

Family Meal: New Orleans

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Donald Link on foggy nights and boozy lunches in NOLA

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Julie Dermansky/Corbis/Getty Images

January 9, 2013, New Orleans LA, Saint Louis Cathedral on a foggy night in the French Quarter. (Photo by Julie Dermansky/Corbis via Getty Images)

(CNN) — Donald Link lives and breathes Louisiana.

It's the cooking he was raised on in his grandfather's kitchen in Lake Charles, a city on the far southwest of the Acadiana region just outside the Texas border.

From an early age, Link was destined for the restaurant world. As a teen, he began working his way up as a dishwasher before making a move to San Francisco to attend the California Culinary Academy. There, he immersed himself in the locally driven, refined techniques of the West Coast that would inevitably inspire his own award-winning Cajun-Southern style.

On the heels of New Orleans chefs such as Emeril Lagasse and Susan Spicer making waves in the early '90s, the time was ripe for a homecoming. In 2000, he opened his flagship French-Southern restaurant, Herbsaint, to critical acclaim and has maintained its 18-year legacy that has garnered prestigious James Beard Foundation Awards in 2007 and 2017.



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With more ideas than could fit into one concept, Link branched into his second restaurant in 2009: a rustic, upscale Cajun-Southern restaurant called Cochon that he opened with chef-partner Stephen Stryjewski.

Another nationally recognized hit, Cochon begot his successful butcher and charcuterie spin-off, Cochon Butcher, followed by a private event facility called Calcasieu; a coastal seafood concept; Pêche Seafood Grill; and most recently, a neighborhood bakery and cafe called La Boulangerie.

Countless awards shot Link to national fame, resulting in two cookbooks and the launch of a homegrown philanthropic organization he started with Stryjewski called the Link Stryjewski Foundation, giving education and job training to impoverished youth in New Orleans.

Link has great ideas for sampling the city's distinctive flavors when you travel here:

Long lunches

Galatoire's and Lilette rank among Link's favorite spots for long, boozy al fresco lunches.

Historic restaurant Galatoire's has remained largely unchanged for more than a century, despite the debauchery along its Bourbon Street address. Here, you can New Orleans culinary standbys such as turtle soup, oysters Rockefeller and shrimp étouffée.

Uptown French bistro Lilette, on the other hand, has less of a storied past than the former, but since opening in 2001, has consistently ranked among the city's best restaurants (with a stellar courtyard to boot).

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Old Fashioneds

If you head to Lilette, make a pit stop at its swanky sister wine and cocktail bar, Bouligny Tavern, located conveniently next door.

The vibe is a lot chillier than what you'd find in the French Quarter, and Link likes to saddle up here with a few Old Fashioneds to listen to great albums with friends.

Audubon Park

Audubon Park is a quiet retreat from the revelry of the Crescent City.

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Stretching from St. Charles Avenue to the Mississippi River, there's plenty packed into 300-acre Audubon Park: running trails, sprawling green spaces, a pool, tennis courts, riding stables, a zoo, aquarium, insectarium and even a rookery dubbed Bird Island that brings in countless birders each year.

"It's near my house and it's great for walks, biking, going to the zoo, playing golf or playing football with the kids," Link says.

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The famed festivals

Mardi Gras is an essential New Orleans experience.



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From the regular procession of second line brass bands to the rowdiness of Bourbon Street, New Orleans is a city that loves to celebrate. And two of the biggest events of the year are Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest.

It's tough to fully explain the phenomenon of Mardi Gras; it just needs to be experienced. Thousands line the streets, usually three to five rows of people deep, while parade after parade rolls through the city morning through night.

These aren't your rinky dink floats either. Think massive, double deckers the size of semi-trucks, stacked with glitzed-out volunteers throwing beads, cups, masks, decorated shoes, purses and even toilet plungers. This is quintessential New Orleans and a must for any Big Easy bucket list.

Jazz Fest, on the other hand, focuses squarely on music. One week, 12 stages, hundreds of legendary and independent musicians. Now approaching its 50th anniversary, New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival has risen to international acclaim, drawing in people from around the world.

Tipitina's

Trombone Shorty performs at Tipitina's in New Orleans.

Rick Diamond/Getty Images

Trombone Shorty performs at Tipitina's in New Orleans.

When you go to Tipitina's, you go to move. Uptown's favorite music venue and dance club has been hosting legendary acts since the late '70s and has no plans of slowing down.

Erected as a devoted venue for legendary performer, composer and pianist Professor Longhair to perform in his final years, Tipitina's continues its tradition by hosting an eclectic mix of musicians ranging from funk and blues to DJs and country artists.

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Perfect nights

Anytime is a great time in New Orleans, but some nights can be downright magical.

"Foggy nights," Link says, "and how the majestic oaks dominate the scenery while the sound of the foghorns from the boats on the Mississippi seep through the air."

Carly Fisher is an award-winning journalist and author whose work has been featured in publications such as GQ, CNN, Fodors Travel, Bon Appetit, Food & Wine, Brides, Saveur, Edible and NBC. She lives and works in Brooklyn, where she is working on her first book through The Countryman Press due 2019.

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