



Vive la Louisiane

Louisiana celebrates its bicentennial in April. **Alison Weeks** explores the state's French heritage, from Creole New Orleans to the Cajun Bayou, and meets the people keeping it alive

It's a warm afternoon in the French Quarter. Moss hangs from the trees above and drifts in the balmy breeze, stirring up the smells of jasmine and Creole spices that linger in the air. Walking towards the river, I can hear a steamboat sound its horn as it sets sail down the Mississippi. And a street musician, as if on cue, belts out "Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?" in a raspy, Louis Armstrong-style voice.

I do, in fact, know what it means. I first fell in love with New Orleans when I was 12 years old and my grandparents brought me here on a day trip. It was here that I got my first taste of France; with elegant old buildings and foreign food, it was the next best thing to a trip to Europe for a girl from small town America. Now 17 years later, and after spending several years in the real France, I was curious to see if it still felt as authentic.

Founded in 1718, La Nouvelle-Orléans was built by and for wealthy French aristocrats, who were lured here by generous land grants from the French government. Bringing with them their cuisine,

language and religion, they would forever shape the unique identity of the city. The descendants of those first settlers called themselves Creole, for they were neither French nor American. And although New Orleans would change hands between the French and Spanish, the Creoles were determined to hold on to their way of life. Even after the city was transferred to the American government, they clung to their French identity, sending their children to be educated in France and dressing in the latest Parisian fashions.

Today, the old colonial city is known as the Vieux Carré, the French Quarter or, simply, as the Quarter. Greater New Orleans is a modern US city, but once you enter the narrowing streets of the French Quarter, America becomes a distant memory. The street signs suddenly change from English to French and the colourful houses, covered in arabesque ironwork, look as if they've been plucked from the Mediterranean. Many of the buildings actually date from the Spanish period, when the city was rebuilt after two great fires swept through it.

ABOVE: The French Quarter Festival in New Orleans
RIGHT: Take a horse and carriage ride around the French Quarter; Saint Louis Cathedral



But there are still traces of the original foundations, half-timbered houses typical of Normandy or Alsace.

Built in honour of Louis XIV, the beautiful Saint Louis Cathedral dominates the skyline of the French Quarter. It overlooks Jackson Square, a public park designed after the Place des Vosges in Paris. I could happily spend the day strolling from place to place and admiring the architecture, but I've been told the most beautiful parts of New Orleans can't be seen from the street. So I meet up with Paul Nevski, from Le Monde Creole Tours to visit some of the city's secret courtyards. Tucked away from public view, these enchanting spaces played an important part in Creole life.

A Paris native, Paul is something of an expert on the history of Creole New Orleans. His company's guided tours focus on a French

Creole dynasty, the Duparc-Locoul family, who arrived from Normandy in 1804. The fascinating tour sheds light on the Creole experience, which he calls *'l'histoire d'une différence'*, as it was a world apart from the Anglo-Saxon culture in America.

Mardi Gras

Speaking to Paul, it's clear that even a French person can appreciate the Gallic influence on local culture: "The legacy of the French can still be found in a certain *laissez-faire* attitude, a non-puritanical understanding of life," he tells me. "The French never believed in moderation." It's true, the puritan beliefs of Anglo-Saxon settlers never really caught on here and consequently southern Louisiana has never been part of the Bible belt.

Instead, the Creoles remained loyal to the Catholic faith and Catholicism still plays an important role in

local culture. The city's famous Mardi Gras celebrations stem from the Creole commitment to tradition. And although the modern festivities have become somewhat hedonistic, many people still observe the event's religious significance.

But you don't have to come for Mardi Gras to have a good time in New Orleans, the nightlife remains lively year-round. Thanks to that *laissez-faire* attitude, the arts have always thrived here, paving the way for some of the best music in the world. And on any given night, there's a wide array of music on offer, from jazz (this is, after all, its birthplace) to bluegrass

or zydeco. After soaking up the atmosphere on the streets, it's time to try out one of the city's iconic restaurants. In a city renowned for its cuisine, you're never far from a great meal.

The menu hasn't changed much since the restaurant first opened – why mess with perfection?

Opened in 1840, by Frenchman Antoine Alicatore, Antoine's has the distinction of being the oldest family-run restaurant in the country. It's a New Orleans legend and one of international acclaim, boasting an impressive guest list from US presidents to Pope John Paul II. Antoine's extensive menu includes authentic French mixed with Creole favourites and lots of locally sourced seafood. Here you can enjoy an eclectic meal of shrimp gumbo and Chateaubriand. Except for the addition of English translations, the menu hasn't changed much since the restaurant first opened – why mess with perfection?

French gastronomy left such a legacy in this city, even non-Creole newcomers often adopted it as their own. Founded by an Irish-American restaurateur, Brennan's is another local institution. It's famous for its decadent Creole breakfast, an epic three courses, typically consisting of turtle soup, eggs Hussarde

A TIMELINE OF FRENCH LOUISIANA

1682 Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle, claims the territory (on either side of the Mississippi, from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada) for France and names it after Louis XIV

1714 Louis Juchereau St. Denis founds Fort St. Jean Baptiste, the first permanent settlement in Louisiana

1718 New Orleans founded, and named after Philippe, Duc D'Orléans

1723 New Orleans becomes the capital of Louisiana

1751 Sugar cane arrives in Louisiana

(served with Marchand de Vin sauce) and bananas Foster (a Brennan's invention). The meal usually begins with a brandy milk punch and there's a wine recommendation for each course. It's an extravagant start to the day, but a wonderful way to appreciate true Creole flair.

Plantation country

While New Orleans was the centre of Creole Louisiana, the French also settled in rural areas, where they made their fortunes farming sugar cane. Most families spent the busy social season from September to June in the French Quarter and returned 'up river' to oversee work on their plantations in the summer months. With the rise of plantation culture came an increase in slave ownership among Creole families. During this period, New Orleans saw the creation of a new class, *gens de couleur libre*, freed slaves or mixed-race people, who also became known as Creoles. At the time, it was common for Creole men to keep black mistresses, often buying them houses and fathering their children. Known as *les placées*, the women and their children became part of a new class system, unique to New Orleans.

Leaving the city, I head north along the Great River Road. Known as Millionaires' Row, this area was once home to some of the richest families in America. One of several Creole homes along the road, Laura Plantation is an excellent example of the French Creole style. Unlike the elaborate mansions favoured by the British, the French usually built simpler, colourful homes. But a bit further down the road, I come to a magnificent Greek-revival plantation built by a Creole family. Originally called Bon Séjour, Oak Alley Plantation was designed around the property's impressive alley of live oaks and the architect didn't think that the traditional Creole style was grand enough to showcase the trees. People must have been shocked to see a Creole family building an American-style home for, above all, the Creoles feared the Americanisation of their world.

Heading northwest of New Orleans, I enter the heart of Cajun country. The Cajun people, or Acadians, descended from the French colonists who settled Acadia, an area now part of Nova Scotia, in 1604. After the British gained control of the region, they expelled the French loyalists living there, forcing the Acadians into exile. Eager to populate Louisiana with Catholics, the ruling Spanish government welcomed them to the territory in the mid-1700s.

The Cajuns were rural people, used to working the land. They settled in the fertile wetlands, or bayou, where many of them built homes on the water and learned to live off this unfamiliar terrain. Because of their rural location and close-knit families, the Cajuns maintained a distinctive cultural identity, rich in language, music and cuisine. Today, they still enjoy a thriving culture and locals are incredibly proud of their unique heritage.

Driving along, I notice the road signs are a mix of Native American and French names. Some sound familiar, such as Abbeville, and others quite comical,

1762 Following the Treaty of Fontainebleau, France cedes Louisiana (west of the Mississippi) to Spain
.....
1763 The Treaty of Paris confirms Spanish control of Louisiana
.....
1764 The first Acadians arrive in Louisiana
.....
1793 Pope Pius VI establishes the first Diocese of Louisiana
.....
1800 France regains control of Louisiana
.....
1803 The Louisiana Purchase is ratified by congress and the US gains possession of the territory for \$15,000,000
.....
1812 Louisiana is admitted to the Union



like Grosse Tête. The places may sound French, but scenery is unlike anything I've ever seen. The country's largest freshwater swamp, the Atchafalaya Basin is 20 miles wide and 150 miles long. The early Cajuns depended on this landscape for their livelihood, so there's no better place to get an understanding of their culture than on the bayou. I stop off at McGee's Landing, near Lafayette, for a boat tour, where my guide explains the history of the area and how the early Cajuns made this their home. During the tour, we pass several alligators, which are actively hunted and an important part of the local cuisine.

The Cajuns are known for their *joie de vivre* and it's evident wherever you go. In New Orleans you'll hear people say '*Laissez les bons temps rouler*,' but the expression actually originated with the Cajuns. A literal translation of 'let the good times roll', it accurately sums up the Cajun approach to life.

At Prejean's, a famous Cajun restaurant in Layette, there is an amazing atmosphere on a busy Friday night. Family comes first in Cajun communities, so here you won't find anyone sitting at a table for two. It's loud, as everyone's shouting to be heard over the live Cajun music, which produces an accordion-based country and western sound. There's no dance floor, but that doesn't seem to matter here. Couples get up periodically from their dinners to do the Cajun two-step in between tables. True to their French heritage, the Cajuns love a good festival and at Lafayette, there's something happening almost every weekend, usually celebrating Cajun culture. There's always plenty of food, music and dancing.


The Cajun people are also very proud of their linguistic heritage and work very hard to preserve the French language. In Saint Martinsville, I meet up with Suzanne La Violette. Born and raised in the Saint

Martin's Parish, where about a quarter of the population speak French at home, Suzanne learned French from her grandmother. I'm curious to hear the French Cajun accent, so I ask Suzanne a few questions *en français*.

She tells me that she's often embarrassed, because she knows she doesn't speak 'Parisian French'. Some of her vocabulary is outdated, words inherited from the early settlers that have since been forgotten in France. Other words never existed in France and had to be invented in the New World. It sounds beautiful, but I can't help but wonder what the Académie Française would say about the Cajun dialect. Regardless, the fact that the language has endured in this rural locale is nothing short of a miracle and a testament to the Cajun people.

Surviving spirit

Gumbo, the official dish of Louisiana, is often used as a metaphor for local culture. Derived from European, African and Native American cuisines, Gumbo is not a melting pot, where everything blends together, but a hearty mixture with distinct ingredients that work well together. The gumbo theory may help to explain the survival of a distinctive French culture in Louisiana, some two hundred years after France gave up the territory. It's also down to the determination of the Creole and Cajun people, who worked tirelessly to maintain their cultural identity in a changing world.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, some people were shocked to see people moving back to reclaim their devastated city. Why would they want to live in a place so vulnerable to hurricanes and flooding? But the people of New Orleans could never give up on their city; its rich history and culture is part of their own identity. 

LEFT FROM TOP:
Achafalaya Basin;
Laura Plantation;
Bananas Foster
at Brennan's
restaurant;
Steamboat
Natchez; One of
the city's jazz bars

FRANCOFILE

Plan your own stay in America's French quarter

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717 Orleans Street
New Orleans, LA 70116
Tel: (US) 504 523 2222
www.bourbonorleans.com

Springhill Suites

301 St Joseph Street
New Orleans
LA 70130
Tel: (US) 504 522 3100
www.marriott.com

WHERE TO EAT

Antoine's Restaurant

713 Rue Saint Louis

New Orleans
LA 70130
Tel: (US) 504 581 4422
www.antoines.com

Brennan's

417 Royal Street
New Orleans
LA 70130
Tel: (US) 504 525 9711
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neworleans.com

Prejean's

3480 NE Evangeline
Thruway
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Laura Plantation

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