

Lagniappe

“A Little Something Extra” in Michigan’s UP



by Judy Kneiszel

Marquette, the most populous city in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, is a major port on Lake Superior for shipping iron ore. It averages about 140 inches of snow per year, and it’s a great place to go for authentic Louisiana cooking.

If that last one surprises you, you are not alone.

“People come in skeptical, but our goal is that everything here is a ‘wow’ from food to service,” says chef/owner Don Durley about Lagniappe (pronounced *lan-yap*), his Cajun/Creole eatery approximately 1,360 miles north of New Orleans. “We’re very proud to say we have regulars from across the country and other nations and, in particular, have never failed to wow a visitor from Louisiana or the south.”

UP Meets NOLA, via Canada

Durley is not from Louisiana as one might assume. He’s a Canadian transplant to Michigan.

“My mother and father came from Nova Scotia, and I grew up in Ontario,” he says. “But I have immediate Acadian ancestry, which is where the Cajuns come from.”

In his early years, Durley wasn’t really in touch with his Acadian roots. With 10 years in Canadian kitchens, he got married and moved to the U.S. in 1983 where he continued as an “old school, self-taught” chef. He perfected his skills over the next 12 years in the kitchen of a Marquette supper club and 10 more years operating kitchens in two hotels with banquet service and restaurants.

His interest in the food and culture of Louisiana began taking shape in 1989.

"I went to the ACF (American Culinary Federation) conference in New Orleans and it blew my mind ... the food, the partying, the chefs doing demonstrations," Durley says.

At the conference he met noted Louisiana chef and restaurant owner, John Folse, a leading authority on Cajun and Creole cuisine and culture. John was an inspiration for the next 20 years before "we discovered we might be cousins," Durley says. "He has ancestors from the same town of Tradie in Nova Scotia."

After that monumental trip to Louisiana, Durley and his wife Terry became frequent visitors.

"We kept going every year; then twice a year and now we go four or five times a year," he says. "We call it 'research and development.' It's just a lifestyle and culture I enjoy, and it excites me every time I go there. Our experience of the culture associated with the cuisine of Louisiana stirred the passions of my Acadian heritage."

Creating a Job From a Passion

Despite falling in love with Louisiana, Durley did not want to uproot his family and move there.

"So I taught myself the skills for Southern cuisine right here," he says. "I created supper club specials and had Fat Tuesday buffets at the hotels and Mardi Gras Nights for conferences and events. The cuisine became as natural to me as if I were born and raised in the south."

Then he took his passion one step further, creating a little corner of New Orleans in Marquette, opening Lagniappe in April 2006. Six months later, the in-house VooDoo Bar was added.

The name, Lagniappe, is a word used primarily in southern Louisiana and southeast Texas, which refers to a little something extra given to a customer as a bonus or gift. What Durley gave himself by opening Lagniappe, was a job.



"After 30 years as a chef I had grown beyond the area," he says. "But we owned a house here and had kids. It was our home and we didn't want to move anywhere else."

The Durleys lease space in a five-story building in downtown Marquette next to an old movie theater. The front door is actually in the alley, giving it a sort of gritty French Quarter feel. Above the restaurant, Durley has added a charcuterie kitchen and The Gris Gris Specialty Shop, which offers Lagniappe's in-house specialty meats, packaged foods, and other specialty items, including hand-made voodoo dolls, Louisiana music, and Louisiana-themed gift items.

Lagniappe has 21 tables with seating for up to 150 guests plus an additional 14 seats at the bar.

Durley says when he leased the building, he stripped what is now the kitchen down to the walls and started over.

"The building owner paid for the hoods and the heating and I had to pay for the line and all other renovations," he says. "The line is a simple 20-foot row where one side is hot and one side is cold."

Natural Gas Crucial to Almost Every Item

The menu at Lagniappe has grown to include 100 items, and a contributing factor to the quality of almost every one of them is natural gas.

"There are 15 appetizers on the menu and every one



of them involves natural gas because they are either deep fried or sautéed,” Durley says. “Fryers are used extensively throughout the menu and all of our fryers are natural gas. Actually, there are only two salads on the menu that wouldn’t be in contact with gas. Everything else on the menu is cooked with natural gas.”

Durley says a corn flour base is used for the fry breading mix so there is no gluten in the fry oil making all deep fried items safe for people on gluten free diets to eat.

Peanut oil is used for cooking in all three natural gas fryers in the Lagniappe kitchen. One fryer is designated for meat, one for seafood, and one for French fries, fry chips and beignets (French doughnuts made famous by the Café Du Monde in New Orleans).

Good and Hot and Blackened

One of the most popular entrees at Lagniappe is the Shrimp and Tasso Bowtie. This dish starts with Gulf shrimp sautéed over a natural gas flame with spinach, artichokes, mushrooms, and bits of spiced cured Cajun ham known as Tasso, that’s tossed with a creamy sauce and simmered, served with bowtie pasta for \$14.95.

For those looking for a somewhat lighter meal, the Lagniappe Salad fits the bill. This salad of mixed greens is tossed with dried cherries, toasted pecans and gorgonzola crumbles then topped with cast iron blackened chicken and drizzled with hot bacon dressing for \$9.75

The Lagniappe kitchen reserves one 4-burner gas stove strictly for blackening. They keep cast iron skillets inside the oven heated to 325 degrees so that when they put a pan on the burner it’s “already good and hot.”

This is how all the items listed under “The Blackened Stove” heading on the menu are prepared to order.

“The hot iron skillets give items a nice char crust,” Durley says. Blackened Stove choices include farm raised catfish or boneless chicken breast for \$14.25, a half pound Delmonico steak for \$14.95 or a one pound Delmonico steak for \$21.95. The Blackened Stove items are the only choices on the menu that include a side dish. For all other items, sides can be ordered à la carte.

“It’s our way of controlling costs,” he explains. “It enabled us to lower our pricing and give a good value. You get what you pay for here.”

An average ticket per person at Lagniappe is \$23 at



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– Don Durley, Cajun Chef and Owner

dinner; slightly less at lunch.

“The only difference is the cost of alcohol,” Durley says of the ticket difference between lunch and dinner. “We use the same menu all day now, because when we had separate menus, people were always asking for things off the dinner menu at lunch.”

Disasters Impact Sourcing

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Cajun and Creole Terms

courtesy of the Lagniappe Menu

Andouille (ahn-do-wee): A spicy sausage cut up and used in gumbo, red beans and other Cajun dishes.

Boudin (boo-dan): Spicy pork mixed with vegetables, herbs and rice stuffed into sausage casings and poached.

Cajun Cuisine: The cooking of the Cajun people, the transplanted Acadians expelled from Nova Scotia in the 1750's who settled in Louisiana. Coming out of hard times, Cajun cooking traditionally involved one large pot and often stretched limited offerings to feed many.

Crawfish (yummy boiled): Tasty freshwater crustaceans known as crawdads. Cooked in crawfish boils throughout Louisiana and often in dishes such as gumbo or Etouffee. Crawfish season runs late November thru late spring. Many crawfish farms are secondary crops to rice fields.

Creole Cuisine: New Orleans Creole cuisine is derived from French, Spanish and African cooking techniques, aided by some Native American ingredients. Dishes make use of regionally available produce, meats and seafood. Generally it is city cuisine, commonly employing sauces and more involved preparations.

Dirty Rice: Pan fried rice sautéed with peppers, onions, celery stock, seasonings and poultry parts.

Etouffee (eh-too-fay): A succulent spicy dish of crawfish tail meat smothered with a simmered heavy roux based sauce of minced vegetables caramelized with Cajun seasonings and spices then served over rice.

Fais Do Do (fay-doe-doe): A traditional south Louisiana dance party with Cajun and Zydeco music. The entire community comes to eat, dance and socialize.

File (fee-lay): Ground sassafras leaves with herbs used to thicken and flavor Gumbo.

Lagniappe (lan-yap): A little something extra or a little more than expected.

Praline (praw-leen): a delicious candy cookie made with pecans, sugar and cream.

Red Eye Gravy: Gravy made from rich stock, seasonings and coffee.

Remoulade: Cajun cocktail sauce with a Creole mustard and horseradish base. Most commonly served with shrimp remoulade.

Roux (rue): The thickening base of gumbo or stews, made of a flour and oil mixture slow cooked to various stages of color.

Tasso (tah-so): A highly seasoned cured smoked ham that is used in seasoning foods like beans, gumbo, vegetables and many other Cajun dishes.

"We don't want to sacrifice authenticity by purchasing premade products," he says. "Our reputation for quality is everything."

Also to ensure authenticity, the Lagniappe menu features items containing Gulf shrimp and Louisiana crawfish, oysters, catfish and alligator...all products sourced from areas affected by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and then the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Durley says things are finally starting to

get back to normal as far as supplies of Gulf products are concerned.

"The oil spill had a horrendous impact," he says. "I only use domestic shrimp and there were times when I couldn't get enough shrimp to offer our Shrimp Boil. With Katrina it affected the catfish a lot."

But the Durleys didn't pout about how these disasters were affecting their restaurant, they rolled up their sleeves and pitched in.

“We went down twice after Katrina to help friends,” he says. “We were amazed at the resiliency of the people there.”

Durley says oysters are starting to “flow again” and the shrimp are back as well.

“With alligator, we had to find different sources and pay more for it for awhile,” he says. “That’s basically what we had to do with everything, just get stuff from a lot of different suppliers and pay more.”

Spicy Misconception

Although he delights in serving Crawfish Etouffee, Atchafalaya Jambalaya, and Shrimp Creole, Durley says he sometimes wishes he had not called his restaurant a Cajun Creole eatery.

“The word Cajun scares small town Yankees,” he says. “They think it’s going to be too spicy. I should have called it a Southern eatery because our current menu covers the Carolinas to Texas and back up to Memphis with a big layover in Louisiana.”

So Durley is trying to get the message out that there is something at Lagniappe for everyone.

“The myth that all Cajun food is spicy, is just that, a myth,” he says. “At Lagniappe, we cook with spice for flavor, not for heat. We do feature authentic Louisiana culinary classics, but that’s just a part of our current 100-



item menu. One of my latest radio spots broke down the menu by numbers saying we have 70 items on the menu that are not spicy.”

Durley says his staff knows the menu well and is happy to help guests find something as spicy or mild as they want whether they are coming to Lagniappe from across town or across the country.

“At least half of the people who live in this area haven’t been in our restaurant,” he says. “But we see visitors from across the country. Marquette is a beautiful area that gets a lot of accolades. We have a large hospital here, Northern Michigan University, and mining companies. They bring people here from all over the world and we easily become someone’s favorite place to go when they are in town. From food to service we really want to blow people away because our number one product is the memory of the experience.”

Small Business, Big Expectations

To become someone’s favorite place, a restaurant has to get customers through the doors the first time, so Lagniappe’s marketing tends to be tourism related, advertising in local travel magazines and in hotel ‘welcome’ materials.

Lagniappe: Natural Gas Equipment

- › Vulcan 6-burner range with 24" griddle, salamander & dual oven
- › Vulcan 4-burner range / oven
- › Star Ultramax 24" char broiler
- › Cleveland pressureless dual chamber convection steamer
- › Southbend dual stacked convection ovens
- › 1 Frymaster deep fryer
- › 2 Vulcan deep fryers
- › Ruud Universal, 250 gal. gas hot water heater
- › Duo Aire heated make up air unit



Durley says marketing is “a guessing game,” however, and margins are tight for a restaurant in Marquette.

“We make 5 or 10 cents on the dollar if we’re doing everything right,” he says. “In this market, it’s easy to survive but hard to thrive. There are 136 restaurants here and for a city of 20,000, that’s about 75 too many.”

Durley says he’s “no Emeril Lagasse,” the Cajun chef who, in addition to his multiple restaurants, has income from books, TV, and personal appearances.

“This is a small business,” Durley says. “I do QuickBooks every morning and change the light bulbs. I am the general manager and the chef. Everything ... my house ... everything is riding on this. We’re just recycling the funds we have coming in to keep and maintain the quality of our product which enables us to continue having income.”


Extra Special Service and Staff

In order to maintain that “wow” factor and keep customers coming back, Durley is “very picky about service.”

“The only things on the table at the end of the meal should be the beverages and the check,” he says. “I don’t want anyone staring at dirty plates.”

Durley is picky about who he hires too, preferring people who share his passion for quality.

“The turnover in my crew is extremely low,” he says. “Especially in the kitchen, because if someone gives me two years here, they know they can work in anybody’s kitchen. We make everything from scratch, so people can really hone their craftsmanship here.”

And that craftsmanship is Lagniappe, or “something extra,” that comes through in every meal at the Cajun Creole Eatery of the UP. 



Lagniappe At a Glance

145 Jackson Cut Alley and
145 Washington St.
Marquette, MI, 49855

Phone: (906) 226-8200
www.marquettcajun.com

Owner: Don Durley

Hours of Operation:

Tuesday - Thursday: 11 a.m.- 9 p.m.

Friday - Saturday: Open 11 a.m.

Kitchen: until 10 p.m.

Voodoo Bar: until 12 p.m.

Seating Capacity: 150

Concept: Southern Cajun Creole
Eatery

Cuisine: More than 100 menu items
featuring flavors of the South from the

Carolinas to Texas and back up to
Memphis, with a big layover in Louisiana!

Average Check Per Person: \$23 at dinner

Menu Sampling:

- › Alligator Bites
- › Deep Fried Pickles
- › Gumbo Ya Ya
- › Shrimp and Tasso Bowtie
- › Chicken Orleans
- › Cajun Crawfish Cavatappi
- › Po Boys
- › Blackened Stove Catfish
- › Shrimp Creole
- › Red Beans and Rice with Sausage
- › Hot Beignets
- › Warm Bread Pudding