

DUCK ON THE MENU

BY TODD A. PRICE

IT'S DUCK SEASON IN Louisiana. I'm not much of a shot, so I did my duck hunting in the city, looking for that luscious, dark meat bird on the menus around town.

I first went looking for duck at **Azul**, the new Asian Cuban restaurant in the Ambassador Hotel. A Cuban restaurant seems like an unlikely spot to find a duck dish. I doubt there are too many duck blinds around the beaches of Havana. Azul, however, flirts with fusion, and the menu mixes the island's cuisine with dishes (spring rolls, edamame and tempura shrimp) and flavors (ginger, curry and oyster sauce) from the Far East.

A friend tipped me off that Azul made a delicious *ropa vieja*, the classic slow-cooked Cuban dish, with duck instead of flank steak.

New Orleans is often called the northern tip of the Caribbean, but few restaurants have the breezy island feel of Azul. The doors open onto the street, and the bar, with its deep collection of tequilas, draws more attention than the dining room. The hip space, like many beautiful people, makes some sacrifices for style, such as keeping the lights so low that I saw a table use their cell phones to read the menus.

My hunt, unfortunately, was unsuccessful at Azul. By the time I arrived for dinner, the duck had disappeared. I settled for the standard *ropa vieja* made with skirt steak,

which was a mass of incredibly moist meat over rice. What tasted like an abundance of cumin, and maybe even a touch of chili powder, gave the *ropa vieja* an almost Southwestern accent.

Every time I visit **Crabby Jack's**, Jacques Leonardi's stellar poor boy joint and downscale gourmet restaurant, the white board listed the duck poor boy as a special. It was always on that board, so I assumed that calling it "special" was a justified boast about this delicious sandwich, instead of a warning that it wouldn't always be available.

If you measure roast beef poor boys by their sloppiness, then Crabby Jack's duck poor boy would best any roast beef in the state. It drips a river of rich duck fat across the butcher paper wrapping. If taste is your only criteria, then it's hard to beat this poor boy bursting with dark duck meat.

I must not be the only fan, because when I stood in front of the counter recently and ordered my duck poor boy, I got the sad news that Crabby Jack's had run out. I can't complain about my second choice — blackened

drum with a chipotle hollandaise sauce. The delicate fish was propped above a buttery, spice-tinged hollandaise on pillars of briny little shrimp. A friend ordered a shrimp poor boy, and the shrimp were as fresh and flavorful as the ones that I often buy straight from shrimpers. My friend mopped up the last of the hollandaise sauce with the shrimp that spilled out

of her poor boy.

I decided to call ahead the next time. It took several attempts before I heard that the duck was not only on the day's menu but also actually in the kitchen. I rushed over, got my poor boy, and sat down at the counter in the gray paneled room decorated with Dr. Bob's art, a "Support Our Troops" banner and several stuffed deer heads. My →

GOOD HUNTING

Azul
535 Tchoupitulas St.
599-2111

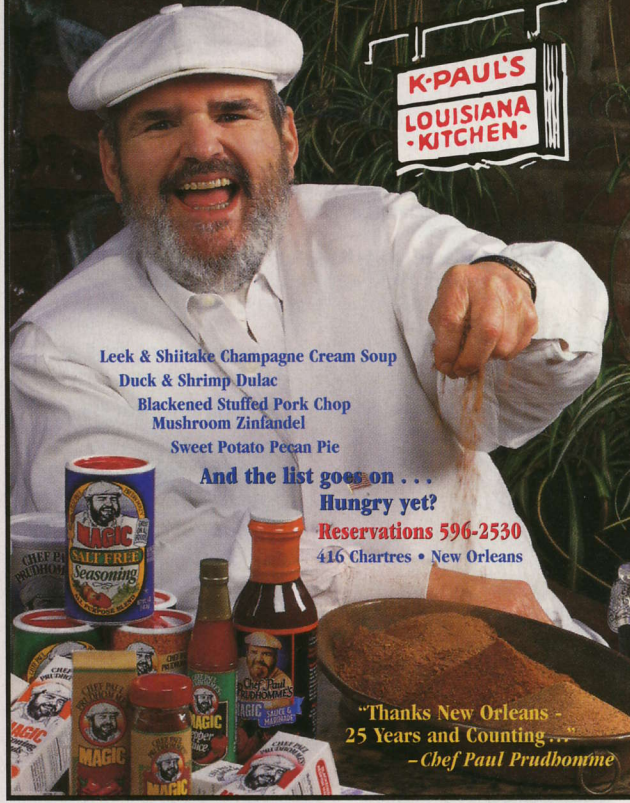
Crabby Jack's
428 Jefferson Highway
833-2722

Stella!
1032 Chartres St.
587-0091



Stella's duck five ways

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TABLE TALK

duck poor boy was well worth the effort. Jacques Leonard has created a sandwich that deserves a seat of honor in the pantheon of poor boys.

It's easy to get distracted from the duck at **Stella!**, Chef Scott Boswell's stunning restaurant in the French Quarter. With so many tempting dishes on the menu, it's hard to choose just one. After a major renovation, which was delayed when Katrina threw the city into turmoil, Chef Boswell returned to Stella! with an all-star team - including sous chef Erik Venéy and pastry chef Nolan Ventura (see p. 64 for a profile of Ventura) - ready to astonish the city. With stunning technique, daring creations and a polished staff of servers, Stella! certainly astonished me.

My wife and I polished off the generous amuse-bouche of a shrimp and mushroom won ton with sesame noodles. In a nod to the team spirit at Stella!, it was offered as a gift from sous chef Venéy.

Our waitress described the Iron Chef Chili Prawns as an Asian twist on barbecue shrimp. Instead of butter and pepper, they were all about heat and sweet. An intense red pepper sauce, which reminded me of Korean *kimchee*, was tamed with the right balance of sugar. On another appetizer, plump escargots awash in fresh thyme, lemon zest and basil pistou were cooked under caps of savory meringues that dissolved into a burst of lavender.

I had come, however, for the duck five ways, a dish

that was created from an excess of duck. Originally, Stella! served duck three ways: a seared breast marinated in Asian spices, moo shoo pancakes with thigh meat and a fried won ton filled with foie gras. As the kitchen broke down whole ducks for the dish, the freezer soon overflowed

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with legs, thighs, livers and gizzards. Chef Boswell, to make use of the extra duck parts, first adding a lacquered thigh, a tribute to Kevin Graham's coffee lacquered duck. One day, he dropped a dollop of miso into a duck stock, creating an intense soup and the fifth element of the dish.

"The duck dish is truly one of my favorite dishes that I have ever done in my life," Boswell says. "I love seeing those plates come back. They are licked down with nothing but a bare bone on them."

I understand why everyone loves the dish so much. Luckily, I always know where to find it. ❀