



BIG TASTE IN THE BIG EASY

In New Orleans, neighborhood ambience meets international cuisine, and dogs are invited to tag along.

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There is a growing menace in the New Orleans food scene. And I'm not just talking about the hummus, or restaurants so loud that your waiter brings your check instead of dessert because without tablecloths on those sheet-metal tables, "I'll have the sorbet" reverberates to sound a lot like "I'm ready to pay."

The threat to New Orleans's ever-expanding restaurant scene is not the trends, on or off the plate. Rather, it comes from men in white helmets and bright orange vests holding detour signs. And if you've spent time driving around Uptown neighborhood, they've broken you like a loaf of French bread, beaten you like the farm fresh eggs in a blue crab omelet, reduced you to tears like a cocktail sauce heavy on the horseradish.

The relentless and extensive road repair work perpetually underway throughout New Orleans means we don't drive anywhere we don't have to. Especially for dinner. Instead of checking out crosstown eateries, we eat local. Very local.

Like, around the corner local.

We are the rats in the maze who've given up on finding a way out. We've flopped down in our corners, eating the cheese we can reach. And boy is it delicious. Especially at Chais Delachaise, a wine bistro with a Franco feel located four blocks from my house in the Riverbend neighborhood. New Orleanians are passionate about their neighborhoods: Mid-City, Marigny, Garden District, and more. My turf is the pocket where the nearby Mississippi River bends as it winds towards the Gulf of Mexico. If you're on the Uptown streetcar, this is where St. Charles Avenue takes a sharp right turn to become Carrollton. Or where Carrollton Avenue becomes St. Charles, depending on where you're headed.

I love the Riverbend for many reasons: proximity to the universities; walking distance to Audubon Park; easy streetcar access. I love that when I go to bed at night the last sound I hear is the low, long *baughhhhhh* of the horns of the ships passing on the Mississippi. But what I love most about my neighborhood is Maple Street, a leafy, 10-block artery of shops, restaurants, and useful services that make living here so easy.

I've been hanging out on Maple Street for most of my life, even before I called the neighborhood home. For Sunday dinner in the 1960s, my parents would drive the station wagon full of kids to the Maple Hill Inn from our suburban home. As a high schooler, I sneaked into the bars on the corner of Maple and Hillary. In college, I wrote research papers at PJ's coffee shop across the street.

Years later, as a new mom, I spent many bleary Saturday mornings on the wraparound porch of the cozy Maple Street Children's Bookshop, pushing my toddler in the wooden rope swing while waiting for the weathered storefront door to swing open. Talk about being up with the son.

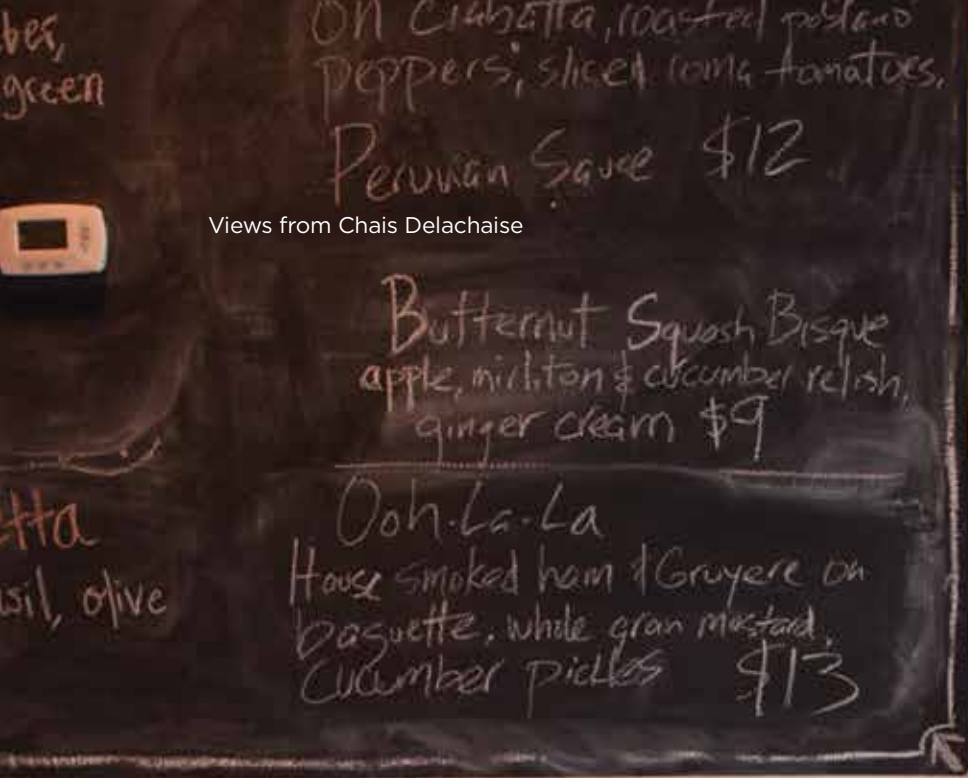
We bought our first house off Maple Street in 1996. Sold that and closed on our second in 2000. Over the years, I tried to move. Really. But no amount of off-street parking (a driveway!) or closet space (more than one!) was enough to uproot me to somewhere where walking to dinner was not an option.

And good thing, because the Maple Street restaurant scene has aged well. It's better and more diverse. My monthly Amex statement reads like a weekend at Disney's Epcot Center: Jamila's Tunisian Cuisine, Ba Chi Vietnamese Canteen, Babylon Mediterranean Café. If it's Tuesday, it must be Thai.

When Chais Delachaise opened last summer, it quickly became



Evan and Trace Hayes with their daughter Lulu.



Views from Chais Delachaise



the neighborhood clubhouse. The globally inspired wine bistro can be your first and only stop on a gloriously directionless Friday night. Housed in a raised, four-bay Victorian beauty and sandwiched between Starbucks and a kosher waffle café, Chais Delachaise—with endless strands of Christmas lights, dog-friendly patio, glowing lanterns, and jaunty bar scene—is impossible to pass up on the way to somewhere else. The owners, Evan and Trace Hayes, made it that way.

“My wife is a really smart woman,” says Evan. Of course, just saying that makes Evan even smarter. “T-R-A-C-E,” he says spelling out her name, which rhymes with pace. His timing is perfect. Trace appears from the dining room and joins us on the porch, wine glass in hand. With one eye on the diner seated at the two-top next to mine digging into the Octopus Ceviche, and the other on my Poached Seafood Arugula Salad, she explains her vision.

“The food at Chais Delachaise is supposed to make you feel as if you are on vacation,” says Trace. “We want you to come play here. To want to hang out. To be warm and comfortable,” she says, as she offers a couple seated on the twinkling patio a folded Mexican beach blanket to ward off the November chill. The menu lives up

entrepreneurs would avoid. Located in an oblong stucco building that had most recently housed a tuxedo rental shop, the original Delachaise was an instant hit among young professionals, thanks to its French vibe, focus on wine, and original gourmet bar food. It’s still going strong.

Tempting fate—or sticking with an unlikely model of success—Evan and Trace again took on a cursed location, this time farther uptown on Maple Street. Over the last 10 years, the raised century-old building that is now Chais Delachaise has been home to a New York deli, a burger joint, and a Thai restaurant, to name a few of the failed efforts.

Most recently, the building housed an upscale poor boy sandwich shop. Talk about consumer confusion. In contrast, Chais Delachaise is more aptly named; in French, a “chais” is an above-ground wine cellar. (The bistro offers more than 40 wines by the glass.)

But Trace doesn’t want to talk about the broken curse, the booths that seat eight, or what exact shade of red is on the ceiling. What she is most proud of is the Costa Rican Blue patio. “I wanted the patio, front steps, and porch to be relaxing, like a swimming

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to that promise, offering four-star exotic comfort foods such as Beef Rendang (eye of round braised with fragrant Malaysian spices and coconut milk) and Choy Bao (lettuce cups filled with stir-fried ground pork, ginger, chilies, soy water chestnuts, cucumber, carrot, and mint).

As we talk, we munch on the goose-fat fries wrapped in a brown paper bag and served with spicy ketchup and malt vinegar herb aioli.

“Trace wrote the menu board based on what she trusted,” says Evan. “You can tell it’s written from the woman’s point of view—lighter and full of flavor.” On cue, my dinner entrée arrives: Fresh, local cobia sautéed with cumin and cucumber.

Trace, who also owns and runs a successful studio, designed both the menu and the restaurant itself. Inside, the 14-foot ceilings are painted a deep firehouse red that’s almost maroon. The woven bistro chairs are easy to settle into. So are the large, U-shaped booths that bookend the cozy dining room.

Chais Delachaise is a bistro version of The Delachaise, Trace and Evan’s successful bar located at the corner of St. Charles Avenue and Delachaise Street near the Garden District of New Orleans. Evan, a former wine salesman, opened The Delachaise 13 years ago in one of those cursed retail locations most first-time

pool,” she explains. “So I painted it Costa Rican Blue.”

Never heard of Costa Rican Blue? You’re not alone. She made it up. “Most of my paint crew were from Costa Rica. One day, they disappeared. The only way to get them back was to tell them I named the paint color after their home.” The job was finished the next day. The restaurant opened shortly thereafter.

Ever since, the love affair between the neighborhood and Chais Delachaise has been mutual.

“This is a true neighborhood in every sense of the word. Everyone walks everywhere. It’s friendly. Nice people. Even nicer dogs,” Evan says while cradling Bandit, my 70-pound boxer, on his lap. Everyone agrees. Chais Delachaise has really gone to the dogs. And the owners couldn’t be happier.

Last week, Trace and Evan found a sweet-looking mutt in the parking lot across the street. The dinner rush came and went. At closing time, a regular who lived nearby offered to take him home for the night while Trace used the Chais Delachaise Instagram account to spread the word. The next day, the customer came back with the lost dog, whose owners were waiting for them on the Costa Rican Blue patio. Neighbors converged. Wine was ordered. A cheese plate was shared. And everyone walked home, with nary a neon construction vest in site. 🐾



Views from St. Charles Avenue and Maple Street



THE RIVERBEND

Next time you're in New Orleans, make sure to go on a riverbender. A riverbender, to be exact.

Maple Street, home to Chais Delachaise, is located in an area locals call The Riverbend. Outlined by the neighborhood separating Tulane University and the Mississippi River, The Riverbend is home to everyone's favorite bars and restaurants, those go-to places where you can watch the game while slurping on oysters, grab a salad with your mom, or take your kids' baseball team out for burgers and ice cream. Accented by the massive live oaks of Carrollton and St. Charles avenues and the *clang clang clanging*

of the passing streetcar, a trip to Riverbend can last a few hours or a full day, depending on how much shopping you want to get in.

To get to there, travel St. Charles Avenue past the Garden District and past Audubon Park, to Cherokee Street. In two blocks you'll be walking the heart of Maple Street, from Lowerline to Carrollton, where the river bends to begin its famous crescent-shaped march to the Gulf of Mexico.

If it's nighttime, have dinner and drinks on Maple and then cab it 15 blocks or so across Carrollton to the Maple Leaf Bar on Oak Street for a nightcap of raucous, live, local New Orleans music. You won't be sorry.—*Ellie Hobson Rand*