

Authentic Louisiana

The good times roll at Angeline's Kitchen in Berkeley.

By John Birdsall

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Beware the Mason jar tumbler. The clunky, wide-mouthed canning jar is the drinking glass of choice in restaurants full up on down-home cliché — you know, those places that try to capture the y'all-set-down-a-spell aura of the Southern table. The food may not receive the same kind of attention when the restaurant's owner feels compelled to hang washboards on the walls. West of Texas and north of Kentucky, Southern food is often little more than mediocre genre cooking, trapped in dining rooms junked up with farmhouse bric-a-brac, Victorian gingerbread, or the glittery trappings of party-store Mardi Gras.

Show up at Angeline's with beer and you'll probably be given Mason jars to drink it from. The New Orleans-style cafe in downtown Berkeley happily avoids the worst excesses of washboard decorating, despite the presence of an alligator formed from pink bottle caps. But one look at the stack of cookbooks draped with Mardi Gras beads and you expect the worst: dishes with big party flavors and precious subtlety. That's why an appetizer like Angeline's grilled boudin sausage is such a delight. Absolutely simple, served with a little pile of arugula and whole-grain Creole mustard, it tiptoed around Cajun caricature. Studded with rice, fragrant with the nutmeg buzz of the French spice blend *quatre épices*, the pork sausage had a papery skin that blistered beautifully on the charbroiler. It was lovely.

Six-month-old Angeline's floats a few degrees above diner casual. The space that once housed the Long Life Noodle Co. still has the outlines of a place designed for grabbing a bite on a semi-nice evening out — part Mel's, part Venus. That's exactly what the owner wanted. Robert Volberg is a native of Tennessee, but he based Angeline's on the low-to-the-ground neighborhood jambalaya joints and muffuletta-making corner markets that he visited in New Orleans six months before Katrina hit. In fact, the name comes from Evangeline, as in the Crescent City parish. That's probably why Angeline's already has a following among Cal students, even with prices edging into splurge. Volberg's restaurant feels real, but not in a French Quarter way. No starchy tourist gumbo, grainy praline, or beignets tasting of dirty fry grease. Angeline's feels small-parish authentic.

And though Brandon Dubea has a name that rings as authentic as Blanche Dubois, he isn't from New Orleans either. The 28-year-old grew up in sweatier, less-glamorous Baton Rouge. He followed a girlfriend to the Bay Area, ditched the culinary program at Laney because he thought it was bogus, and survived a trial by fire on the sauté line at Pasta Pomodoro in Rockridge. That's where he met Volberg, who was busy casing College Avenue storefronts when he noticed Dubea in chef's pants getting out of a car. They talked. But it was only later, after Dubea had sous-chefed at Marica and was months into a gig at Berkeley's Cafe Rouge, that Volberg was ready for him. Chalk one up for serendipity. Volberg had a kitchen, and Dubea had a knack for transferring his Southern taste memories to the plate.

Like the buttermilk fried chicken. As fried chicken it wasn't flawless; two long, boneless breast strips were a lot less satisfying than joints on the bone would have been. Still, the ruffled-looking breading was nice, slightly orange from Creole spices that radiated warmth but didn't distract with any fierce blasts of fire. And the beige puddle of cream gravy was fantastic — nutty-tasting from toasted roux, and bacony from chunks of tasso (Cajun-smoked ham, in this case Aidells). It turned the chicken multidimensional, giving it a toasty shadow that made you want to keep eating after the bird itself got tired.

Restaurants at this price point tend to offer interchangeable heaps of meat-starch-veg, but Dubea aims to make a coherent statement on each plate. With the fried chicken, grilled zucchini chunks gave off a nicely savage breath of char, welcome relief from the suave gravy. But a sprawling pillow of puréed sweet potato was so rich, so puffed up with cream, powdered ginger, and vanilla, that finishing it would've felt like blazing through a pint of Häagen-Dazs. We could only venture in as far as a few bites.

Dubea had more success with pan-seared sole fillet étouffé. The plate's elements played against each other beautifully: buttery cheese grits; sweet, small green beans suffused with the taste of the grill; and a crawfish sauce where cream only magnified the elegant flavors. It worked on a textural level, too. The plate's smooth elements played up the sole's cornmeal-and-flour breading, which was astonishingly even, fine-textured, and brittle — evidence that Dubea knows his way around a sauté pan. Only the sole, whose flesh had that dishwater whiff that troubles some bottom fish, worked to sully the magic. A cleaner-tasting specimen, sand dabs or halibut, could have made this dish really take off.

Angeline's gumbo has an authentically homely profile: thin, swampy-black from a roux cooked so long it developed agreeably bitter tannins, and a weedy undercurrent of filé. The delicious jambalaya worked on the level of moist, sticky pilaf. A heap of round-grain

rice had absorbed a mass of sauce piquante, a spicy, acrid-tasting tomato purée as dark as dried blood. It made the hunks of tasso and pieces of andouille (Cajun-smoked sausage) seem meatier, and the fat, moist shrimp taste even more luscious. Beer is essential with both. For now you have to bring your own, although a license is pending.

The hush puppies resemble deep-fried balls of tightly wadded cornbread, with a feltlike texture that made us lose interest after the first two or three. Oysters bordelaise were quirky. Half a dozen hulking, perfectly fried bivalves came with leaves of butter lettuce for rolling up, like Vietnamese spring rolls. And the ramekin of New Orleans-style bordelaise (melted butter perfumed with garlic and Parmesan) had an air of the Crescent City's offbeat culinary sensibilities, not to mention its love of the fulsomely rich. It just needed a few drops of Tabasco to come alive.

The more times you eat here, the more comfortable you feel putting yourself in Dubea's hands. At the end of our second meal we trusted the chef enough to order Bananas Foster bread pudding, something we might ordinarily avoid, fearing it'd be uncomfortably rich and sweet. Turned out it was a square of cakey, banana-studded pudding that looked as prim as gingerbread. Its rum-tinged caramel sauce managed to be luxurious without stifling the warm, sweet-sulfur taste of the fruit.

That's the thing about this place. Where you expect Mason-jar caricature, the chef is capable of surprising you with dishes of real character, something that makes Angeline's feel unexpectedly like a good time. And it's got nothing to do with Mardi Gras beads.

Chris Duffey



Good chicken, great breading, fantastic gravy.
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AngelinesKitchen.com
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