

## NEW ORLEANS

# Swamp Things

A pair of celebrity chefs combs the bayou backwoods for dinner **BY ROD O'CONNOR**

**THE TWO MEN** come trudging through the brush at Palo Alto Gun and Rod Club, a hunting ground in the tiny town of Donaldsonville, La., shotguns and frogging nets in hand. Clad in camouflage and just a little sweaty from stalking fresh meat around the banks of the bayou, they seem like any other hunters wandering this vast wilderness. Only they're nationally famous chefs. And they're looking for swamp critters. For their restaurant.

Celebrated Louisiana-born chef John Folse of Lafitte's Landing and his new partner, James Beard winner Rick Tramonto of Chicago's Tru, are in the process of launching their first joint project, Restaurant Revolution, in New Orleans' historic Royal Sonesta Hotel. There, they will present Cajun and Creole food »

**GOT A FROG IN YOUR THROAT?**  
Restaurant R'evolution's fried frog legs stuffed with mascarpone and crab

» as nature intended: containing frog, quail and sometimes even raccoon. “We view every animal from the swamp-floor pantry as a possibility,” Folse says, as he attempts to flush out some grub from a copse of oaks.

There’s an old joke in southern Louisiana: If the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries wants to control the population of a particular species, all it needs to do is circulate a few recipes. Famously indiscriminate eaters, the Cajuns residing in these parts have long incorporated into their dishes all manner of wild game, whether it flies (quail, snipe, chukar), runs (squirrel, raccoon, nutria) or swims (gator, bullfrog). It’s a tradition that dates back to 1765, when French-Canadian exiles settled in swampland 65 miles up the Mississippi River from New Orleans. With the help of their Indian neighbors, these settlers and their descendants—called Cajuns—became excellent hunters and even better cooks, serving up country meals that took full advantage of the area’s bounty.

Ingredients bagged and skinned, the two culinary stars spend the afternoon cooking in a simple log-cabin kitchen, fine-tuning dishes for their opening menu. Folse stuffs two fresh quail with oysters, andouille sausage and rice for a clever creation he calls “Death by Gumbo”; Tramonto prepares a saffron-infused white wine sauce that he pours over plump frog legs crusted with yellow flour. Chukar, a cousin to partridge, is braised in a stock made from the bones of deer and boar until the flavorful dark meat becomes melt-in-your-mouth tender. All of the dishes are good country fare made with elegant techniques, honoring Louisiana’s rich culinary heritage while simultaneously pushing it forward.

Alas, the chefs’ hunt for nutria, the semiaquatic rodent that may represent the swamp-floor pantry’s outer boundary of palatability, came up empty. But Folse predicts that the animal’s “magnificent white meat ... similar to domestic rabbit” will show up on special menus at Restaurant Revolution—as will gumbo made with raccoon, whose slightly red meat is an “absolute delicacy” when smoked over pecan wood.

“Knowing how to cook these meats and present them makes all the difference in the world,” Folse says. “If you’re going to eat raccoon, I want you to eat it with me.”

## Buggin’ Out

During the spring harvest, Louisiana residents go crazy for crawfish

**YOU KNOW IT’S SPRINGTIME** in Louisiana when the newspaper-covered picnic tables piled high with fire engine–red crustaceans—heads snapped and tails peeled to reveal a pinkie’s worth of tasty meat—start to appear in public parks. Ninety percent of the U.S. crawfish haul comes from the Bayou State, and the locals are passionate about celebrating the beginning of harvest season. This month, at the Louisiana Crawfish Festival in Chalmette, mudbug lovers can get their fill of the boiled beauties—as well as all kinds of crawfish specialties, from po’boys to quesadillas—

## SHORT AND SWEET

New Orleans falls for Abita Brewery’s fruity seasonal brews—but only for a few months at a time

When beloved Louisiana craft brewer Abita first rolled out its Strawberry Harvest beer, in 2005, it was a one-off—a

yellow-bodied lager made with ripe local strawberries for the annual Ponchatoula Strawberry Festival. But the beer was so popular that the brewery started bottling it commercially the following year. It’s now such a favorite that Louisianans reach near-panic when it approaches the end of its limited run each May, says Abita president David Blossman. Luckily, summer brings



ROBERT S. DONOVAN (BEER)



**ONE FISH, ROUX FISH**  
Sauteed red snapper with  
crawfish bisque at GW Fins



while basking in the glow of the newly crowned Crawfish Queen.

The start of crawfish season also means that fresh crawdaddies will be creeping onto menus throughout the Big Easy. At the elegant French Quarter seafood house GW Fins, chef Tenney Flynn incorporates them in decadent recipes: His version of crawfish pie is a spicy étouffée ladled into the same flaky, homemade shortbread crust that holds his hedonistic bourbon-pecan pie. The crawfish bisque, a labor-intensive soup made with a peanut-colored roux and crawfish stock, is ladled over savory rice pudding and topped with a spectacular piece of grilled gulf redfish. To make the bisque, Flynn toasts flour-dusted crawfish heads in the oven and adds them to the pot. ("The flour expands in the liquid and thickens the soup," he says.) For the final touch, he fills the heads with a riff on the typical bread-based stuffing: a mousseline of lobster, eggs and cream. The result is a delicacy fit for a celebration. —R.O.

another of the brewery's celebrated fruit beers: Satsuma Harvest Wit, a Belgian-style white that gets its subtle citrus flavor from the small, sweet mandarin-type oranges grown in Plaquemines Parish at the state's southernmost point. The satsuma's peel and pulp are used in the mash, which adds a dose of sugar to balance the beer's clove-and-coriander profile. Both brews pair well with Louisiana's shrimp and crawfish dishes, and during the summer months, its sweltering temperatures. —R.O.