

New Orleans hospitality is alive and well in Berkeley

Carol Ness

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MIDWAY THROUGH A MIGHTY DISH OF FRIED CHEESE smothered in a rockin' good crawfish etouffee, I knew I'd be coming back to Angeline's Louisiana Kitchen. But it took my equally smitten partner-in-dine to pinpoint the appeal of this otherwise modest New Orleans-style addition to downtown Berkeley's eating scene.

IMAGES



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"They don't dumb the food down for Berkeley," she said.

What she meant was the butter. Lots of it. No Bay Area health-conscious recipe-tweaking goes on in Angeline's small, open kitchen, where chef Brandon Dubea cooks pretty much the way he did back home in Baton Rouge. Before opening Angeline, Dubea cooked at Cafe Rouge in Berkeley and Marika in Oakland's Rockridge district.

It's a surprising touch of richness in a restaurant that feels deliberately not-fancy and DIY.

Tables are bare. The low-level New Orleans swag decor comes complete with a 5-foot alligator made from purple bottle caps on one wall. Portions rival Paul Prudhomme in size, and prices are low, attracting a jeans and khakis clientele.

Owner Robert Volberg greets guests warmly, adding a dash of his native Southern hospitality. Before opening Angeline's last July, he was involved with Mudbugs, a more upscale New Orleans-style place in Mill Valley that closed.

Angeline's young, friendly servers keep things moving pretty reliably, with occasional lags when the place gets busy.

I ordered the grits (\$9.95) with trepidation, expecting bland grits under a blanket of ooey-goopy cheese, like a French Quarter-style nachos plate. I was wrong.

The grits had been cooked with plenty of butter, then cooled, cut into long bars and fried (in butter) so all sides were crisp and brown, with a thin cheese crust on one side adding a salty crunch. Inside, the butter kept things creamy.

Poured all over was a vat of well-browned etouffee sauce, full of bite-size crawfish pieces plus the usual onions, green peppers and ... butter, the richness matched by just the right amount of cayenne. Billed as a starter, it was enough for a main course. We didn't leave a scrap.

Another dish that hit the same mark was the Creole-style BBQ shrimp (\$10.95/ \$14.50). This is no smoky-sweet-tomatoey kind of barbecue. The large shrimp are sauteed, and served alongside a cup of sauce made by simply tossing butter into the shrimp juices left in the pan and cooking it all until it's brown and thick. The result is rich, deep and satisfying.

My third don't-miss-it dish was another surprise: the Brussels sprouts (\$5.95), a gigantic bowl full gussied up in garlic, sage and lots of brown butter.

The other high point of Angeline's menu is the oyster po' boy (\$11.95). It's all about plump, fried oysters, sitting pretty in a toasted bun with mayo, lettuce and tomato. On the outside, the oysters are lightly crisp; inside they're all sweet and creamy.

Beyond that, Angeline's menu carries all the New Orleans basics, generally well-executed renditions done in a home-style way.

Gumbo (\$5.95 for a cup, \$12.95 for a bowl) and hushpuppies (\$2.95) are often the dishes that restaurants like this are judged on, and Angeline's does fine with both. The gumbo is thick with shrimp, okra, andouille, tasso and rice. A few drops of Crystal hot sauce sass it up.

The golf-ball-shaped hushpuppies -- deep-fried parsley-flecked cornmeal balls -- are crisp, dense (in a good way) and miraculously not sweet, though you can slather on the honey butter served alongside.

However, other dishes didn't work as well. The muffaletta (\$10.95) was OK, but nothing to rival Central Market's famous sandwich. All the elements were there -- a thick pile of salami, mortadella, provolone and olive salad, on a giant round bun -- but the effect was heavy and daunting.

The shrimp creole (\$13.95), which promised "zesty" flavor, was as bland as shrimp and rice in an ocean of tomato sauce can be. Crystal hot sauce rode to the rescue.

And salads were overdressed in sickly sweet vinaigrettes, fig balsamic on the house salad (\$5.95), and pomegranate molasses on the arugula with blue cheese and walnuts (\$7.95).

Angeline's features Abita beer from Louisiana to go with the food; sweet tea, lemonade and a short list of ordinary wines are the alternatives.

This is definitely a restaurant where a second stomach for dessert -- a concept promoted by a friend I desperately want to believe -- would come in handy, if only for the bananas Foster bread pudding (\$5.75), dense, moist and jammed with caramel and bananas, with even more caramel sauce on top.

Alas, I simply could never get to the beignets (\$4.50), which I prefer for breakfast.

Rich as it can be, this may not be food you choose to eat every day. But I know that once in a while, the fried grits, or maybe the barbecued shrimp, or even the Brussels sprouts, will call to me in all their buttery beauty.

Angeline's Louisiana Kitchen 2261 Shattuck Ave. (near Bancroft), Berkeley; (510) 548-6900. Lunch 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; salads, sandwiches, 3-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; dinner 5:30-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday, until 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Beer and wine. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Difficult street parking; pay lot nearby.

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Overall: TWO STARS
Food: TWO STARS
Service: TWO STARS
Atmosphere: TWO STARS
Prices: \$\$
Noise Rating: TWO BELLS

Pluses: Classic New Orleans-style menu, made with lots of butter.

Friendly,
casual atmosphere.

Minuses: Some dishes miss the mark. Service can get slow if it's busy.

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS: Extraordinary
THREE STARS: Excellent
TWO STARS: Good
ONE STAR: Fair
(box) : Poor

\$ Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under
\$\$ Moderate: \$11-\$17
\$\$\$ Expensive: \$18-\$24
\$\$\$\$ Very Expensive: more than \$25

Prices based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories,
the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

ONE BELL: Pleasantly quiet (under 65 decibels)
TWO BELLS: Can talk easily (65-70)
THREE BELLS: Talking normally gets difficult (70-75)
FOUR BELLS: Can only talk in raised voices (75-80)
BOMB: Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous.

All meals are paid for by the Chronicle.

Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits.

Ratings are updated continually based on a least one revisit.

