



lafitte guest house A circa 1849 French-style mansion in the heart of the French Quarter. This property is for sale by Dorian Bennett Sotheby's International Realty, dbsir.com.

American French

In New Orleans's exuberant tapestry, there are filaments of French gold.

BY JONATHAN LERNER

Love of food. Passion for luxury. Ardor for display. Rich history, evocative architecture, grand boulevards — there's even one called Elysian Fields, but don't mistake it for the Champs-Élysées. This is not Paris, but New Orleans. It's not exactly foreign, but it certainly is French. Also African, Spanish, Irish, German, Italian, Caribbean, Jewish, Choctaw and more — exotically American that is. In a place with such braided origins, is it possible to pick out strands that are distinctly French? No. And yes.

The city was founded in the early 18th century to be the capital of French Louisiana, a huge colonial territory extending north as far as Canada. New Orleans's original urban design, for the area still called the French Quarter, was a precisely regular grid of streets with a public square and cathedral at its center. This bears no resemblance to the mostly haphazard medieval French towns of the time. But it was an expression of the Enlightenment ideal then prevailing among the country's elite; picture the symmetrical geometry of Versailles, the royal city outside Paris, erected just a few decades earlier.

France retained the Louisiana territory until the 1760s when the Spanish took it. But for most of that time, France's attitude was one of neglect. A frontier seaport, New Orleans was a natural magnet for entrepreneurs, adventurers, hustlers and exiles who arrived from anywhere and everywhere. The ethnic and cultural gumbo and unrestrained spirit that arose among them then still make the city unique. So in a sense, during the colonial period, France's most important influence was its lack of influence.

Detailed Design

Aside from the French Quarter's grid of streets, almost nothing physical remains from that time. One surviving French-colonial structure, where you can take a self-guided tour, is the Old Ursuline Convent, completed in 1752. You step through its gates into an austere, geometric parterre garden to find a graceful cypress staircase, crafted originally for the convent's earlier

building and said to be the oldest surviving bit of architecture in the Mississippi Valley. There are displays of antique ecclesiastical jewelry, vestments and altar pieces, early New Orleans maps and architectural drawings, and a fascinating scale model of the French Quarter as it looked in 1914, constructed by two jazz-crazed, New-Orleans-loving Parisians.

Nearly everything standing in the Quarter now went up in the Spanish era or thereafter, and the dominant architecture is more Caribbean than French. Two surviving houses dating to the French period reveal the difference. The Ossorno House and the one called Madame John's Legacy are both cottages of a single story raised above ground-level cellars. They are freestanding, set back, with their long sides parallel to the street, and have deep upstairs porches. Most houses in the Quarter, by contrast, hug the sidewalk with their narrow ends, one against the next, and have secluded interior courtyards and narrow iron balconies over the street. Those

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two French-period houses, viewed from outside — your only option, since neither is presently open to the public — suggest a more pastoral, less crowded place than the close, jostling urban center New Orleans became.

The French Quarter today is notoriously touristy. You may choose to avoid the raucous bar scene on Bourbon Street, and the trinket shops. But this remains an authentic neighborhood, with quieter residential streets delightful to stroll. Surprisingly, there are a number of large, rather conventional hotels hiding behind old, and new-looks-old, French Quarter facades, but also many small hotels of character.

One has an especially strong French connection and historic atmosphere. The Soniat House occupies three circa-1830 townhouses, two of which were built for the son and grandson of a French military engineer who arrived in 1751. The guest rooms vary enormously in size — some are in what were originally slave quarters—but the galleries and serene interior courtyards lend a sense of privacy. Suite 18 seems particularly reminiscent of earlier days: a long, shadowy hallway leads to a pair of high-ceilinged parlors connected by pocket doors, with antique carpets, dark 19th century furniture and a lacy ironwork balcony overlooking the convent.

At the New Orleans Museum of Art you can view a collection of 18th and 19th century French Rococo paintings that have a radiant air of frivolity and flirtatiousness. Is it entirely coincidental that during those same centuries New Orleans evolved its famous culture of celebration and eroticism?

Fine Food & Drink

A socially prominent New Orleans attorney recently recalled a departed friend: "We ate through life together," he said wistfully. This is a city that treasures a good meal, and where it's hard to find a bad one. More difficult is finding one that is purely, classically French. New World ingredients and worlds of culinary influence

were long ago stirred together here. Still, there are restaurants where a French sensibility prevails. You might as well use that criterion to choose where to dine, because unless you move here for good you'll never manage to eat everywhere people rave about.

Several French Quarter establishments have history on their side, resembling classic Parisian brasseries and offering venerable French-Creole cuisine. These include Brennan's, Arnaud's, Galatoire's and Antoine's where members of the wait staff typically



gift from france The people of France gave the city of New Orleans an exact copy of Emmanuel Ferniet's famous golden bronze statue, Joan of Arc, in 1972. Formally located in front of the International Trade Mart building, the statue was moved in 1999 to its present location in New Orleans French Quarter at the 'Place De France' on Decanter Street. The pedestal of the St. Joan's statue is engraved with the inscription "Joan of Arc, Maid of Orleans 1412-1431."

LAFITTE GUEST HOUSE PHOTO COURTESY OF LOUIS SAHUC

PHOTO OF ST JOANS STATUE COURTESY OF BRUMBEYS



of tradition, but due to their fame and location many visitors too.

More modern and less touristy French-accented spots are elsewhere in town. In the Central Business District, Lüke has a lively ambiance and hearty Alsatian cooking. Go on Monday for *cassoulet* as creamy as pudding, enriched with smoked bacon, duck confit and pork sausage studded with whole garlic cloves. The nutty smell of cooking butter permeates the air at Herbsaint, where the earthy food suggests France's Mediterranean provinces. Baked shrimp with cauliflower, for example, turns out to be an irresistibly rich paella-like baked

rice dish. Restaurant August has multiple intimate spaces: a tall front room of exposed brick dressed up with gorgeously glittery chandeliers, and smaller ones luxuriously paneled. Here you can order a la carte, or

from four-or seven-course tasting menus. The food is complex: truffle-crusted veal tenderloin with mustard green risotto, braised onions and madeira-and-truffle sauce *perigueux* was a recent offering.

Magazine Street through the Garden District and Uptown is dotted along its length with charming boutiques and restaurants. At Lilette, in an old storefront with a brick-red interior color scheme, flavors are vivid. You might order a sage-scented plate of roast duck with kale, butternut squash and orange-coriander sauce. La Petite Grocery — it was one, once — has a muted, airy saffron-toned decor and a restrained approach. The puréed turnip soup with truffle oil, for instance, is velvety, not rich — with just a hint of refreshing bitterness.

Café Degas, in Bayou Saint John, is named for the French Impressionist painter Edgar Degas who once lived up the street. Grilled rib eye served over a garlicky black bean ragout, with truffle-dressed teardrop tomatoes and a strewing of *piquant fleur de sel* demonstrates the kitchen's French bona fides. This relaxed neighborhood spot draws a convivial crowd. But exuberant sociability is everywhere in New Orleans. How much that is a legacy of the city's French origins is a matter of opinion. **AL**

stick around for decades. Antoine's peach-toned front room, hung with ornate fans and chandeliers, is lovely at lunch when sunlight streams in. The most French menu choice might be the simplest, "*trout meuniere*." These restaurants draw locals, out

Where to Go

The Soniat House \$240-625 nightly, soniathouse.com, 800-544-8808

Antoine's antoines.com, 504-581-4422

La Petite Grocery lapetitegrocery.com, 504-891-3377

Lilette lilletterestaurant.com, 504-895-1636

Café Degas cafedegas.com, 504-945-5635

Herbsaint herbsaint.com, 504-524-4114

Lüke lukeneworleans.com; 504-378-2840

Restaurant August restaurantaugust.com, 504-299-9777



exuberant sociability LEFT Restaurant August is contemporary French eatery with a focus on local ingredients, found among the highest ranking establishments in respected dining guides. RIGHT A guest room at the Soniat House is a step back in time to earlier days.

Why have three sales in april? Everyone is out of the house.



Premium Brands Sale (March 18 - April 3) Heart Healthy Sale (April 15 - 17)
Belgian Beer Sale (April 22 - May 1)

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