

Contra Costa Times

Cajun, Creole at home in California

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Enough already with local wild salmon on baby spring lettuces and organic fava beans. I want my vegetables deep-fried — with sauce! Then I want dessert.

Long before there was California cuisine, Cajuns and Creoles emphasized local ingredients with a French flair — they just weren't so concerned about calories. Now in the heart of Berkeley, Robert Volberg has opened **Angeline's Louisiana Kitchen**, and clogged the menu with classics from top to bottom.

He calls it "puttin' love on the plate" from a place where "fusion is a dirty word."

The oysters here are battered, deep-fried and delivered with a double dose of melted butter. An iceberg salad is dressed in ranch, topped with two strips of bacon and served with garlic bread. Another starter, Angeline's Creole-style BBQ Shrimp, is in a sauce so darkly rich it could pass for a sundae topping.

Two friends and I started with this trio recently at Angeline's, where jazz and zydeco blare from Volberg's "grown-up jukebox," and where cushions and chardonnay give way to brick, beer and bottle-top folk art.

The natural suds come from Abita Brewing Company, started outside New Orleans by a clan "in a shed out back," says Volberg. If you like it dark, order a Turbo Dog. For a fresh palate cleanser, try the raspberry spiked Purple Haze. It's so crisp it cuts right through the fat in the food.

Twenty-eight-year-old chef Brandon Dubea has more loyalty to his hometown of Baton Rouge than Berkeley, thank goodness. Getting the mustard spread right on a po' boy is more important to him than coming up with some new-age aioli. The result is food with integrity, or as Dubea puts it: "Not too cheffy but clean."

The contrast of crunchy coating and silky shellfish in those oysters (\$10.95) has got to be one of the naughtiest packages since Oreos. It comes with a side of "bordelaise," a New Orleans sauce not to be confused with the classic French demiglace. This is the sort of garlic butter that turned snails into a commodity.

That dark sauce on the Voodoo Shrimp (\$10.95, \$13.95 for an entree) has a haunting complexity informed by a richly bittersweet reduction of spice, shrimp shells, wine and

Worcestershire. As with the oysters, preparation trumps ingredients here — the seafood is merely a sidecar for delivering flavor.

Same thing with the salad (\$6.95). A light, tangy, dill-flecked buttermilk dressing is the star — giving needy iceberg something to cling to.

Feeling rather Southern, we also got the munchies for some Hush Puppies (\$3.95). The corn balls taste dull on their own — but they're not on their own. A cup of creamy honey butter comes along for the fried ride — enough to smear a whole baguette. It brings out the cornmeal's natural sweetness.

Dubea is more at home with the sausage and spice of Cajun than the cream and herbs of Creole, but he represents both admirably without worrying about "authentic" recipes.

His full-flavored and sausage-heavy crab gumbo (\$5.92/\$12.95), for instance, is made with a blond roux, rather than a dark one, relying on sassafras and spice for its grassy complexity. He uses both file and okra for body — a combo that would horrify some Creoles — and always a shake or two of Worcestershire. "It's the MSG of the Cajun world," Dubea says.

There's tomato in his jambalaya (\$13.95), which, heaven help him, isn't made in one pot. The buttery Uncle Ben's rice brings the dish together, but each element — spicy andouille, chicken and tasso (a smoky Louisiana ham) — shows character.

Dubea does occasionally get flack for holding back on the chiles, which is why he's got Tabasco on every table. He learned restraint with seasoning while working under Christopher Cheung at Marica in Rockridge. For the jambalaya, however, he puts the peppers on parade.

Tasso reappears in a killer sauce with the Buttermilk Fried Chicken (\$14.50). One would expect a pile of bones in a place such as this, but the breast meat is like candy against what is essentially country gravy spiked with heavy cream (and Worcestershire, of course).

Dubea spent a lot of time in Louisiana several years ago searching for secrets, but more often than not found restaurant chefs had turned to freezers and cans. So he visited families instead — "going to see my friends and ignoring them and hanging out with their grandma in the kitchen." He sees it as an honor to re-create this down-home fare in California.

He settled on a sweet-and-sticky tomato-based sauce for his ribs (\$10.95) with a shade closer to molasses than ketchup. He braises the meat in honey water, slices them into individual ribs and flash-grills them to achieve a glassy crunch. The pork slips right off the bone, making for an easy-to-eat, easy-to-share appetizer.

Volberg found this Shattuck Avenue space by walking up and down every restaurant row from San Pablo to College. It used to be a Long Life Noodle Company restaurant, but now that New Orleans has moved in, Volberg wants you to live it up.

"This is a table after my own heart," he said after stopping by on our anonymous visit, smiling at our plates of banana bread pudding (\$5.75), beignets buried in powdered sugar (\$4.50), and pecan pie with whipped cream (\$4.50). "Three people, three desserts." "When you get to New Orleans," he says, "you gain a pound a day."

On my one trip to the Big Easy, a month before Katrina, I must have put on at least that much. But the much-hyped beignets at Cafe du Monde had nothing over the sweet doughnuts here. For his bread pudding, Dubea, who most recently worked as a pastry chef at Cafe Rouge, makes a big, creamy batch of Bananas Foster before turning it into a bread custard. Served warm with a rummy caramel sauce, it was as satisfying as the original Bananas Foster at Brennan's in the French Quarter.

Angeline's is a closet compared with those big-name New Orleans restaurants, but it's helping to keep this gutsy cuisine alive. You'll find Volberg either doing laps in the dining room or out running errands.

"It's really me and the chef," says the lanky Volberg. While he does have a small, dedicated staff, he says the work pressure has kept him from expanding like a balloon.

"It's called the Open-a-Restaurant Diet Plan," he says. "I'm gonna write a book." Reach Times Food editor Nicholas Boer at 925-943-8254 or nboer@cctimes.com.

ANGELINE'S LOUISIANA KITCHEN

3 1/2 forks (Value rating)

CUISINE: Cajun and Creole.

PRICES: \$\$ (entrees \$9.95-\$17.95).

CHECK: \$120. Five appetizers, two entrees, three desserts and \$24 in beverages.

HOME RUN: Fried Chicken, beignets.

STRIKEOUT: None.

VEGETARIAN: Jambalaya and Muffuletta have veggie options.

FREEBIES: None.

DESSERTS: Homemade, authentic Southern treats.

BEVERAGES: A handful of moderately priced California wines and Abita beers from Louisiana.

3 STARS (Service, ambience rating)

2261 Shattuck Ave. near Bancroft Way, Berkeley.

HOURS: 5:30-9 p.m. Mondays; 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays; 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays.

CONTACT: 510-548-6900. www.angelineskitchen.com.

RESERVATIONS: Small dining room accepts reservations for both lunch and dinner.

NOISE LEVEL: Loud music.

SERVICE POINT: Our waiter was more sincere and respectful than the decor dictated or we deserved.

PARKING: Street parking is usually available within three blocks, especially on the west side of Shattuck (opposite the restaurant).

DINING ALONE: Lots of single diners at lunch. Counter seating for three and plenty of small tables.

KIDS: Fried chicken, pasta, and french fries are popular.

DATE OPENED: July 20, 2006.