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SoFAB

in More Ways Than One

The Southern Food & Beverage Museum

By Su-Jit Lin

The first thing in a rookie visitor's mind when it comes to New Orleans is Mardi Gras. This decadent, rowdy celebration, they believe, is the heart of all that is the Crescent City; masks and beads are the primary psychological associations. However, after the first night of debauchery and first pangs of hunger, they come to realize that there is a much more important lifeblood pumping through the veins of this city – an obsessive oral fixation.

Which is not to say that Mardi Gras and all the joy and gaiety it brings means nothing, or that it has no correlation to our love of all things tastable; it's just a simple fact that the food and beverage of Louisiana is the *real* vehicle of pleasure to our hedonistic natures.

Although acknowledged, the importance of the food and drink of this region has nonetheless been pushed down in prominence below other attractions for centuries. Taken for granted, its history has not been highlighted or preserved with as much care as other facets of Southern identity. A group of people felt that this needed to change- it was time for our food to be enjoyed outside of the moment, celebrated as part of our regional foundation. From this basis, non-profit organization The Southern Food and Beverage Museum was founded, led by president Elizabeth Williams since 2004.

When questioned about the part cuisine played in shaping our city, she responded that "in New Orleans, it's absolutely crucial; after Katrina, the opening of new restaurants and the way people welcomed them was an important part of banding together." Further support comes from the fact that SoFAB, active through the post-K "food diaspora," received e-mails aplenty from displaced New Orleanians mourning their dismal out-of-area meals.

Unfortunately, these letters still come, since a great many favorites remain on partial hiatus from their traditional offerings ... part of why SoFAB's Menu Project is so important.

The way Liz Williams sees it, it's "something [they've] done as part of a mission to gather information for the future ... preserving today for tomorrow." Menus, Williams believes, can tell a story of a time. For instance, just from selections and prices, researchers will be able to glean facts about the economy, the environment, ethnic populations, and trends.

Williams states that menus are "personal and idiosyncratic to the people who collected them," part of the appeal of the Project. She believes the same to be true of the community cookbooks they're collecting for the SoFAB library. Says she, "We think of cookbooks not the way a library looks at books. A library says, 'These books you keep, because they're reference, or popular, and in circula-

tion.' [But] cookbooks are thought of here as community artifacts. Recipes from, say, 1957, with grease stains – you can take as empirical evidence that the dish was popular."

Her hope is that local libraries start donating their cookbooks to SoFAB rather than disposing of them in tag sales. Beginning with a collection of Southern publications and eventually expanding to other ethnicities and non-English languages, Williams aims to provide reference points for all cultural groups, allowing all to explore their culinary roots.

SoFAB provides other reference points through interactive exhibits. They don't show the actual food (... outside of the Tasting Room; there, free samples abound!), but "tell the story of the food." Current features include *Laissez Faire-Savoir Fare* (Louisiana/NOLA), *Wish You Were Here* (postcards of African-Americans and newly documented dishes), and

Williams' favorite, *Eating in the White House – America's Food*, which she finds interesting for the fact that "much of what we serve in the White House influences national trends, like Lady Baltimore Cake and Martha Washington. It sets the tone for what people want to eat."

Equally intriguing is traveling exhibit *Restaurant Restorative*. Premiered at the James Beard Foundation Awards ("the Oscars of the food world," jokes Williams), it has temporarily made New York City home. This collection focuses on photos of destroyed and reopened restaurants in New Orleans. Eloquently, they say: 'come on down; the feeding's fine! -- We're back and better than ever!'

SoFAB encourages its visitors to spread this message through a Wiki and innovative forum, open for any discussion, to maintain a catering to the public. In fact, Williams believes so strongly that SoFAB is an organization for the people about the people, that the permanent location of the museum was picked so that they could "bring the museum to them."

The new Riverwalk address will certainly do that effectively, and its grand opening this month is greatly anticipated. To get more details, visit www.southernfood.org, but until then -- eat, drink, and be merry! For every bite and every sip is a tribute to the evolution of the delicious history and savory culture of the South.

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