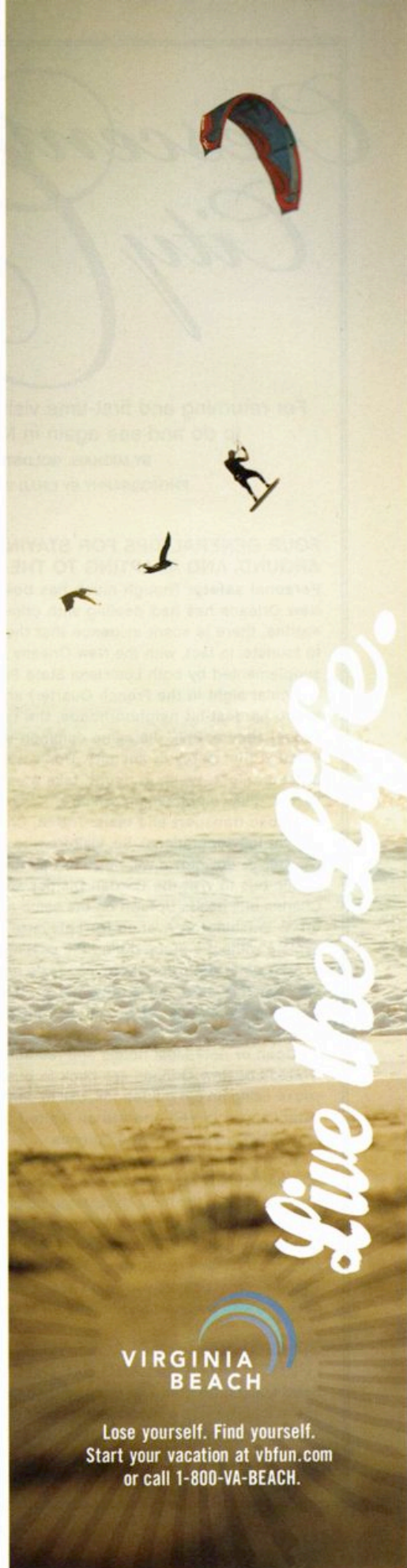


New Orleans, and Chuck is, I think, at least the 13th local who has expressed the same sentiment. Indeed, he says it nearly verbatim to what we've heard elsewhere. And that makes you wonder whether these people have some kind of groupthink delusion going on. It has to be said: There is real reason to believe we could lose New Orleans. Some fret that big companies will move in, buy up the French Quarter and the Garden District, and make the city into a giant theme park, turning what is undeniably real and unique into something completely phony. I doubt it. If there was a market for such a place — call it NOLAwood — it'd be cheaper and easier to build it somewhere else. Vegas, maybe. No, my worry is that New Orleans will go the way of Venice. Sure, Venice is still beautiful and historic and wonderful. But there are hardly any Venetians living there anymore. That city's charm isn't totally lost, but its spirit is on the endangered list. If New Orleanians can't or won't come back, can't or won't stay, it could face a similar fate.

But you know what? Maybe it's the Canadian Club talking, but as I sit at the bar at Lafitte's with the doors closed and the candles flickering, and the Voodoo machine running, I'm starting to feel optimistic. I think back to an afternoon earlier

in our trip when we met Katherine, a cheerful, young saleswoman at Fleur de Paris, a wacky, expensive hat and dress shop on Royal Street. She told me unequivocally, "I'm not going anywhere. New Orleans is too important to leave. And I love it here." I get the sentiment. This country needs a place like New Orleans, with its rich history, its old, even decrepit buildings, its music, its oddball mix of people and cultures, and its fantastic food. Or, at least, I need it. And I've heard so many people say they're devoted to making this place work, for themselves, for visitors like me, for the abstract concept of supporting a slower, gentler life, which New Orleans — at its best — represents, that I feel better about the city's prospects. Indeed, I suddenly feel like I haven't had enough fun, like I owe it to this city to enjoy myself here completely. No guilt. So I press Chuck to finish the Sinatra lyric and make it one more for the road. He obliges. Sure, maybe the doors are closed earlier than usual, but as long as there are paying customers, Chuck, like New Orleans, will keep on serving. ☺

**Joseph Guinto** believes he makes the best jambalaya in the northeastern United States. But it's still not half as good as the rabbit and sausage jambalaya at Coop's Place.



Lose yourself. Find yourself.  
Start your vacation at [vbfun.com](http://vbfun.com)  
or call 1-800-VA-BEACH.