

Food News

By Su-Jit Lin

"It's the most wonderful time of the year... It's the hap-happiest season of all ..."

--Andy Williams

For people in other parts of the country, this song brings to mind red and green, blue and silver. But here, that's far behind us, washed away in waves of green, purple, and gold. In case you haven't noticed, it's Mardi Gras time yet again!

PJ's Coffee was one of the first places to get your mouth in the mood, unveiling its newest seasonal flavor, the King Cake Blend. As always, this local coffee chain uses its premium hand-selected Arabica beans as the base of their flavors, and this latest creation will be sure to satisfy even the sweetest of teeth. "Liquid king cake," is how PJ's Roast Master Felton Jones described it--"smooth and robust with a hint of cinnamon." To me, that sounds like a new tradition in the making, and the perfect complement to the sugary brioche-like pastry PJ's is keeping fully stocked, in cream cheese, praline, and traditional flavors.

They're not the only ones getting in the sugar-high mix—**Whole Foods** has unleashed a dark, rich stranger on us, and the name is Yves Thuries...chocolate. The French chocolatier is offering to the public some really innovative bars of dark, white, and milk chocolate enhanced with your choice of mint, hazelnut, cocoa nib, and pear. To take it a step further, candied pink rose and violet petals can make these a great gift for either Valentine's or Mardi Gras.

If all that sweetness is already starting to make your teeth and head hurt, maybe some actual *food* might help. You know, like the kind they have on the new lunch menu at **Begue's** in the **Royal Sonesta**. Mondays through Saturdays, 11:30-2, they'll be serving up the good stuff, from turtle soup to a baby spinach salad with pears, blue cheese, and pecans to sandwiches to full-sized steaks.

That's not the only serious lunch in town, though—**Chef's Charity for Children**, a benefit event for **St. Michael Special School**, is hosting an ambitious meal on Tuesday, February 3, from 10-2 at the **Hilton Riverside**. The guest chef list has got some serious clout, with **John Folse**, **Lazone Randolph (Brennan's)**, **Emeril Lagasse**, **John Besh**, **Leah Chase**, **Frank Brigtsen**, and a good many more. Tickets are just \$55 each for one of the best meals of your life.

Another great value that's kicking off is Ladies Night at **Gattuso's**, one of our city's Westbank favorites. Wednesdays are going to find the new renovation chockfull of eye candy from 4-9 PM, since girls drink totally free during that time. The recently redone space is just as much of a draw as the free booze, though, and from all reports, it's a fair claim.

More on recent redos, **Coquette**, brainchild of **Chef Michael Stoltzfus** (formerly of **August**), has just announced that its second floor is now open for private parties of up to 40. Since this restaurant *is* just a baby, diners get a whole lot of freedom in selecting their event menus and the chef, so far, has a great variety of phenomenal dishes to choose from.

Coquette certainly isn't the only establishment branching out this season. **Aloha Sushi's** going to be making a splash at the **Sun Ray Grill** in the Warehouse District; their grand opening celebration is slated for February 3-7. Half of the sushi bar's proceeds are going straight to the **Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation**, a really great cause that many of us are already familiar with. Pacific inspiration is the key theme for Aloha, as you may have guessed, but you get the best of both

worlds by being given the freedom to order from either menu.

That's not all, folks. Mardi Gras is on the national radar, but so is New Orleans right now. *USA Today* gave our city quite a few high marks in their Food & Wine section this year, naming the oyster meat pie from **Cochon** and **Meauxbar's** Napoleon of crawfish, avocado and tomato confit as top dishes for the year and **Stella!** as a runner-up for their "Meal of the Year" title. The paper goes on to discuss the tenacity of our restaurateurs and chefs during the mess we call Gustav, citing **Daisy Dukes**, **EAT**, and **Mr. Chubby's Cheesesteaks** as troopers that made sure the city was well-fed in every way.

The Creole cream cheese cheesecake from **Commander's Palace** also got a shout in *USA Today*, but their press this month went

beyond that. Voted "Top Décor" for *Zagat's* latest survey, the people have spoken that classic quirk is a perennial favorite. The biggest honor, though, is that they earned the "Most Popular" tag for the eighteenth time. Congratulations, Commander's! With a fresh attitude like that of **Chef Tory McPhail**, this oldie remains a goodie.

And now that we're seriously entering the Carnival zone on our calendars, goodies are solidly on our radars. So get those chairs out 'da closet and repaint those ladders! Like I said, "it's the most wonderful time of the year...!"

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