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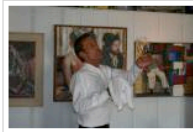
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Upperline Restaurant Celebrates 25 Years

Written by Su-Jit Lin

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It's been twenty-five joyful, tearful, and flavorful years since JoAnn Clevenger first opened the doors of her passion project: a little yellow restaurant tucked into a corner off Prytanian on Upperline. Now celebrating their quarter-century anniversary, they've come a long way from their humble beginnings, the still-spry and still colorful Clevenger confided, with not a bit of pride but wide-eyed wonder and humility.

"We were only one room, and didn't even have enough funds to pay the staff their first check on time," she reminisces, pushing her bright red spectacles up.

But the thick linen and polished wineglasses gracing the sea of tables and rare and local art tastefully but eclectically covering the cheery walls of the three-room dining area make it obvious that this labor of love has come into itself.

At the heart of Upperline's selections is all the heart its past four chefs have put into the restaurant. Each skilled chef has contributed to the menu as it stands today, and the result is unpretentious and delicious gourmet comfort food, steeped in tradition and cozy history. From appetizers to entrees to dessert, every dish has its story. One of Clevenger's favorites is the one about the Fried Green Tomatoes with Shrimp Remoulade.

"No one else had thought to use remoulade," she observed. But she did, and the dish spread like wildfire to international popularity. Although never officially recognized as the inventor of what has become a famous Southern staple, Clevenger takes more satisfaction in spreading good flavor than her personal name. For her, the pleasure is in the food – simply, making food that makes people happy.

Another app that has been met with rave reviews is the Spicy Crispy Oysters St. Claude, battered and fried oysters sitting in a neat row atop a half-shell with a tangy tomato-based sauce of pesto consistency. However, my personal favorite is the Spicy Shrimp with Jalapeno Cornbread and Aioli. Marinated, then sautéed in onions, seasoning crisping on the edges of the shrimp, this subtly sweet dish is addicting. The use of jalapenos in the bread is subtle and well executed, and the overall effect is warm and flavorful rather than searing hot.

Clevenger is a spicy shrimp lover, but they have proven that they love her back. Upperline's Drum Piquant with Hot & Hot Shrimp (a dish, she assures me, created explicitly for a fixation with a phrase she encountered in Alabama) was selected one of USA Today's Top 25 Dishes for 2006.

Tom Cowman's Roast Duck with Garlic Port or Ginger Peach Sauce is another favorite, a legacy left by a previous chef named – you guessed it – Tom Cowman. Slow-roasted and crisped, it's a bit well done for those with an affinity to rare meats, but if you like your game smoky and fall-off-the-bone, this dish is top-notch. The Garlic Port sauce is thick and rich and doesn't seek to overpower the natural flavor of the duck or the filet it's also offered with. Other entrees also focus on luxury meats, such as the Lamb Shank Braised in Red Wine, Veal Grillades with Cheddar Grits, and Rack of Lamb with a refreshing Mint Madeira.

It's very easy to end there, but not quite as fun as going out with guns blazing. By that, I mean, desserts are a must-try. An amazingly dense Praline Crème Brulee does nicely if your meal's got you filled to the brim, and the buttery Pecan Pie is ideal if you're feeling indulgent. The Honey Pecan Bread Pudding is the ultimate in comfort-food luxury though, with its moist, thick layers, crunchy honeyed nuts, and drizzle of toffee sauce.

With a menu so wide and enticing, it's hard to choose a taste route, so Upperline offers a little culinary map to lead the way. Offered year-round is a "Taste of New Orleans" menu, which includes not a choice of, but all of the following:

Duck Etouffee with Louisiana Pepper Jelly, Turtle Soup, Andouille Gumbo, the Fried Green Tomatoes and Spicy Shrimp mentioned earlier, Roast Duck with the sweet Ginger Peach Sauce, and a choice of the bread pudding or pie.

For under \$40, it's a bounty hard to believe.

Just know that one visit is all it takes to become a believer, whether you go for the full-flavored "Taste," the Garlic Festival summer prix fixe, or explore the full menu. And if you need help, look for the little lady with the big personality radiating enthusiasm and that indefinable New Orleans-ness.

Paul Sanchez



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