



Crossing the **17th Street Canal** Exploring Metairie

by Kim Ranjbar



Metairie prides itself on the family-friendly atmosphere that pervades the annual Family Gras event pictured above. Unless otherwise noted, photos courtesy the Jefferson Parish Convention and Visitors Bureau.

With

pour out onto higher-traffic, multi-lane strips lined with everything anyone would need from grocery stores and gas stations to restaurants, malls, and car dealerships. Metairie is a shining example of what it means to be a suburbanite, except when it's not. ...

seemingly emingly endless rows of well-manicured lawns, cul-de-sacs brimming with playing kids, tidy homes, and neat gardens ... Metairie is a lot like suburbs all over the country. Strip malls hug the edges of orderly communities, and schools are wrapped securely within residential zones. Small neighborhoods

A suburb of New Orleans separated by the 17th Street Canal, Metairie is the largest community in Jefferson Parish, with a population of nearly 160,000, and the fifth largest CDP (census-designated place) in the country. In the early 18th century, French settlers were the first Europeans to colonize the area now known as Metairie Ridge, a natural levee formed by an old branch of the Mississippi River and a travel route used by the Acolapissa Native Americans. The French-settled ridge was largely farmland, and at the time, it was common for landowners to lease property to farmers in exchange for half of their crops. The name “Metairie” is derived from the French word “moitie” or half, and “moitoin” was a term used during that era to describe sharecropping.

In the 1910s, an electric streetcar was installed just along the winding Metairie Ridge and in the 1920s, the way was paved to become Metairie Road, often touted as the

oldest road in the Greater New Orleans area. Commercial buildings and high-end residences rose up around the road and its meandering path (very) loosely delineates what is now referred to as “Old Metairie,” a term that has become something of a sticking point between the residents of both “old” and “new” areas of town.

The land to the north and west were largely marshland and swamps until after World War II, when it was drained from Metairie Ridge to the edge of Lake Pontchartrain using a Wood Screw Pump, a device designed by local inventor and engineer A. Baldwin Wood to deal specifically with New Orleans’ unique drainage problems. The newly available land was opened for residential development, and Metairie’s population soared as families could acquire more land for less and be exempt from city taxes.



The Neighborhoods

“Old Metairie”

Though the boundaries of Old Metairie (“Metry” locally, or “the Metries”) are as hazy as mornings on the levee, there is a certain level of pride and a healthy dose of the good ol’ days that oozes from the shopfronts, floats through the oak-lined streets, and thrives within its residents. Long-standing businesses like the blast-from-the-past barber shop Algie Haley’s, a landmark that has endured in “Hog Alley” since 1953 (when there were actual hog farms across the road), carries just as much Old Metry street cred as the seasonal favorite Sal’s Sno-Balls, a stand that’s been serving summertime treats from sno-balls to sundaes since 1960. Gennaro’s Bar at the far western end of Metairie Road is easily the oldest in Metairie, established in 1937 and currently serving Bear’s

Poboy, home of a roast beef poor boy that carries a history long enough to merit its own article.

Bonnabel Place

Just north of Old Metairie, on the other side of I-10, lies a large subdivision known as Bonnabel Place. According to the Bonnabel Civic Association, the history of the neighborhood begins in 1836, when wealthy Parisian chemist Henri Bonnabel purchased the land with the intent of creating a town dubbed Bath (after the same town in England), but he died before his plans could come to fruition. More than half a century later, in 1914, Alfred Bonnabel, one of Henri’s nine children, began subdividing the tract into Bonnabel Place and Old Homestead. Alfred E. Bonnabel Jr. grew up to be a surveyor who was



Opposite page: Metairie Road in Old Metairie; the Bucktown marina
Above: Chef Andrea Apuzzo of Andrea's in Metairie; a family enjoying the beauty of Lafreniere Park
Following page: concert venue at Lafreniere Park

commissioned by the state to be the surveyor of Jefferson Parish, and it was his wife, a lover of myth and folklore, who named many of the streets from Hesper and Helios avenues to Demosthenes Street. Most of the homes in Bonnalabel are pre-WWII bungalows designed in the Arts and Crafts style.

Bucktown

Bound by Bonnalabel Boulevard in the west, West Esplanade Avenue to the south, Orpheum Avenue to the east, and Lake Pontchartrain to the north — Bucktown started life as a string of fishing and hunting camps almost a century ago. Living in small wooden huts on stilts, the squatters who made this area their home lived off hunting, fishing, and crabbing, as well as renting boats and selling tackle and bait to sightseers and vacationers who traveled there. By the early 1900s, Bucktown had grown rapidly; the small huts were replaced by long wooden camps with wide galleries and included a schoolhouse, jail, saloons, dance halls, and gambling houses.

Visitors and nearby residents were drawn to Bucktown's restaurants, which offered the bounty of seafood, plus wildfowl and game from Lake Pontchartrain and the surrounding marshes, but food certainly wasn't the only draw. During Prohibition, Bucktown became the place to be, with its speakeasys, brothels, and gambling houses. This rowdy, good-time atmosphere offered a stage for jazz musicians including Johnny Wiggins and Jelly Roll Morton.

Places to Eat

Fury's Restaurant

In business for more than 30 years, Fury's is a definite casual go-to for families in the Bonnalabel neighborhood and beyond. Though the menu features a familiar Metairie mix of Creole Italian cuisine and fried seafood platters, Fury's is most famous for its fried chicken.

Andrea's

Located just off North Causeway Boulevard, Andrea's has been a fine dining destination serving authentic Northern Italian cuisine and fresh, local seafood since 1985. A native of Capri, Italy, Chef Andrea Apuzzo spent his formative years working in kitchens all over the world, from Germany and England to Bermuda and Atlanta, Georgia. It was his life-long dream to open his own restaurant, and it is obvious to anyone who dines there that Andrea has put his heart and soul into his eponymous Metairie eatery.

Schaefer & Rusich Seafood

Though it's not technically a restaurant, you can certainly order boiled crawfish, crab, or shrimp to eat while gazing out onto Lake Pontchartrain. Likely one of the original seafood markets (along with Deanie's Seafood), Schaefer's has been in business for over 40 years and offers fresh seafood by the pound (a hot spot during crawfish season) and prepared foods like baked macaroni, turtle soup, oyster dressing and crab salad.

R&O Restaurant

At its inception, R&O was a tiny pizzeria inside a Bucktown grocery store, but it has grown quite a bit since 1980. It is now a large, casual restaurant on the corner of Old Hammond Highway and Carrollton Avenue, a neighborhood staple whose claim to fame has drastically altered from pizza (which it no longer serves) to a roast beef poor boy. In fact, in 2012, local food critic Brett Anderson of The Times-Picayune went on a quest for the best, and R&O ranked #1.

Radosta's Restaurant

A casual Creole Italian restaurant serving up plate lunches and poor boys since 1975, Radosta's is another one of those classically Metairie establishments known for a killer roast beef poor boy. It also has everything from fried chicken salad and gumbo to seafood platters and a veal Parmesan poor boy with red gravy (marinara sauce) and melted provolone.

Morning Call Coffee Stand

When folks think of cafe au lait and hot, fresh beignets, many think about the eternally famous Cafe du Monde in New Orleans. But most Metairie denizens tout Morning Call as the best, and there's plenty of reasons why. Originally opened at the lower end of the New Orleans French Market in 1870 by Joseph Jursich, Morning Call remained in business there for over a century before succumbing to the competition. Higher rents and redevelopment along the riverfront caused owners to close the original location and move operations to Fat City in Metairie. Morning Call has been there ever since (and in 2012 opened a second location in New Orleans City Park), serving chicory coffee and beignets 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week.

Drago's Seafood Restaurant

Unless you've been living under a rock for the past 20 years, you surely would've heard of the delicious charbroiled oyster originally created by Drago's Seafood Restaurant in Metairie. Since 1969, diners have been drooling for this mollusk masterpiece and the recipe has been copied time and time again by other eateries all over the country. If you finally want to slurp the original, Drago's offers what it refers to as "the single best bite of food in New Orleans." Who are we to argue?

Unique Attractions

Lafreniere Park

Opened in 1982, Lafreniere Park is not only the largest park in Metairie, but it's also a testament to the citizens of Jefferson Parish who wanted a large green space for their community and were more than willing to pay for it. Spread over 155 acres, the park offers a bunch of amenities from a 2-mile jogging trail, eight picnic shelters and a 20-acre lagoon to a carousel, several sports fields, an 18-hole disc golf course, and the Foundation Center — a hall available for parties, showers, family reunions and more. Along with humans of all ages, Lafreniere Park attracts a surprising variety of wildlife from turtles and rabbits to beautiful waterfowl like the white ibis, black swan and great egret. The park also plays host to numerous events throughout the year — from Christmas in the Park with its fanciful lighted sculptures and the Lafreniere Park-A-Boo Halloween Festival to live concerts, fishing tournaments, and band camps.





David Gallant for LK&C

How to Charbroil Oysters at Home

If you don't have access to oyster shells, make friends with a local seafood restaurant and ask them to save a few dozen for you. You can use them over and over again; throw them in the dishwasher after each use. If you can't get access to oyster shells at all, fashion little oyster shell-shaped boats out of heavy-duty tinfoil. Some people suggest using muffin tins, but they protect the oysters from the flames generated when butter drips from the shells onto the fire. You still get a smoky taste, but miss out on the charred goodness that results from fire hitting the cheese and butter.

Drago's has never released their official recipe, and Klara and Drago's son, Tommy Cvitanovich, swears there's a simple, common ingredient that no one has ever guessed.

The recipe here is not exactly what you're going to get in either of the restaurants, but it's delicious. Make sure to serve with lots of crusty bread for sopping up the remnants of sauce.

Drago's-Style Charbroiled Oysters

- 2 sticks butter, softened
- 2 to 6 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon Italian seasoning mix
- 2 dozen oysters on the half shell
- ½ cup grated Romano cheese
- 2 tablespoons chopped parsley
- hot crusty French bread

Combine butter, garlic, pepper, and Italian seasoning; mix well and set aside.

Preheat a gas or charcoal grill to high. Position oysters, shell down, over hottest portion of grill. Spoon one heaping teaspoon seasoned butter on top each oyster, using enough to ensure some overflows the shell and causes the fire to flare a bit.

Grill oysters, 2 to 5 minutes, or until liquid is sizzling and oysters puff and edges curl.

Top with one teaspoon grated cheese and a small pinch of parsley; serve immediately with hot bread for sopping up the juices.

Serves 2 as a main course.



Daryl Schmidt Photography

Left: Andy Le Boeuf reigned as King Centurion XXXVIII for the Krewe of Centurions in 2017.

Below: The Lake Pontchartrain causeway in Jefferson Parish is the longest continuous bridge over water in the world. Neighboring Tangipahoa Parish is home to the Manchac Swamp bridge, the 5th longest bridge in the overall category of bridges.

Lake Ponchartrain Causeway

Connecting Metairie to the North Shore of Lake Ponchartrain, the Causeway is frequently seen by locals as merely a long, sometimes dreary part of their daily commute, but in truth it's much more. Listed in the Guinness Book of World Records, the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway is the longest continuous bridge over water in the world, stretching almost 24 miles. Built in 1956 with a price tag of \$46 million, the Causeway has more than paid for itself by cutting the commute time into the city from St. Tammany Parish by almost an hour and bringing the North Shore communities into what is considered the New Orleans metropolitan area.

Family Gras

Although not quite as prolific, the Mardi Gras celebrations in Metairie still occupy its residents for a full two weeks of parades that begin behind Clearview Shopping Center, travel

down Veterans Memorial Boulevard and typically end on Martin Behrman Avenue. Generally, the krewes and parades of Metairie tout a more family-friendly atmosphere, and nothing emphasizes this point more than Family Gras.

Celebrated on the neutral ground on Veterans across from Lakeside Shopping Mall, Family Gras is a free, rollicking, kid-centric event that occurs while the Krewe of Excalibur, Krewe of Adonis and Krewe of Caesar are rolling down the boulevard. A stage is set up in the median featuring artists like Frankie Vali & the Four Seasons, the Monkees, and the Pointer Sisters. There's also an art market with regional arts, crafts and jewelry, the Flambeau Food Court with vendors from all over Jefferson Parish, and a Kid's Court for children 12 and under filled with interactive games, face painting, and unique hand-wax art. ♦

Graphic Resources

