

CAJUN-CREOLE CUISINE
GONE HORRIBLY WRONG

YATS All Folks

By Michael Nagrant

NORMALLY, WHEN I WRITE A RESTAURANT REVIEW, I try to avoid indulging in blow-by-blow course descriptions, poor adjectives and Architectural Digest-style décor treatises, a feat I like to call the “Pat Bruno.” Instead, I

try to look for the story behind the restaurant, personal memoir spurred by dining at the establishment or a cultural context in which to put the food. But I was so appalled by the experience and the food at YATS Cajun-Creole Cuisine, a new Chicago location of a popular quick-service Indianapolis-based restaurant, I’m having a hard time avoiding a hyperbolic, damning diatribe. Eating there last week was the worst dining experience—and that includes trips to the now-shuttered Bennigans—of my career as a food writer.

The story is that Joe Vuskovich was a wunderkind restaurateur, operating two spots in New Orleans by the time he was 19. He parlayed that success into a spice wholesale business, eventually going back to the restaurant game with YATS. The name, though it sounds more like what I wanted to do (yack) after eating there, actually comes from his self-described status as a “yat.” On his MySpace page, Vuskovich says that “yats” are a particular breed of New Orleanians that “talk in their own language, have their own schedules they follow separate from the world and eat their own particular style of food. The common greeting ‘Where y’at?’ is where they get their name.”

After Vuskovich opened YATS in Indianapolis, a local magazine dubbed it the “city’s best Louisiana comfort food” and the New York Times called the fare “excellent.” Unfortunately, the hubris of such accolades spurred Vuskovich to open a new location on one of Chicago’s best restaurant strips. Based on my first visit though, I doubt even if he opened in one of our many food deserts he’d have much luck.

If the New York Times sends someone to cover the new Randolph location, the YATS folks better hope they send their poorest indiscriminate college intern. The space painted in a pukey Tequila-Sunrise-orange with its new leather banquettes sloppily dripped with said paint, dingy Indy 500 checker-flag-style floor covered with institutional runner mats, glass chandeliers and retro concert posters is pretty much straight-up frat-house as imagined by an interior designer who has had far too many Hurricanes or Hand Grenade cocktails on Bourbon Street. If YATS represents any part of New Orleans, it’s the tourist-fueled “beads and boobs” aesthetic of the central French Quarter. It says a lot when the most tasteful or interesting thing in the joint is a vintage Liberace concert poster.

Culturally speaking, YATS is truly unique in that unless you count the Cheesecake Factory, Chicago has never really had a pan-Latino-Cajun-Creole-cheesecake restaurant. But, as anyone who’s ever ordered the chop suey from the last page of a “War and Peace”-sized menu at a “family” restaurant knows, “pan” anything is almost always a recipe for pan-horrible. While YATS does keep their menu limited to nine daily specials, it’s a confused assortment that includes Cuban-style ropa vieja, Mexican pozole and a Creole, Cajun and Frito Lay hybrid known as chili-cheese crawfish etouffee. It seems the only real criteria for making it on to the menu is the ability for a dish to withstand hours moldering away inside a slow-cooker.

In fact, I’m guessing, outside of the YATS “kitchen,” there hasn’t been this many slow cookers gathered in one spot since a 1950s cocktail party fueled with Swedish meatballs. After you place your order, a dude, who in a pre-Netflix world would more likely be manning the local Blockbuster video counter, scoops out oozy mountains of whatever you requested from the cooker onto oval plates along with a bit of rice. He tops those starchy masses with French bread that looks like it’s been slopped Jackson Pollock-style with the neon orange oil drippings from the grease trap of a Buffalo Wild Wings. Frozen Pepperidge Farm Texas Toast never looked and tasted so good.

The peanut-butter-colored chili-cheese crawfish etouffee was runny, gamy, sour and punctuated by flavorless chewy crawfish tails. Though the spice level was admirable, the jambalaya was punctuated with desiccated andouille sausage, and the rice was so gloppy, were you to hurl a spoonful at a passing car, you’d likely break its windshield. The pozole was perfumed with the one-note limey essence of hominy pounded in to split-hulled submission by the relentless heat of the slow cooker. The ropa vieja did include tender shards of chicken, but they were slathered with a horrid metallic tomato essence. I’d tell you about the dessert, but since the NY and Turtle cheesecakes they offer aren’t quite Cajun specialties, we skipped them. You’d expect a bourbon pudding or a bananas foster cheesecake variation at least. It’s not all bad news though, because YATS is BYOB (at least for now), so you can afford to drink enough to forget the meal you just ate.

YATS is located at 955 West Randolph, (312)829-7930

MUSEUMS

Field Museum

1400 S. Lake Shore (at Roosevelt), (312)922-9410. →NATURE UNLEASHED. The Field Museum’s “Nature Unleashed” opens with a tree cracked in half and stripped of bark. It is just one of many extraordinary visuals from the planet’s most destructive natural phenomenon: earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, hurricanes and tornados. The exhibit juxtaposes Earth’s callous meteorological and seismic forces with the poignant human stories affected by its disasters. Visuals mimic the colossal power of nature while smaller artifacts, such as handwritten letters from Hurricane Katrina survivors, tug at heartstrings. The recorded sounds of seismic activity (alien-like pops and scrapes) lend the space an omnipresent sense of doom, as if at any moment the floor might rupture. The exhibit’s most impressive offering is the invention of stormchaser Tim Samaras, a digital recording device which allows guests to stand in a 360-degree video-viewing area that places them in an approaching tornado’s path. For several heart-stopping seconds, visitors are encircled by the eye of the storm. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 4. Hours: Daily 9am-5pm. Fees: \$12 adults, \$7 children 4-11, \$7 students & seniors. With Chicago ID: \$10, \$6 children, \$7 students & seniors.

Museum of Science and Industry

57th and Lake Shore, (773)684-1414. →SMART HOME: GREEN + WIRED. The Museum of Science and Industry’s latest exhibit is a fully functioning three-story house, the “Smart Home,” an ecologically sound building built on the foundation of material, energy and water efficiency. This is green living gone haywire. Museum guests are ushered through a twenty-minute eye-opening (if somewhat rushed) tour of the house. Every aspect of the building is environmentally friendly, from the recycled construction material, to the organic food, to the to LED lights. An ethanol-burning fireplace. A “raw” wood kitchen table. And of course, in the garage, a hybrid car. The house is called “smart” for a reason. Even the houseplants are clever. When a plant needs watering, a call is placed to your phone. That’s right—your plant is calling to say it’s thirsty. A black obelisk with blinking blue lights (that calls to mind HAL from “2001: A Space Odyssey”) is the “brains and guts” of the “Smart Home”; it’s an automated system that controls the heating, cooling and lighting of the entire house. A module of the house’s network charts not only the amount of energy being used, but also the amount being produced. Guests are given a “Resource Guide” which, like a shopping catalogue, details each gadget and piece of furniture, and where everything can be purchased. We all might not be able to live in technologically advanced, self-sustainable houses, but we can live green by bringing aspects of the “Smart Home” into our own. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 4.

→THE GLASS EXPERIENCE. Vases edged in filigree, windows like Japanese shoji screens, vibrant sculpture pods—one wouldn’t expect an exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry to feature galleries flaunting Tiffany lamps, Frank Lloyd Wright windows and a Chihuly Macchia sculpture garden, but “The Glass Experience” does just that. The exhibit celebrates the collaboration between glassblowing and science, a relationship in which the artisans of Venice and Murano jumpstart technological leaps forward in LCD and fiber optics. The scientific specifics are only touched on in favor of a more all-inclusive look at the glass world. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Sep 1. Hours: Mon-Sat 9:30am-5:30pm, Sun 11am-

TIP OF THE WEEK
LIZARDS AND THE
KOMODO KING

The Shedd Aquarium, bastion of Chicago’s Beluga whales and Moray eels, has played host over the last two years to the fork-tongued, cold-blooded and scaled. After an extended stay, “Lizards and the Komodo King,” which opened in 2006, is in its final weeks. The exhibit spotlights more than twenty-five species of lizard, most of which ignore the glass-tapping of the museum’s younger guests with unflappable aplomb. Much like a colorful carnival freak-show, the exhibit focuses on the amazing feats of these reptiles. Some lizards change color for camouflage, some clone themselves, others use their tails like prehensile arms and still others do away with their tails all together. The exhibit’s headliner is Faust, a 120-pound Komodo dragon. Guests gawk at the enormous creature; this dangerous, carnivorous inhabitant of Indonesia is the world’s largest lizard and has the distinction of being able to eat a pig in twenty minutes. Faust, the lizard king, takes his final bow Labor Day. (Laura Hawbaker)

“Lizards and the Komodo King” shows at the Shedd Aquarium, 1200 South Lake Shore Drive (312)939-2438) through September 1.

5:30pm. Fees: \$11, \$10 Chicago residents with ID; \$9.50 seniors 65+, \$8.75 city residents; \$7 children 3-11, \$6.25 city residents; children 3 and under & members free. Thu free. Omnimax, U-505 sub tour & CSI exhibit prices not included. Parking \$12 non-members.

→ Shedd Aquarium

1200 S. Lake Shore, (312)939-2438. LIZARDS AND THE KOMODO KING. See Tip of the Week. Hours: Daily 9am-6pm. Fees: \$24.95; \$17.95 seniors 65+ and children 3-11; children 2 and under free. 25% off with Chicago ID. 4D Special FX Theater \$3 w/ Premium Day Pass.