

Lawrence Galloway has been driving a streetcar for about 30 years. The fare is \$1.25, but having Lawrence back in business is priceless.



“New Orleans is not just back—it’s better.”

Local icon and author Julia Reed recounts how her city has made a fresh new start, thanks to its old magic: food, music, art, and miracles

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Julia pauses at the Napoleon House, a French Quarter landmark since 1797 where the music is classical and the signature drink is a Pimm’s cup; see the recipe at [napoleonhouse.com](http://napoleonhouse.com).

## Ten days after Katrina hit, my husband John and I caravanned back into New Orleans

with our resourceful Mississippi Delta farmer friend, Byron Seward, who also has a house in the city. Passes were still required to get past checkpoints (in my case, a press pass—Byron and John were my “photographers”), water was still high in some places, and there was no electricity without a generator. Still, I figured we could meet any challenge—Byron’s truck bed was loaded with everything from extra gas and garbage bags to industrial-strength disinfectant and a shotgun. There was only one thing we forgot: food.

All my life, I’d been toting food out of New Orleans: live crawfish, dried red beans, Crystal Hot Sauce, Peychaud’s Bitters. I have a friend who never returns to his native Manhattan without a bag full of muffuletta from the Central Grocery, and another who packs jars of pickled vegetables and olives from the same place so he can re-create the crab salad at Mosca’s. In all the madness, it simply had not occurred to us to bring anything to eat, and so, after we had checked on our own houses, we drove through the empty streets, assessing the damage done to our favorite restaurants, which, with a few sad exceptions (Gabrielle, Dooky Chase, Mandina’s) was, thankfully, minimal. I pressed my nose against the windows of Lilette and Herbsaint, saw the tables still neatly set for dinner, and had to stop myself from trying to push open the door. We finally managed a delicious cold beer out of an ice chest at Johnny White’s, the valiant Bourbon Street bar that never closed, but the only food we saw that day was in various states of decomposition; we had stupidly offered to clean out some friends’ refrigerators.

Food—along with music and culture—is the heart and soul of New Orleans, and the marked absence of cooks cooking that day gave the city a stranger air than the odd yellow light or helicopters flying low overhead. So it was not surprising that food—quickly followed by music and culture—became the driving force behind the city’s revitalization.

In the days immediately after the storm, Gulf War vet John Besh of Restaurant August and Besh’s Steakhouse fired up his butane boiler, put it on a flatboat, and brought hundreds of pounds of red beans and rice to folks stranded in the water. Paul Prudhomme moved pots and pans

and a set of 10 burners from K-Paul’s Louisiana Kitchen in the French Quarter to the parking lot of his suburban seasonings warehouse, and by the time his restaurant reopened on October 18—heralded by a zydeco band out front—he’d cooked almost 30,000 meals (jambalaya, chicken paprika, eggplant lasagna) for National Guard troops, police, firefighters, and volunteers. Within days after our first foray back, a friend e-mailed me that the Royal Grocery was serving everything from gumbo to hot dogs and had been dubbed “the new Galatoire’s.” Tenney Flynn, chef and partner at the upscale fish restaurant GW Fins (where there was no gas), was so anxious to cook he spent 12-hour days turning chickens and ribs on the giant oven at Zydeque, his nearby barbecue establishment.

By the first weekend in October, Donald Link, whose house in Lakeview had flooded, opened Herbsaint with six employees (as opposed to his usual 40) and a menu that included a terrific iceberg lettuce salad (all that was available) and the best meatloaf I’ve ever tasted (the secret was bits of andouille sausage). A few days later John Besh followed at August, where a lunch special was a flavorful chicken stew with pistachios replacing the pine nuts he couldn’t find. They were winging it, and cooking better than ever—both Donald and John were nominated for the James Beard Foundation’s Best Chef in the Southeast Award the following spring, less than nine months after Katrina. John won that year, Donald the next, and Cochon, the restaurant Donald opened with Stephen Stryjewski during the first Easter weekend after Katrina, was one of five finalists for Best New Restaurant in the whole United States.

Meanwhile, the few neighbors who had made it back Uptown kept checking the bulletin board outside Upperline, while inside, owner JoAnn Clevenger and chef Ken Smith were peeling up the dining room’s destroyed floors and scouring the kitchen. On opening night, JoAnn’s son, a philosophy professor in St. Louis, served as Ken’s sous chef, while her husband, an engineer, tended bar. Despite such good omens, rumors were rife—Frank Brigtsen was opening a restaurant in Atlanta and never coming back; the oyster beds would take years to replenish; there would be no

### pride of place

**Irvin Mayfield** wrote “All the Saints” both to celebrate New Orleans’ survival and to commemorate his father, who died in Katrina’s floods.

**Stephen Stryjewski**, here between catfish and soft-shell crab purveyors Joey and Jeannie Fonseca, built a shrine to authentic Cajun food with Cochon, one of the best of the many new restaurants that appeared soon after Katrina.

**Rev. Michael Jacques** of St. Peter Claver Church has worked tirelessly to help his parishioners rebuild their lives and homes in the severely damaged Tremé neighborhood.

**Donald Link** (right, with shrimpier Dino Pertuit and Dino’s son, Dean) was able to reopen his restaurant Herbsaint the first weekend of October 2005, albeit with only six employees and an improvised menu.

**Paul Prudhomme** of K-Paul’s Louisiana Kitchen cooked for rescue workers and volunteers mere days after Katrina hit.

**Frank Brigtsen** returned and reopened his restaurant, Brigtsen’s, in December 2005, despite rumors he had left New Orleans for good.

**Rev. Vien Thé Nguyen** of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church fought to get electricity and water back on in New Orleans East—and keep a planned dump out.

**JoAnn Clevenger and Ken Smith** of Upperline had to tear up the place’s ruined floors and clean out the kitchen before reopening; Uptown residents could hardly wait.

**Walter “Wolfman” Washington** keeps the New Orleans music scene vibrant, playing several nights a week all over town.



Irvin Mayfield



Stephen Stryjewski



Rev. Michael Jacques



Donald Link



Paul Prudhomme



Frank Brigtsen



Rev. Vien Thé Nguyen



JoAnn Clevenger and Ken Smith



Walter “Wolfman” Washington

“New Orleans continues to live,  
thanks in no small part to the chefs and the artists,  
the musicians and the spiritual leaders, who rally us all”

Thanksgiving lunch at Susan Spicer’s Bayona—but all, thank goodness, unfounded. Susan opened for Thanksgiving, Frank made it in time for New Year’s, and the oysters (and shrimp and crab) were on everybody’s menu. Café du Monde quelled fears of a beignet-less city when it reopened on October 19 in a celebration that merited a segment on CNN. Each opening was like a cocktail party: At Upperline, JoAnn asked us diners to help assess which wines had made it through the heat unscathed, and we were happy to oblige (so much so that one particularly dutiful patron ended up passed out on the banquette).

The crowds on the sidewalk outside Herbsaint reminded me of the old, boisterous lines in front of Galatoire’s; in the ladies’ room I heard a woman say, “It’s so wonderful to see *people*.” Restaurants were where you went not just for the much-missed New Orleans food and an even more-needed cocktail, but also to find out who was back, who was staying, how their houses fared, where they’d been. More than one returning New Orleanian told me that in those early, literally dark days (the streetlights didn’t come on for months), the constant trickle of reopening restaurants, and, therefore, civilization, was what convinced them to stay.

Of course, music and art didn’t hurt either. The lady in the Herbsaint loo was not the only one

craving company. The Ogden Museum of Southern Art became the first museum to reopen when it unlocked its doors on October 27 for “Ogden After Hours,” a weekly event at which local musicians play, beer and wine are served, and all the galleries are open to the public. (This despite the fact that all but one staff member had lost their houses.) By November, word had gotten out, and more than a thousand people gathered to hear Walter “Wolfman” Washington play his legendary mix of soul, funk, and blues. The number is especially impressive given that pre-Katrina, the “after hours” crowd usually topped out at about 300 to 400, and now there weren’t even 100,000 people in the city. Before the month was out, gallery owner Arthur Roger spearheaded an entire arts weekend featuring not only his own “Come Back Exhibition,” but also the reopening of the Contemporary Arts Center and numerous galleries, as well as new shows at the Ogden. Arthur decided to showcase only local artists at his gallery, but he thanked the artists and supporters who flew in from all around the country by hosting an emotional lunch at Adolfo Garcia’s fabulous Latin-tinged seafood restaurant, RioMar.

November was also the month that the brilliant trumpeter Irvin Mayfield and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, which he leads, performed an epic piece, “All the Saints,” for a standing-room-only crowd at Christ Church Cathedral on St. Charles Avenue. The church had originally planned to commission a tune by Irvin to commemorate the Episcopal bicentennial in Louisiana; instead, the Very Rev. David duPlantier met with Irvin—who lost his father to Katrina—in Baton Rouge the weekend following the storm. He got to work writing and gathering far-flung orchestra members, and the result was a stunning piece of music at once mournful and celebratory. Before the concert, Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu exhorted the crowd to “get a sense of where you are in time and place” and “understand that New Orleans has always lived, lives today, and will continue to live.”

And so it does, thanks in no small part to the chefs and the artists, the musicians and the spiritual leaders, who, in the face of government paralysis and personal loss, rally us all. Irvin,

**Adolfo Garcia** (far right, with fruit sellers Chanel and George Lafargue) not only reopened the popular RioMar but also added La Boca, a new Argentine-style steakhouse, in the months after the storm.

**The hurricane may have brought a renaissance to New Orleans’ schools:** Rebuilding and restructuring has allowed educators like Tony Recasner to create new programs, such as the Edible Schoolyard at Samuel J. Green Charter School.





Arthur Roger (seated, center) made the decision to exhibit only the work of local artists on the opening weekend of his eponymous gallery.

The miracle of the cereus (I could tell it had bloomed just a night or two earlier from the spent blossom that remained) was a good sign for other parts of the city. The New Orleans Public School System, for example, had been an irreparable disaster long before Katrina, operated out of condemned buildings by a corrupt board. The state had taken it over just before the storm, but Katrina did what no bureaucracy would dare—it gutted it completely. Now, out of the wreckage, schools have risen that actually work, including an ambitious network of charter schools and a much more streamlined public school system under the leadership of a new superintendent, Paul Vallas, who previously turned around similarly dysfunctional schools in Chicago and Philadelphia.

One of the city's new educational heroes, Tony Recasner, a native New Orleanian with a PhD in psychology, had run one of the city's few pre-Katrina charter schools. After it flooded, he moved to the Samuel J. Green Charter School, which has 400 students from kindergarten through eighth grade. "Tony gets up in front of these kids and there's this amazing communication back and forth," says Stephen Hales, a pediatrician and charter school activist who serves on the board of Children's Hospital with Tony. "He communicates to them that they can do anything, and he's going to help them do it. You can feel the buzz, you can feel the synergy. You say, 'God, please let this happen in other schools.'"

Tony says that since he is not bound by the bureaucracy of a large school district, "we are free to experiment." Now, part of that experimentation involves a successful partnership with Edible Schoolyard, only the second of its kind in the country. The program, founded by Chez Panisse proprietor and activist Alice Waters, has a mission to bring sustainable and organic gardens to urban schools, where the kids grow and cook their own lunches and the lessons of the garden are integrated into the curriculum. Measuring a plot of earth, for example, might also be a lesson in mathematics.

And so we come full circle, to where you always end up in New Orleans: at the table. It is the place that may well save us all. ■

Walter "Wolfman" Washington, Kermit Ruffins, and so many others continue to play. John Besh bought an additional eatery, beloved La Provence, on the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain, and opened a new place in New Orleans, a bistro called Luke that pays homage to the more cherished of the bygone establishments. Commander's Palace renovated and reopened, as did Dooky Chase, Mandina's, and Gautreau's. Adolfo Garcia opened an Argentine steakhouse; much-loved caterer Joel Dondis opened a sophisticated patisserie and gelateria called Sucré. The fish and the produce stands are back at the twice-weekly farmers' market—local farmer Jim Core has attained such stature that his name appears on more than one of the city's menus in descriptions of salads.

For all the losses, much that was good survived. The city's architecture is as integral to its identity as its food and culture, and historic neighborhoods including the French Quarter, the Garden District, the Holy Cross area of the Lower Ninth Ward, much of the Marigny, and parts of Bywater remained largely unscathed. When we drove in that first morning, we went first to our Greek Revival house in the Garden District (one of the earliest, built in 1847), and then to the Marigny, where Byron and his wife have a spectacular weekend cottage that is my favorite: a two-story, Caribbean-influenced shotgun, with a huge palm in the front and a gallery along the side. We were both blessed—we lost a magnolia, and Byron's fence was down—so we continued on to my old place in the Quarter where some of my plants still resided. The pots in the courtyard were in shards and all the citrus trees dead, but miraculously still alive was my cereus, the most exotically beautiful plant in the city, with musk-scented blooms that don't appear until sundown, and then for only one night.

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**9** irresistible recipes  
 from New Orleans' best chefs

Food editor and New Orleans native Kim Sunée asked the city's top chefs to share some of their favorite recipes. We tried them all in our Test Kitchen and now offer them online so you can get a taste of the best of New Orleans in your own home. Bon appétit!

PHOTOGRAPHER: KATE SEARS; FOOD STYLIST: TONI BROGAN; PROP STYLIST: STEPHANIE BASRALIAN



The Best Darned Grilled Chicken Ever, Paul Prudhomme



Dirty Rice, Donald Link



Catfish Courtbouillon, Stephen Stryjewski



Arugula, Satsuma, and Fennel Salad, Susan Spicer



Chile-Roasted Shrimp, Donald Link



Fried Green Tomatoes with Shrimp Rémoulade, Ken Smith



Grilled Mahi-Mahi Escabeche, Adolfo Garcia



Roast Pork Tenderloin with Pepper Jelly Glaze, Frank Brigtsen



Lemon Buttermilk Pie, Stephen Stryjewski