

THE ADVOCATE

New Orleans' Tableau stars with French Creole cuisine in the Vieux Carre

ENCORE!

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In New Orleans, creating a restaurant that specializes in “New Orleans fare” can be a tricky proposition. There are scores of eateries that offer the classic menu items people have loved for generations here, and which have come to define the cuisine of the Crescent City.

So, how does one open a new eatery that showcases the classics, while still attempting to stand out?

Dickie Brennan — along with co-owner Steve Pettus, G.M. Mike Batten and Chef Ben Thibodeaux — took that gamble with the recently opened Tableau, in the French Quarter, and it's paying off handsomely.

Everything about Tableau is designed to impress, but not overwhelm, beginning with the building itself. A 400-seat, three-story affair attached at the hip to Le Petit Theater (one of the dining rooms — cleverly titled “the green room” — literally connects to the theater's balcony section), it features numerous private dining options, a grand staircase, courtyard seating and a private balcony overlooking Jackson Square.

Brennan and Pettus tapped Thibodeaux, formerly the chef at Palace Cafe, with designing a menu that would both pay homage to the French Creole classics and simultaneously breathe new life into them.

“Dickie and Steve approached me with the concept of the restaurant, I was really tuned up about it,” said the chef. “I loved the idea of reinventing or touching up some of the classic Creole dishes of New Orleans. A lot of places around town will have the same dishes that we have, but not with the same level of detail involved. We try to keep things as simple as possible here, but focus more on getting the best ingredients we can, and presenting it in a way that exceeds expectations without being off-putting or intimidating. And, being attached to a theater, I wanted to create a menu that was a little feminine, a bit softer than usual.”

“Not to say that there’s not a 24-ounce bone-in ribeye on the menu,” Thibodeaux was quick to add.

The menu’s thoughtfulness is evident right down to the bread that began a recent meal at Tableau, made especially for the restaurant by Leidenheimer bakery, which involves a 50-hour fermentation process that produces a more defined crust and a tangy-flavored dough.

The “Grand Royale” was a foursome of Creole favorites: crabmeat ravigote, shrimp remoulade, marinated crab claws and oysters en brochette (\$34, each available a la carte, as well). Each item showcased the chef’s desire to refresh the classics. The crabmeat popped with crispy fried capers, and the crab fingers shone in a truffled vinaigrette, but the oysters were particularly noteworthy. Where a traditional version of the dish would be breaded, wrapped in bacon and deep fried, these were skewered on rosemary, dusted with panko crumbs and then broiled, resulting in a much lighter version with the classic flavor profile.

Tableau also offers a “crepe du jour,” in this case a clever take on shrimp scampi in which the crepe had been julienned to simulate pasta, then topped with a pair of jumbo shrimp and roasted red peppers (\$8.50).

Thibodeaux also puts his stamp on a satisfying Creole French onion soup, made with andouille and local beer, then topped with a Gruyere crouton (\$8), as well as a chilled asparagus and seafood salad topped with local tomatoes, crabmeat and jumbo shrimp (\$12).

Brunch items also get their own spin, including Eggs Benedict (\$15), incorporating a house-made English muffin, crab boil-poached egg, and ham that the chef smartly chops short, so that diners avoid having to cut through a huge slab of meat.

When it comes to entrees, Tableau offers demi portions of larger dishes, encouraging guests to sample more of the menu. The pan sautéed Gulf fish (\$18, demi portion \$10) — in my case a pecan “crusted” redfish — was a nod to the dish made famous by Paul Prudhomme, but only dusted in flour, and therefore significantly lighter than its forebear.

Carnivores will be sated by the herb roasted “Chicken Tableau” (\$18), which features both a juicy breast as well as a crispy fried thigh served with potatoes and a sauce Béarnaise, and the outstanding “Tourdedos Rossini Moderne” (\$32, demi portion \$22), two 3-ounce cuts of rare steak set atop roasted croutons and topped with seared foie gras.

As for drinks, Tableau’s house cocktails are inventive but not fussy, including the spicy, smoky “Overruled,” which features mezcal, pepper jelly and habanero bitters (\$11), and diners also have the option of ordering cask wine, on tap in the European fashion, by the glass, half carafe or carafe at friendly prices (\$6, \$15, and \$30, respectively).

In creating Tableau’s dessert menu, pastry chef Stephanie Bernard has clearly been given free rein, and it shows nicely in

her Praline Monkey Bread Pudding (\$8), Strawberry Shortcake Macaroon (\$9), sweet and spicy Hot Chocolate Pot de Creme (\$8), and a wonderfully unique vanilla bean creme brûlée served in a shallow dish, to maximize the sugar-to-custard ratio (\$7). Ultimately, Brennan and Pettus have set their stage wonderfully at Tableau. The performance is worthy of an encore.