

# People Get Ready

Hurricane season is upon us, and restaurants are preparing like never before.

**T**he Ralph Brennan Group, which runs Bacco, Red Fish Grill and Ralph's on the Park, had a one-page hurricane plan before Katrina. It was simple. The employees should grab the hurricane supplies from the closet. If the phones go out, use the pay phone in the back. "Those pay phones aren't even there anymore," says the group's executive vice president Charlee Williamson.

Now, as New Orleans faces the second hurricane season since Katrina, it has a 62-page plan that covers everything from disposing of food to tracking down employees after an evacuation. Like many New Orleans restaurateurs, the Ralph Brennan Group is now better prepared to survive a storm and reopen quickly after the winds die down and the water recedes.

In the months after Katrina, refrigerators full of rotting food were as common along the streets as live oaks. "Imagine," says Greg Reggio, one of the owners of Semolina and Zea Rotisserie, "a walk-in refrigerator that's about 10 times the size [of a household fridge] and always full. It was just a mess. Looking back, the one thing I wish I had done was gone in there and thrown away all the food."

If the city evacuates again, his restaurants will immediately dump already prepared food. "We bought these big, industrial, food versions of a body bag," he says. "They are sealed up, so even though they are outside and may start to gas up, we're not going to create any environmental issue." Food that can be salvaged will be condensed into a cooler set to freezing, where it should remain frozen for up to four days even if the power goes out.

Restaurants have new ways of finding employees scattered across the country after an evacuation. The John Besh group of restaurants, which includes Restaurant August and the new Lüke, will gather phone numbers and evacuation addresses of employees three days before a category-three storm threatens the area. The Ralph Brennan Group, at the start of hurricane season, will give employees laminated cards with toll-free numbers for the company, a password for an online message board and the numbers for 12 cell phones purchased after Katrina with Idaho area codes. "We were looking for a place that was not likely to have any kind of crazy disaster,"

says Williamson. "Ironically, shortly after we purchased them a dam broke in Idaho."

Many large wine cellars were lost when temperatures climbed after the power failed. No one *OffBeat* spoke with, however, has a solution for saving wine in the future. "You can't take it with you, so to speak," says Melvin Rodrigue of Galatoire's, which normally has between 8,000 and 10,000 bottles. Chef Tom Wolfe, who lost nearly all his wine at Peristyle and the still shuttered Wolfe's of New Orleans on the lakefront, will carry out as many valuable bottles as he can. None of the restaurants plan to reduce the size or quality of their cellars.

As a small businessman, Jay Nix of Parkway Bakery and Tavern can't afford to close early for an evacuation that might be a false alarm. He was originally going to ride out Katrina with his nephew at the Mid-City restaurant. They finally left after a police car drove by Parkway the Sunday before landfall announcing over the PA, "Leave or die."

Now he has a better plan. "You have to hold the place open until the eye comes near," he says, "and then you have to haul butt."

## FAMOUS PORK

Chef Donald Link wanted to open an Italian restaurant. It would serve simple, Northern Italian food. After talking with Stephen Stryjewski, his sous chef at Herbsaint and partner in the new venture, they decided that southern Cajun cuisine was a better idea. "It's the one thing that you can't find in the city," says Link. Thanks to that change of plans, New Orleans has Cochon, which was nominated by the James Beard Foundation as one of the best new restaurants in America.

The restaurant is a shrine to pork, where the smell of roast pig fills the air like incense. The menu includes so many pig parts—from head cheese to grilled ribs with watermelon pickles and ham hocks to pulled pork with turnips and cracklins—that big eaters could order enough pieces to reassemble a whole hog at their tables. Even before the James Beard nomination alerted the world to Cochon, food luminaries as diverse as Alice Waters of *Chez Panisse* and the late R.W. Apple Jr. of *the New York Times* were praising the Warehouse District restaurant.

At the James Beard awards on May 7, Link

was honored as the best chef in the South. Cochon, unfortunately, was beat out for best new restaurant by the Atelier by Joël Robuchon.

Link thinks that Cochon is part of a trend towards casual fine dining. "I have kids, I'm busy," he says. "Where can I go to get a good bottle of wine at the right temperature, good service, tasty food, I can bring my kids, wear my blue jeans and I'm not going to go broke?" The popularity of sushi restaurants, he believes, paved the way for high-end food in a more relaxed atmosphere.

Link and Stryjewski also plan to open a Mexican restaurant this fall in Lakeview. "Good margaritas, good Mexican food, a nice looking room," Link says, "same concept as Cochon but with Mexican food."

Their first idea, though, was that Lakeview really needed a new Italian restaurant.

## OTHER NEWS

John Besh (Restaurant August, La Provence) opened Lüke, an Alsatian brasserie, in the spot on St. Charles Avenue previously held by Cobalt. Chef Jared Tees, last seen at the Bourbon House, is the executive chef....Sucre brings exquisite pastries and chocolates to the Garden District....Henry's Bakery opened a second location further Uptown on Claiborne Avenue....Camellia Grill has reopened.

Bacco: 310 Chartres St., 522-2426

Camellia Grill: 626 S. Carrollton Ave., 309-2679

Cochon: 930 Tchoupitoulas St., 588-2123

Galatoire's: 209 Bourbon St., 525-2021

Henry's Bakery: 3400 S. Claiborne Ave., 894-8894

Herbsaint: 701 St. Charles Ave., 524-4114

Lüke: 333 St. Charles Ave., 378-2840

Parkway Bakery and Tavern: 538 Hagan Ave., 482-3047

Peristyle: 1041 Dumaine St., 593-9535

Ralph's on the Park: 900 City Park Ave., 488-1000

Red Fish Grill: 115 Bourbon St., 598-1200

Restaurant August: 301 Tchoupitoulas St., 299-9777

Semolina's: Multiple locations

Sucre: 3025 Magazine St., 520-8311

Zea: Multiple locations