

Curbside Comfort

HOW OUR RESTAURANTS
DELIVERED FAMILIARITY,
AND HOW WE CAN ASSIST THEM



By Tom Piazza

Curbside pickup.

It will be remembered, along with “social distancing,” as one of the ubiquitous phrases of 2020. Curbside pickup became *de rigueur* for supermarkets, bookstores, lumber yards, even veterinarians. And, of course, for restaurants.

It would be hard to overstate how central restaurants are to the social, and spiritual, life of New Orleans. Dining out is so central, and omnipresent, that it can be easy to take it for granted. Or it used to be. As 2020 clawed its way along, and the COVID-19 pandemic made enforced social distancing rules necessary, restaurants were among the hardest-hit businesses.

But New Orleanians are nothing if not improvisational, and many restaurants quickly developed ways of offering their food for takeout, via curbside pickup. In the midst of so much loss and worry, it was a kind of transcendence to be able to savor fried chicken from Dooky Chase’s, or seared tuna from Brigtsen’s, or a shrimp po-boy from Mandina’s. It kept our spirits and our taste buds alive at home, along with the hope that we might be able to enjoy these dishes again, next year — together, across a table, among friends.

As 2020 dragged on, though, and federal aid dwindled, it became clear that an alarming number of the restaurants we love might not survive the economic impact of the pandemic. They, and their hardworking kitchen and serving staffs, need



Photo by Mary Howell

help to get them through. So here is a modest proposal: Maybe a few well-heeled foodies will cook up an Adopt-A-Restaurant plan. A reasonable tithe each month from some folks with vision, soul, and resources could go a long way toward helping restaurants survive this dangerous time. New Orleans food culture is as fundamental to the city as its architecture and its music. And one thing 2020 has taught us, if nothing else, is to take nothing for granted.

Tom Piazza is celebrated both as a novelist and as a writer on American music. His twelve books include the novels A Free State and City of Refuge, the post-Katrina manifesto Why New Orleans Matters, and the essay collection Devil Sent the Rain: Music and Writing in Desperate America. He was a principal writer for the innovative New Orleans-based HBO drama series Treme. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Atlantic, Bookforum, Oxford American, and many other periodicals. In 2015 he received the Louisiana Writer Award from the Louisiana Center for the Book and the State Library of Louisiana, awarded annually to a writer “whose published body of work represents a distinguished and enduring contribution to the literary and intellectual heritage of Louisiana.” He lives in New Orleans.



Golden Cauliflower

Improvisation is the heart of New Orleans music, dance, and life in general. Adjusting plans to accommodate the unforeseen is a necessary life skill here, even without a pandemic to enforce limitations. A little rummaging in the refrigerator and on the spice shelf can spark some inspiration. Here is a very simple (originally improvised) side dish that is a perfect accompaniment to fish or chicken.



Photo by Kenny Morrison

INGREDIENTS

1 medium-size head
of cauliflower
Extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons turmeric
2 tablespoons cumin
1 tablespoon coarse-ground
black pepper
Kosher salt to taste

HOW TO PREPARE

Cut up a head of cauliflower, getting rid of the thickest part of the stem and the leaves at the base. Make each floret about the size of a golf ball or a little

smaller. Arrange them in a steamer and steam as long as it takes for them to accept a fork with only token resistance. Strain the cauliflower and pat the florets dry with a paper towel.

Generously cover the bottom of a large skillet with the best olive oil you've got. Drizzle turmeric and cumin as evenly as possible into the olive oil. Add coarse-ground black pepper and Kosher salt (I use a half tablespoon, but you can use more if you prefer a saltier flavor profile).

Heat the seasoned oil over high heat until the oil thins out and the black pepper starts to sizzle. Add the florets to the skillet, stirring them around every 15 seconds or so and flipping them so that they are well covered in the seasoned oil. Once they are golden yellow, turn the heat down to medium high and let the florets sit in place long enough to get crispy on the outside, turning them occasionally.

When they are looking good enough to eat... serve and eat!