

Ragin' Cajun

Tastes from the bayou rule the roux at Jambalaya.

Dining

BY TED SCHEPFLEB



Brad Grive works the gumbo, one of the many stirring scenes at Park City's Jambalaya.

After years of lamenting the lack of Cajun/Creole cooking in our area—good, bad, or indifferent—I can no longer whine. The fact is, all of a sudden we're in the pink.

I wrote not to long ago in this column about the Crocodile Lounge in downtown Salt Lake City. The food and atmosphere there are terrific, and if you haven't tried the Croc yet, you should. But whouda thunk that the most authentic Cajun/Creole restaurant in the state would pick Park City as its home? Not me.

Jambalaya, located at the bottom of Main Street in Park City at the Marriott Summit Watch, was scheduled to open last fall. Unfortunately, delays kept the doors from opening until around Mardi Gras and they still haven't gotten it quite together yet to open for lunch. At present, Jambalaya serves dinner only, with lunches on tap for late spring.

So what's all the fuss about Cajun/Creole cooking, anyway? Or, as a friend of mine who ones a couple of glitzy Park City restaurants recently put it, "I thought Cajun cooking was a fad that had come and gone."

It's true, there's a style of cooking made popular by jumbo-sized Louisiana chef Paul Prudhomme that has pretty much gone the way of the people who taught us that we could blacken anything and get away with it--Prudhomme's most popular creation, of course, was blackened red snapper. The technique of blackening involves dusting foods with a coating of Cajun spices, then searing them at superheated temperatures in black cast-iron skillets with lots and lots of butter. Folks finally realized that blackening meats, fish, and poultry tended to hide their intrinsic good flavors.

The point is that Cajun/Creole food is about a lot more than blackening. In fact, the big daddy of Cajun cuisine is gumbo. And I judge every Cajun restaurant first by its gumbo. If the gumbo doesn't speak to me, it's doubtful I'll bother with the rest of the menu.

Good gumbo begins with a good roux. And I'll tell you right now that you won't find two cooks in all of Louisiana who can agree on what makes a good roux. But it's not that complicated. A roux is simply a mixture of flour and fat (lard, butter, chicken or duck fat, preferably) whisked together and cooked for the better part of an hour until it caramelized and becomes a rich brown color. Though it adds flavor, a roux is little more than a thickening agent, but it's critical to good gumbo.

At Jambalaya, they didn't overlook the roux. The seafood and andouille sausage gumbo is perfect in its consistency—almost creamy, with a glossy sheen that is the signature of ward winning

gumbo. Like a lot of the dishes at Jambalaya, the gumbo is pretty spicy. I'd recommend ordering a cup-sized portion (\$9.98) just to get the idea.

One of the reasons I wouldn't make an entire meal out of the gumbo is that there is so many other good things to try on the menu. There's deep-fried alligator tail served in a sherry sauce (\$8.95) and spicy jumbo barbecued shrimp (\$21.95). There are Creole-inspired pastas and po'boy sandwiches served with Cajun fries.

The easy way out is to order the Cajun sampler platter, which has a little of a lot of everything. You will not leave the table hungry after digging into the mother of a platter. On a recent evening, the platter included a cup of gumbo, hush puppies, boudin, blacked fish, dirty rice, and andouille sausage. A pretty good smattering of Cajun cuisine, I'd say.

The highlight of the platter was the boudin sausage, which was unlike any I'd ever tasted. When I think of boudin I'm usually thinking of dark, black, blood sausage. But Jambalaya serves a white (boudin blanc) boudin---sausage stuffed with dirty rice---that, while light and airy, is incredibly tasty. For the record, this is the first time I've ever used the phrase "light and airy" in a sentence about sausage.

The andouille was very tasty as well, but I was disappointed in the hush puppies which were blander than George Will.

The highlight of Jambalaya's extensive menu is the crawfish etouff'ee (\$18.95), which was as good as any I've had in New Orleans or elsewhere. Etouff'ee is a thick sauce of tomatoes, peppers and onions poured over white rice, with any number of flavors and ingredients---but crawfish etouff'ee is the standard by which all others are judged. Again, the secret is in the roux. The etouff'ee at Jambalaya is sublime and packs a fiery punch. Warning: It's not for the timid.

And what could be better than eating crawfish etouff'ee and in a setting that's reminiscent of the French Quarter in New Orleans. The designers of Jambalaya went out of their way to bring a little of Bourbon Street to Park City with their wrought iron and wooden shutters that lend a picturesque Old West feeling to the restaurant. I also liked the way the servers are dressed in snappy white uniforms, reminiscent of New Orleans' famed Commander's Palace. And then there's the zydeco music constantly in the air. All things merge to create a festive Mardi Gras atmosphere.

So, there must be downside to this, you're saying. Well, yeah, there is. The catch, and I'll try to put this carefully, is that you may not be able to totally enjoy your Cajun/Creole meal due to the invasiveness of Jambalaya's owner. On a couple of occasions, the servers were unable to explain the specials or take and deliver orders to our table because the owner was holding court at our table, telling stories of adventures sailing in Australia, and generally being---how can I put this---a pain. And by the way, he didn't know me from Elvis, so it wasn't like I was being given especially annoying treatment for being a restaurant critic.

The other inescapable fact about Jambalaya is that it's definitely geared to as a well-heeled Park City clientele. Prices are two to three times what you'd pay at the Crocodile Lounge. But is it worth it? Absolutely! The bottom line is that you won't get better Cajun/Creole cooking in Utah other than that at Jambalaya. So, ignore the help, and as they say in Louisiana. "Laissex le bon temps roulent" (Let the good times roll).

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Jambalaya

Where: 900 Main Street

When: Dinner Daily from 5:30-11:00PM

Prices: Appetizers from \$4.95-\$6.95

Specialties \$9.95-\$24.95

Other: Fun atmospheres: Beer, wine and alcohol available
