

# My Life & The Legacy of Upperline

by JoAnn Clevenger

In the summer of 1982, I was searching for a retail shop to rent near Tulane and Loyola universities to expand my Decatur Street vintage clothing store when I spied a "FOR LEASE" sign on the old Martin's Restaurant building that was now a shuttered Kershenstine's Barbecue. I called the next day to ask about rent and was stunned to discover that the owners had decided to sell just that morning, for \$106,000. My immediate thought was, "We can do that! We can open a restaurant!" After walking into this modest space, I saw beyond the pseudo-Western motif and envisioned a place of warmth, art, and fine dining, and people connecting with each other. Driven by this vision, I persuaded my son, 23-year-old Jason Clevenger, to leave his position as head chef at Café Sbisà and my husband, Alan Greenacre, to take a second mortgage on our home, keep his job at an engineering consulting firm, and help transform this space into an upscale bistro at 1413 Upperline St.

By January 1983, Upperline had opened its doors with Jason as its first head chef. A few years later we expanded into the adjacent building, thereby increasing our seating capacity from 45 to 85 chairs. I was thrilled how quickly it became a fixture in the New Orleans dining scene.

When people come to a restaurant, they are having a communal meal, literally breaking bread with strangers. In our society, restaurants are also one of the few refuges where all guests can feel like royalty. For me, the essence of Upperline was about creating a place where our guests could feel seen, valued, and treated well. Upperline attracted a wonderfully diverse clientele, from regulars who had their favorite tables and celebrated every occasion at the restaurant to couples on a first date to visiting newcomers from all over the city and world.

I was born in Alexandria, Louisiana, the oldest of four siblings. My family moved nine times due to my father's job. At age seventeen I moved to New Orleans to take care of my mother, a patient in the small Contagion Building behind Big Charity, while finishing high school at Warren Easton as a National Merit Semi-Finalist. Following my graduation and my mother's death, I took my first job, as a medical librarian at Mercy Hospital and moved to the French Quarter. This was in the late 1950s, and I thrived in the bohemian atmosphere of the French Quarter. I soon settled in this neighborhood, making friends, marrying, and raising a family. I also continued working, first as a waitress, then a bookkeeper and restaurant manager. I became a flower vendor who won a lawsuit brought by the Louisiana Department of Agricultural and Forestry's Horticultural Commission. Not only did the judge rule in my favor and let my flower carts continue to roll, but I was also able to work on legislation with a kindly city hall official that I successfully lobbied

through state government. The result in Louisiana was a new category that permitted "Cut Flower Dealers" in places like grocery stores to sell flowers without a licensed florist on duty. My husband at that time, Max Clevenger, built the pretty wooden carts while Jason, then 15 years old, helped run our snowball stand/art gallery in the French Market. In the early 1970s I opened a bar, The Abbey, on Decatur Street which for a few years was the only place in New Orleans where people could buy the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* on that Sunday. We even moved the flower cart headquarters to the patio behind the bar. Then I opened a vintage clothing store, Mathilda's, and a Mardi Gras costume and mask emporium in the 1200 block of Decatur Street where local mask artists sold their wares. This vintage store provided the opportunity for me to design the costumes for *One Mo' Time* for the performances in New Orleans, New York, London, and Australia, as well as other stage productions. My daughter, Morgan Clevenger, was intricately involved with all these productions as well.

When I moved out of the French Quarter and established Upperline, it felt like a culmination of my life's work, connecting with thousands of people from different walks of life, all leading to a big, beautiful finale, Upperline Restaurant.

Upperline would become a James Beard Foundation Award national finalist numerous times. In 2015, I received the Craig Claiborne Lifetime Achievement Award from Southern Foodways Alliance. But the most important accolade came when my grandfather visited the restaurant for the first time at the age of 93. A carpenter and farmer, he was a man of few words, but he told my brother at the end of the evening: "That girl has gumption!"

That is the praise and aspiration I carry with me. I repeat it daily: "Brave. Strong. Patient. Kind. Silly! Generosity. Persistence. Courage. Gumption!"

All these qualities I have brought to my work and to my life. When the pandemic forced Upperline's closure in 2020, I helped my team find new jobs and listed reopened restaurants on our outdoor menu board so patrons could continue to enjoy local dining. Eventually, I made the difficult decision to close Upperline for good. The paintings came off the walls, the dishes were washed one last time, and the lights were turned off. However, I'd like to think that the restaurant's spirit and a legacy of heartfelt hospitality endure.



Me with Susan Kinnaman, my original flower cart partner, at one of the carts.

## Ice Cream Sundae with Honey-Poached Garlic Sauce

35 minutes

Yields approximately 1 ½ cups

I am such a fan of garlic that Upperline's Garlic Fest menu in the summer would highlight different dishes using the fragrant cloves. One of the most surprising and popular items was a sundae made with vanilla ice cream and a honey-poached garlic sauce.

It was brave to come up with a garlic recipe for ice cream, but the resulting taste was hot and sweet, kind of like Red Hot candies.



Photo courtesy JoAnn Clevenger

Circa 1963: Photograph taken by Don Snell, an artist and best friend to my then husband, Max Clevenger. His wife, Jan Hinton, was my best friend; we both worked as waitresses together.

1 cup garlic cloves, peeled

1 cup honey

1 cup water

1 cinnamon stick, approximately 2-4" long

1 orange peel as a long spiral

1 lemon peel as a long spiral

Premium vanilla ice cream

(JoAnn used Häagen-Dazs Vanilla Ice Cream)

Pecans, chopped, to taste (optional)

Peel orange and lemon, and set peels aside.

Combine garlic cloves, honey, water, cinnamon stick, and citrus peels in a 1 ½- or 2-quart heavy bottomed sauce pan.

Simmer gently and stir occasionally until the water evaporates, the liquid has thickened into a heavy syrup, and the cloves are caramelized, about 20-30 minutes. Small amounts of water and extra minutes may have to be added for cloves to reach the caramelization stage.

Discard citrus peels and cinnamon stick.

Sliver peels for garnish, if desired.

Reserve the garlic cloves in a separate bowl.

Keep sauce warm, not hot. Dilute with 1 tsp of hot water if too thick to spoon out.

### To Serve

Place one big scoop of ice cream in a dessert dish. Drizzle 2 Tbl of sauce over ice cream, sprinkle with 1 Tbl of chopped pecans if using, and place 2 to 4 poached garlic cloves on top. Garnish with slivered citrus peels, if using.

### Notes

It is important to use a whole cinnamon stick; do not use cinnamon powder. If preferable, 2 star anise can be used instead of the cinnamon stick.

