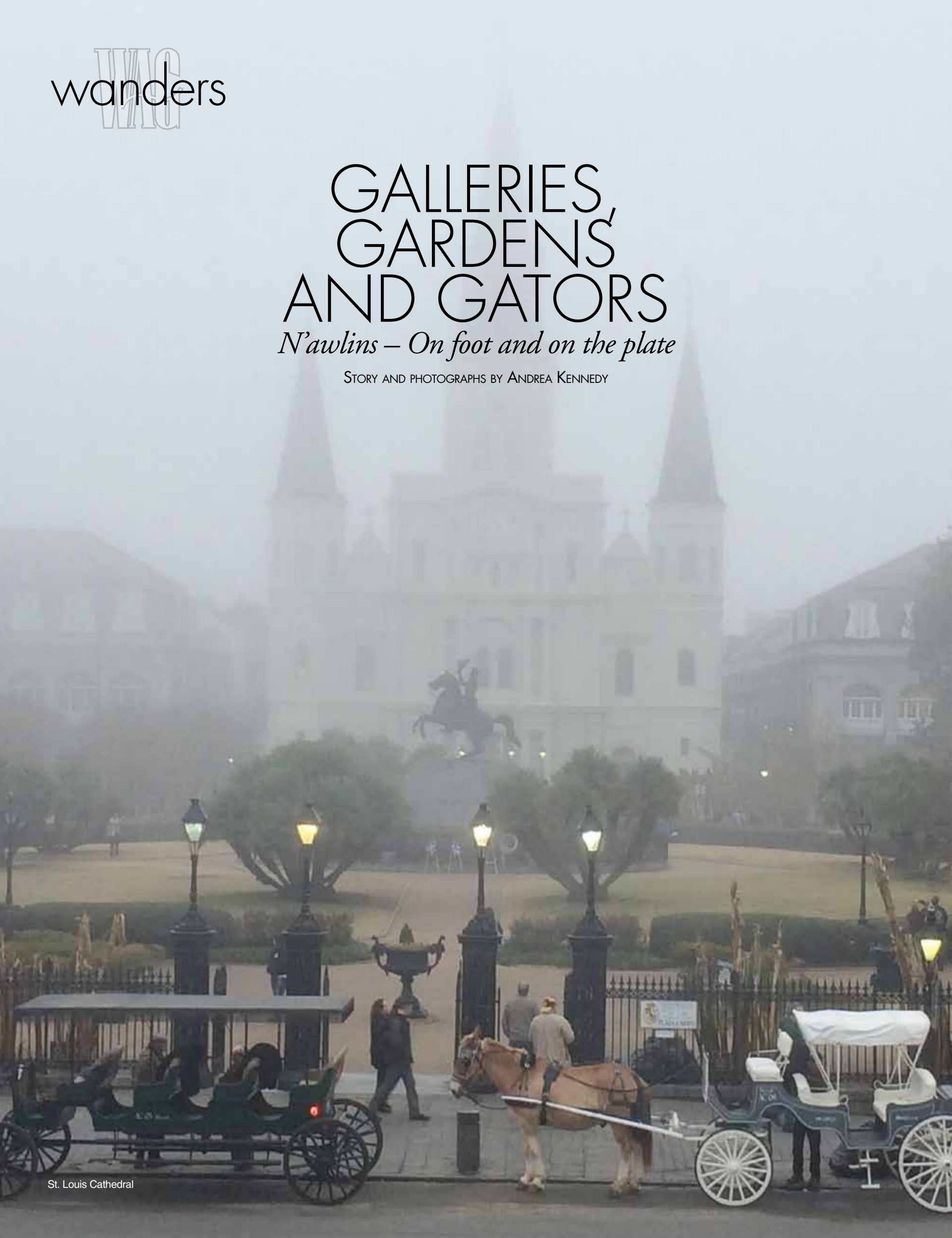


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GALLERIES, GARDENS AND GATORS

N'awlins – On foot and on the plate

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA KENNEDY





The French Quarter

Not every day is Mardi Gras in New Orleans, but in terms of carnal gluttony it sure can be. This year the feast day of feasting falls on March 4, but as my recent visit proved, local fare tempts indulgence always. And I caved, time after delicious time. The saving grace that saved my behind – miles and miles of meandering around this intriguing and historic city.

We landed in New Orleans in early January, just as Mardi Gras, or Carnival, season began – trading four days of frost for the fair temps of the bayou. A conference for my husband drew us to The Big Easy, and we stayed close to the French Quarter in the Central Business District at Marriott's modern Renaissance Pere Marquette, with lots of local flavor like conference rooms named Storyville and our floor dedicated to jazz legend Count Basie. The spot put us in the best location in the city for eating and walking. Good thing, too, since we started with a splurge.

After a long day of travel, we were relieved we only had to ride the elevator downstairs to dine at the hotel's critically acclaimed MiLa restaurant. We started with cocktails – mine a Hoochie Coochie of bourbon, peach schnapps and ginger beer. Then came the sweet potato bread

with white bean puree, barbecue lobster, sweetbreads with grits and the crusty-coated "Crispy Baby French Chicken" with crawfish. Welcome to N'awlins, y'all.

By morning, I was revved up to explore with sights set on the Garden District, a destination known for historic and architecturally distinct plantations-turned-mansions as well as shopping on Magazine Street. We hopped a St. Charles streetcar for the little more than two-mile ride. By we, I mean myself and my trusty travel buddy, our 9-month-old, who was strapped to my front with all his diapering paraphernalia strapped to my back. Think of him as an adorable little weight vest.

Little did I know that while New Orleans' charming fleet of streetcars – made famous by Tennessee Williams – branch to most points of interest, that 15-minute ride was the only one I'd take on the entire trip.

We rode along St. Charles to Washington Avenue, where we hopped off and headed south to tour the area settled back in the day by English-speakers who desired a comfortable distance from the Francophones. Here, if you're dressed for it (we weren't), stop in to Commander's Palace for their rich Creole lunch and cheap martinis. To peruse the must-see Greek Revival and Italianate homes fes-

tooned with ornate balconies and intricate scrollwork, pick up a walking tour or just switchback along the streets solo. A favorite – the grand Colonel Short's Villa, occupied by military heads during the Civil War, that's fenced in by cheerful iron cornstalks.

Keep due south and you'll hit Magazine Street, a shopping destination, but not necessarily a touristy one. Offering authentic insight into local life, it's lined with cafés and coffeehouses, galleries (the art kind), high-end retail, antiques and mom-and-pop shops. NOLA Couture sells modern accessories with Southern charm from bright and whimsically patterned bowties and pocket squares to wristlets and jewelry. If you, like we, land in New Orleans during Mardi Gras season, you'll also see every eatery touting their King Cake, a circular pastry served only between Kings' Day (the Carnival kickoff on Jan. 6, which is the Feast of the Epiphany, or Three Kings' Day) and Fat Tuesday. I sat for a slice at Sucre, which makes theirs like thick brioche with a cream cheese filling and dusts it with Mardi Gras shimmer.

Magazine Street spans six miles, so kudos if you go the distance. After all our touring, I pooped out after about a dozen blocks and headed back to the St. Charles

streetcar. The thing is, it never showed. A passel of us hopeful riders griped about "Why the holdup?" for about 15 minutes before folks started hailing cabs. Since a cab was a no-go considering my little man in tow (and no car seat), I just started walking. Good thing I got that King Cake.

"Well, this is one way to see the city," I thought, trying to ignore my achy feet and back. And I'm so glad I did. I (we) trekked the two miles back along St. Charles' wide, grass-lined median passing jazz clubs; laundries that served pub food and beer; Lee Circle; Emeril's headquarters; and the intriguing Eiffel Society – a museum, dining room, club and catwalk rolled into one that's constructed from thousands of pieces originally perched on the Eiffel Tower. Mark one destination for our next trip.

After a quick rest and with a ravenous appetite, I met my husband for dinner at the long-lived Arnaud's, a short (thank goodness) walk away in the French Quarter. With the lure of live music, we took a seat in their jazz bistro to sip a bubbly French 75 – served covertly yet liberally there through Prohibition – while taking in some Dixieland. With Southern service as entertaining as the tunes, we dined on Creole dishes like escargot en casserole, a



Fried Alligator at Cochon



Crispy chicken at MiLa



Crab beignets at Restaurant R'evolution



Catfish po' boy at Cajun Cafe

sampler of gargantuan baked oysters and juicy gator sausage.

Day two I awoke with my internal compass set to “beignet.” I strapped in my little man who’d been loving the sights – and I the extra workout boost – and thought we’d hop a streetcar to Café du Monde in Jackson Square. Hmmm, none approaching? A walk down Canal Street is just as nice, and nicer still is keeping up on that calorie burn.

In 25 minutes time, I was ordering my powdered sugar-coated pastries and café au lait from Café du Monde’s to-go window and reveled in the sweet treat on a bench in a misty Jackson Square. After marveling at St. Louis Cathedral – the oldest in North America, which looked haunting in the day’s fog – we zigged and zagged the south French Quarter all afternoon, taking in the layers of charming Southern galleries, popping into haunts, perusing the French Market and an old U.S. Mint, becoming audience to almost hourly street parades and dodging the drinkers. (Though they’re ubiquitous along Bourbon and Decatur streets, the city insists that they – and the Spring Breakers who bare all – are not a Mardi Gras tradition. The Quarter hosts only a fraction of the city’s parades anyways, where krewes throw beads and doubloons

among more kid-friendly shenanigans.)

Juxtaposing the historic sights with a modern find, we hit the highly recommended Cochon for dinner. A 15-minute walk from The Quarter, the hot spot by native chef Donald Link serves locally sourced pork (or cochon in local lingo) and contemporary Cajun cuisine that reminded me of Bill Taibe’s The Whelk in Westport, Southern style. We stuffed ourselves with smoked pork rib with watermelon pickle, shrimp and tasso with charred greens, fried alligator, gumbo, paned pork cheeks and their boucherie plate.

Our final day, I attempted to take it easy, but with my walking workout on a roll and the fog evaporated I couldn’t help but hightail back to the Mississippi for some good ol’ riverboat watching. I detoured back to the French Market via quieter residential streets like Ursulines Avenue, where sits a historic convent plus plenty of blooming garden boxes on second- and third-story galleries – a quaint reminder that the French Quarter is also where many folks call home.

Back at the French Market, I stopped at the Cajun Cafe and ordered a blackened catfish po’ boy from a memorable Cajun named Mark who served up not only the sandwich but a history of his Acadian immigrant cuisine as well. The po’ boy takes



Quail triptych at Restaurant R'evolution

on many flavors – fillings of fried shrimp, oysters or even Vietnamese pork – though it’s always served in the same fluffy roll. This catfish with a Cajun kick felt light enough for lunch yet loaded with the salty-spicy flavors of the bayou – a good choice to enjoy on a bench facing the breezy Mississippi riverfront.

To finish our visit with a flourish, we dined at Restaurant R’evolution by chefs John Folse and Rick Tramonto – a meal we agreed was one of the best we’ve had. We began with their elegant Creole Louisiana Snapping Turtle Soup poured

tableside over mini deviled eggs, then sweetbreads and eye-rollingly scrumptious beer-battered crab beignets with four rémoulades. (My husband may fly back just for the latter.) Our main was the quail triptych – Southern-fried with a biscuit, absinthe-glazed and boudin-stuffed preparations (boudin being a type of Cajun sausage). We were too sated ourselves for dessert, but with the check arrived a three-tiered vintage jewelry box with each drawer offering a different flavored truffle.

Somehow – bless our hearts – we managed to polish off every sweet morsel. ■