

# OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Todd A. Price  
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The Delachaise

## Old restaurants with new faces

BY TODD A. PRICE

WILL PETERS AND LEIGH Sledge had relocated to Shreveport after Hurricane Katrina. They had found new jobs. They planned to stay. So when Jennifer Benz, who co-owned **Dick and Jenny's** with her husband, Richard, asked them to return to New Orleans and manage the restaurant, they weren't interested.

"I told her that I would only come back if they sold me Dick and Jenny's," Peters says. He was joking, but Benz took him up on the offer. Now Peters, Sledge and Whiton Paine own the

restaurant where they once worked.

After Katrina, many people found new opportunities. Some had started new lives in unknown cities but returned to New Orleans when given the chance. Others were forced to step into new roles because their old jobs disappeared. And some people, after their lives were disrupted, decided to pursue a dream that they had harbored for years.

At Dick and Jenny's, little has changed except the owners. Former chef Richard Benz's hand-painted plates still line the walls. By early evening, the front room is full of people waiting for tables. Benz will continue to create his menu of New

### WE'RE HERE TO PLEASE: NOW, PASS THE CHORIZO

Our reader surveys shows you are interested in dining out, so, because we are here to please, we have increased our reporting. With this issue, Dining Editor Todd A. Price takes over our Table Talk section. Price, who formerly covered restaurants for *Gambit Weekly*, is a well-versed commentator on the local restaurant scene. Omnipresent Lorin Gaudin introduces our new Restaurant Insider section, providing scoop from the kitchens. Also in this issue, we have revived and updated our restaurant listings (page 61). Our goal has been to provide *New Orleans Magazine* readers with the area's best dining coverage. We think we have done it.

Orleans cuisine with a few fancy touches – a little chorizo sausage in the dirty rice or truffle jus with pecan-smoked, roasted filet. Benz's food could only be found in New Orleans, but there isn't anywhere else quite like Dick and Jenny's in the city.

The restaurant's menu might have been planned in reverse, from the desserts to the earlier courses. The appetizers and entrées have the same homey comfort as the flourless chocolate-mint *gâteau* or the toffee pudding, which tastes like a homemade cake pulled from the oven while the center is still warm and soft.

I started a recent meal at Dick and Jenny's with the portobello-and-chestnut bisque, a thick soup with a smoky flavor – thanks to mushrooms. "They've been tossing everything in the smoker," our waitress said. The smoker is located, appropriately enough, on the smoking porch. The iron-skillet-bronzed drum was expertly cooked and served with a corn, okra and tomato maque choux. Here, even a dish as exotic as foie gras over rich, fatty veal cheeks can taste like comfort food.

A more bracing style of cooking can be found at **The Delachaise** on St. Charles Avenue, where chef Chris DeBarr has taken over the kitchen. He

mixes in sharp tastes – a bite of garlic or a little bitter endive – the way an expert bartender mixes cocktails. His cooking is the ideal complement to a place where wine and drinks are as prominent as food.

DeBarr has created his own menu for the first time after working 14 years in New Orleans. Before the storm, he was the chef de cuisine at Christian's, a restaurant that has yet to reopen. When he returned to New Orleans in mid-October, he stopped in at the Delachaise and asked if they needed a chef.

"It's walking distance from where we now live," DeBarr says, "and I thought it would be cool to have a job where I never had to drive."

The menu at the Delachaise has all the snacks you might expect at a wine bar – olives, dips, fries and a cheese plate. DeBarr, however, frets over his mix of olive and caperberries tossed in fennel and garlic. Instead of a standard dip, he makes a traditional Turkish *muhammara* with walnuts, red peppers and pomegranate syrup. The french fries are thin, crisp ribbons fried in duck fat. The cheese plate, a

generous selection of complex cheeses with quince paste and spicy pecans, might be the best in town.

DeBarr also knows how to use cheese in unexpected

### A TASTY TRIO

**THE DELACHAISE**  
3442 St. Charles Ave.  
895-0858

**DICK AND JENNY'S**  
4501 Tchoupitoulas St.  
894-9880

**IRIS**  
8115 Jeannette St.  
862-5848

ways. He stuffs Steen's-cane-syrup-topped French toast with chocolate and *gjetost*, a Norwegian goat cheese that tastes like sweet caramel with a hint of sourness. One night, a friend of mine took a bite of the French toast. She vowed to eat no more so that she wouldn't forget that first taste. After a few minutes of resistance, she dove back in and ate half the dessert.

Most of the Delachaise menu is made up of appetizer-size portions, such as the delicious oysters Delachaise topped with a forceful horseradish cream sauce. It would be easy, however, to assemble a full dinner. With a kitchen that stays open late, the Delachaise is a great place for a weekday meal or a late-night snack. The vaguely decadent atmosphere, despite a few windows that look out onto a well-lit gas station, only adds to the appeal.

In the Riverbend, the former Mango House has become **Iris**, a cheery little restaurant with an ambitious menu. Inside the converted shotgun, the spearmint-green walls with white trim make the dining room seem so airy that I thought a wall had been removed.

Ian Schnoebelen, who spent the last four and a half years as the sous-chef at Lilette before opening Iris with Laurie Casebonne, knows how to take a few clear flavors and make them shine throughout a dish. An edge of curry balances the white-wine-and-coconut broth in the excellent mussels. A spicy taste of ginger peeks through every bite of the wild-mushroom consommé. If Dick and Jenny's food is like a warm quilt, then

Iris' food is like a tapestry with individual threads still visible among the whole.

A grouper with olive-butter sauce had a crusty sear on top and was perfectly cooked all the way through. The duck breast was even better. Many restaurants can cook duck well, but what makes this version special is the way all the elements come together. The Brussels sprouts underneath the duck were tossed with bacon and roasted to a mellow flavor. The menu described the sauce simply as honey, but there was enough vinegar to balance the sweetness.

Schnoebelen adopted some of Mango House's dishes, including a crème brûlée infused with coconut and topped with rum-soaked bananas.

He and Casebonne, a waitress at Peristyle and Lilette, had long thought of opening Iris. They had already considered the name. They knew what kind of food they wanted to serve. They had even decided that the restaurant should be situated in a small house. What they didn't have were any immediate plans to open it. When the opportunity to buy Mango House arose, Schnoebelen and Casebonne found a way to create the little restaurant they had dreamed about for years.

"The vision with the name Iris was to have greens and purples," Schnoebelen says, "the whole feeling of springtime."

This past difficult winter, there were signs of new life among New Orleans restaurants. New places opened. Chefs received their first chance to create their own food. As spring arrives, there will no doubt be more signs of rebirth across the city. ♣