

## GETAWAY

# THE BREAD PUDDING WARS:

## NEW ORLEANS CHEFS REDEFINE A CLASSIC

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**W**hite chocolate, bananas, cranberries, Southern Comfort, rum, praline liqueur, buttered brandy... could these diverse ingredients really be associated with something as humble as bread pudding?

My early experience with this unappetizing-sounding dessert was something that popped up occasionally at potluck dinners as a not-very-interesting lump with a consistency ranging from brick to mush. So I was surprised to see bread pudding on the six-course table d'hôte menu at Tujague's restaurant in New Orleans' French Quarter.

I was dining with my cousin Julie, a New Orleans local, who has a weakness for Tujague's beef brisket. Since she was right about the melt-in-your-mouth Cajun brisket, I kept an open mind for the banana bread pudding. The decadently moist confection covered with caramel sauce and slivered almonds was a far cry from potluck fare. One bite and I became a true convert.

It's often said that you know you're in New Orleans when the topic of conversation over a wonderful dinner is where to get the next fabulous meal—in this case, where to find the most delectable bread pudding, and Julie assured me there were many to choose from in the city.

Developed in 13th-century England as a way to use stale leftovers, this mixture of bread, milk, eggs and sugar has evolved into an artistic canvas for pastry chefs to embellish with unique flourishes.

Once my taste buds were piqued, I was zealous in my pursuit of the best New Orleans bread pudding.

What makes a good bread pudding is a matter of personal preference. The traditional New Orleans variety is very dense and comes in slices or squares, usually with a sweet sauce. The bread pudding blocks with praline sauce at the Praline Connection in Fauberg Marigny or the precisely-cut chunks loaded with pecans at Uppeline in Uptown are prime examples.

While I'll continue to make the pilgrimage to Uppeline for lamb shank in red wine, and visit the Praline Connection for their fried chicken, I found my favorite bread puddings right in the French Quarter, with the top contestants coming from two classic New Orleans eateries.

Galatoire's is known for their Sazerac cocktail lunches, "jackets required" policy, and their deep fried seafood. I'll skip the notable fried oysters to save room for their fluffy individual banana bread pudding smothered with chunks of fruit in a decadent praline liqueur sauce. Yum!

Brennan's, a New Orleans standard since 1946, is the home of the original Bananas Foster, but it's the Bread Pudding St. Joan d'Arc that gets my top vote. This labor-intensive concoction has three different consistencies of bread-laden batter folded together with Southern Comfort-infused raisins and cranberries to create a complexly textured dessert served in a bath of

Southern Comfort vanilla sauce with roasted pecans. Heaven on a spoon! It's not only the high-end establishments getting in on the act. Mother's Restaurant serves theirs in a styrofoam dish, but the white chocolate inspiration in buttered brandy sauce is no slouch, and the über-rich apple version in whiskey sauce at the casual Gumbo Shop Restaurant packs the most sugar per bite of any I tried.

## Southern Comfort vanilla sauce with roasted pecans. Heaven on a spoon!

With no reservations to be had, I was foiled in my pursuit of Emeril Lagasse's Bananas Foster bread pudding with vanilla ice cream and caramel sauce at NOLA Restaurant and his bittersweet chocolate invention with Creole cream cheese, seasonal fruit compote and pecan pralines at Emeril's Delmonico. Just one more reason for a return trip to New Orleans.

Now I am fantasizing about Café du Monde coming up with a banana bread pudding beignet to go with their famous chicory café au lait.... A girl can dream can't she? My quest continues... ■

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