

Angeline's Louisiana Kitchen

A tiny Berkeley restaurant brings the East Bay its best taste of the Bayou

BY KATHRYN JESSUP



The story of Angeline's Louisiana Kitchen, like any good Southern tale, begins with a little magic. Robert Volberg, the restaurant's affable, gray-haired proprietor, was sniffing around Rockridge for a space where he could open a restaurant. Suddenly, he saw a young man in chef's pants. Volberg approached the man and asked him if he was a chef. Brandon Dubea, now Angeline's upbeat 28-year-old chef de cuisine, responded "yes." He then asked Volberg: "Are you from the South? Because nobody talks to anyone here. People think you're crazy if you say hello."

Indeed, both men are from the South—Volberg grew up in Tennessee and North Carolina and frequently visited New Orleans, and Dubea (pronounced dooBAY) is a native of Baton Rouge. The chance meeting of these two Southern gentlemen was lucky not only for them but for us. The pair has opened an excellent venue for Cajun and Creole food, cuisines rarely represented in Bay Area restaurants, and even more rarely well represented.

It's easy to pass by Angeline's, tucked as it is on a packed block of downtown Berkeley, on Shattuck Avenue across from the UA Cinemas. Once you slip through the door, the exposed brick wall, sweet tea served in curved Coca-Cola glasses, and Fats Domino on the stereo make your passage to the South instantaneous. An alligator made of purple-painted bottle caps adorns one wall, Mardi Gras beads hang from the chandelier overhead, and a sign above the kitchen reads "Be Nice or Leave." A blue banner with the fleur-de-lis, a symbol of Louisiana, hangs on the restaurant's front door as a sign of solidarity with the ongoing Katrina recovery efforts in New Orleans.

Dubea's cooking and Volberg's hospitality are certainly doing New Orleans proud. Take the fried cheese grits with crawfish étouffée: The dish is composed of golden rectangular logs of crisp-on-the-outside, creamy-on-the-inside cheese grits, topped with a delectable creamy sauce brimming with plump, pink crawfish meat. The abundance of shellfish will astound you, and the subtly spicy, wonderfully buttery flavor of the étouffée makes the dish irresistible. The



Gumbo at Angeline's Louisiana Kitchen in Berkeley

Creole-style barbecue shrimp (a dish that is neither grilled nor served in barbecue sauce) has a similarly addictive quality, with the tender yet crunchy shrimp accompanied by a deep, rust-colored seafood reduction. These Creole dishes are of the refined, expertly sauced sort you would find in New Orleans. The menu also represents Louisiana country cooking with a knockout gumbo topped with plump, individually articulated white rice, an appetizer of boudin (a mixture of pork and rice in a sausage casing), and a Cajun mixed grill entrée including baby back ribs, shrimp, and a Louisiana hot link.

“In some ways, we’ve got the greatest-hits menu,” says Volberg, a tall, thin man with a knowing smile who frequents the dining room and seems to remember every customer. “It’s classic cuisine.” Dubea, who has cooked at Marica in Rockridge and Café Rouge on Berkeley’s Fourth Street, adds, “There’s no fusion, and it’s not all [New Orleans] city dishes. We’ve got some grandma-style Southern food and Louisiana country cooking.” A good example of that is the crunchy, refreshing ranch salad, with its chopped iceberg lettuce, scattering of cherry tomatoes, and house-made, dill-flecked buttermilk-lime dressing.

Angeline’s lack of pretense and its commitment to tasty food help explain its success. Dubea points out that you’ll have as many “real” gumbo recipes as there are Southerners, so he says he feels comfortable putting his own mark on the food. For example, his po’boys—the baguette sandwiches born of the 1927 New Orleans streetcar strike—come on different bread than they would down south. Dubea uses a wonderful square-cornered French roll from Metropolis Baking Co., and he adds unorthodox ingredients such as dill pickles, tomatoes, and mustard. The result is an arrestingly good, must-have-it-over-and-over sandwich. The shrimp po’boy, for which Dubea fries the shellfish to utter lightness in a buttermilk batter, deserves a patent.

Angeline’s is a restaurant you should plan to visit several times, because in addition to the dishes already mentioned, you just have to try the crispy, buttery, sage-infused brussels sprouts; the jambalaya with its yellow rice, tomato, and spicy andouille sausage; and the tender, golden-fried chicken breast. We’ll leave the tough decision of where to start up to you.

This Southern tale ends with a little magic, too, thanks to the iconic beignets, fresh from the fryer and buried in powdered sugar, the sticky pecan pie with a touch of salt in the crust, and the better-than-narcotics bananas Foster bread pudding with rum caramel sauce. You can choose, but you can’t go wrong, so *laissez les bon temps rouler*.

What makes it special: Louisiana cooking so good that even the experienced waiters are jazzed about the food, plus a welcoming atmosphere complete with zydeco music.

At a Glance

Don't miss: The fried cheese grits with crawfish étouffée or the amazing shrimp po'boy.

What to order: Barbecue shrimp, Cajun mixed grill, gumbo, fried chicken, bananas Foster bread pudding, and the classic beignets.

The space: Down-home comfort with big wooden chairs, exposed brick walls, and big windows framed by a pretty iron trellis.

When to go: When you're hungry.

Bonus: The "swamp water," a refreshing blend of iced tea and lemonade.

Contact: 2261 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, (510) 548-6900, www.angelineskitchen.com

Hours: Lunch Tues.–Sat., dinner Mon.–Sat.

Price: Appetizers \$4–\$11, entrées \$10–\$18

Alcohol: Wine and beer

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