



diningout

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CAJUN LEANINGS



SOUTHERN STYLE
Crawfish Etouffee at the Maple Tree Inn in Blue Island features tender crawfish tails smothered in a nice, swampy, velvety gravy served with a choice of etouffee risotto or white rice. |

RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

Blue Island's Maple Tree Inn melds Creole, BBQ and brews

As a regular visitor to Louisiana and a stalwart aficionado of all things Cajun and Creole, it is difficult for me not to compare Blue Island's Maple Tree Inn, which bills itself as a "Louisiana Brasserie," to the restaurants of New Orleans. Against that standard, the Maple Tree Inn doesn't always stack up. That doesn't really matter, for the

Maple Tree Inn is its own very beautiful, unique thing.

The visit to downtown Blue Island is worth the trip alone. It's a slice of nearly-extinct Americana that includes turreted storefronts, vinyl awnings and a smattering of Mom-and-Pop businesses such as Gayla's Irish Saloon and Jeben's Hardware (whose windows are filled with an

assortment of vintage bicycles and hurricane lanterns). New America has infiltrated Blue Island, too, in the form of Mario's Tacos and Taqueria Durango.

And there at the end of Old Western Avenue is the Maple Tree Inn, a warm red-brick facade trimmed in emerald green (built in 1890) that was once a forbidden Prohibi-

tion speakeasy. The tiny front bar room is all honey-colored woods and outfitted with a generous selection of beer taps. The beer list is good as any in the Chicago area, with such offerings as Abita from Louisiana and some of America's finest craft brews from Lagunitas, Mikkeller and Allagash.

As for those Louisiana standards

MAPLE TREE INN ★★

13301 S. Old Western Ave., Blue Island

(708) 388-3461; www.mapletreeinnrestaurant.com

Hours: Tues.-Sat.: 5 p.m. - 11 p.m.;

Prices: starters, \$5.50-\$13; entrees, \$15-\$26

Try: Voodoo Nuts, Crabe Avec Crabe, Hickory-smoked ribs

In a bite: Great beer, and Cajun and Creole eats interpreted Chicago-style.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★★★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

I referenced, the "BBQ Shrimp" is not full of head-on-shrimp soaked in butter and Worcestershire sauce as it is at Mr. B's in New Orleans' French Quarter. The shrimp at Maple Tree Inn is butterflied, peeled and doused instead in a too tangy, but not nearly as comforting, tomato sauce. Fried green tomato wheels are blanketed in a traditional cornmeal, drizzled with tangy remoulade and cut with a nice, sharply acidic peanut slaw; but they're also kind of soggy. The crawfish etouffee, though, has a nice, swampy, velvety gravy much like the one served in NOLA. That's pretty much where the comparisons end. I have never seen Maple Tree's "Voodoo Nuts" in Louisiana, smoked balls of sweet, roasted garlic cloves wrapped in spicy Andouille sausage, but I bet they'd capture the hearts and minds of Baton Rouge.

Maple Tree has a way with smoke. Their ribs are dry-rubbed and slow-cooked over hickory until a deep pink ring sets in to the flesh. The skin transfigures into a dark, caramelized, lacquered bark. The interior meat is tender but still firm. It is one of the finest ribs in the Chicago area.

The *crabe avec crabe*—crunchy, briny, softshell crabs doused in peppery lemon-butter sauce fortified with additional pulled crab and topped with sweet candied nuts—could only be better if someone laid an arm of fresh King Crab over the top. The again "crabe avec crabe avec crabe" is probably too cumber-



Maple Tree's dry-rubbed hickory smoked spareribs are some of the finest barbecue ribs available in the Chicago area.



Voodoo Nuts, roasted cloves of garlic covered with fresh andouille sausage meat, are a unique offering worth sampling.



Crabe avec Crabe, features softshell crabs doused in peppery lemon-butter sauce fortified with more pulled crab and topped with sweet candied nuts.

some to order.

The dessert specials rotate regularly, but a recent Bananas Foster bread pudding, glazed in buttery brown sugar, custardy bananas and splashed with rum, is the thing to have. Plenty of spots in New Orleans serve that dessert, but few let you

wash it down with a Three Floyd's beer from nearby Munster, Ind.

Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer. Follow @MichaelNagrnt. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.

SIDE DISHES



Big Jones in Andersonville serves Crawfish Etouffee in white wine and butter with onion and Cajun spices. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES

Maple tree isn't the only place serving solid New Orleans' fare in Chicago. Here are three more spots to check out:

BIG JONES, 5347 N. Clark; (773) 275-5725; www.bigjoneschicago.com

Vibe: Lush draperies, potted palms and cool lamps that look like tufted-meringues, give this Andersonville restaurant an Antebellum plantation parlor ambience.

Flavor: Chef Paul Fehribach feeds your stomach and your soul with thoughtful blog posts on the restaurant's website and with smart regional Southern cuisine in the dining room. Cajun and creole specialties include Cajun-liver boudin fritters, gumbo yaya and crawfish etouffee, which is not the swampy dark brew you find in New Orleans, but a lighter, wine-, butter- and onion-based sauce more typical of the Breaux Bridge region of Louisiana served in the 1940s.

Unlike the spin-offs, which feel more like a New Orleans' restaurant theme park, there's more of a gritty diner/lunch counter, a la Manny's Deli, feel here.

Flavor: Most suggest the gumbo is the thing, but I prefer the sausage po-boy, a crisp buttered Pullman loaf stuffed with a garlicky link of Andouille sausage slathered with spicy creole mustard.

DIXIE KITCHEN, 825 Church St., Evanston, (847) 733-9030; www.dixiekitchenchicago.com

Vibe: Corrugated tin, checkered tablecloths, strings of Christmas lights, and a mess of tin advertising signs, Dixie Kitchen feels like a vintage Louisiana fish shack.

Flavor: The fried green tomatoes are never soggy and always tangy. Though, it's not particularly Cajun or creole, it's also tough to pass up the corn-perfumed johnnycakes.

— Michael Nagrant

HEAVEN ON SEVEN, 111 N. Wabash, (312) 263-6443; www.heavenonseven.com/wabash.html

Vibe: The original outpost of what's become a mini-empire, you wonder how anyone ever found their way up to the seventh floor of this Loop commercial building for a bite.



The andouille sausage po-boy at Heaven on Seven on Wabash. ANDREW A. NELLES-SUN-TIMES MEDIA