

 **Local News**

Top cuisine on the North Shore

La Provence still going strong in Lacombe with celebrated chefs John Besh and Chris Kerageorgiou

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Earlier this year, New Orleans chef, restaurateur and TV's Iron Chef regular John Besh purchased La Provence, the acclaimed restaurant in Lacombe on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans.

No matter that it was almost an hour's drive from the city across the causeway, La Provence attracted dignitaries for more than 30 years, including former President Ronald Reagan. The country French restaurant was also the recipient of numerous awards, including Four Stars from the Mobil Travel Guide and a coveted 5-Bean rating from New Orleans' Times-Picayune.

Chef Chris Kerageorgiou opened La Provence in 1972 and Besh held his first position there as chef de cuisine, beginning in 1995. While on the north shore, Besh was named Best New Chef by Food&Wine Magazine in 1998.

Since then, Besh has continued upward, opening Restaurant August in New Orleans in 2001 and being named Best Chef in the Southeast in 2006 by the James Beard Foundation. August also received the 5-Bean rating from The Times-Picayune and was honored in Gourmet magazine's Guide to America's 50 Best Restaurants.

Besh purchasing La Provence couldn't be more natural. The two chefs have remained close friends over the years and will operate the restaurant together.

"This is what every restaurateur dreams of: John Besh, my protégé, continuing my vision for La Provence long into the future," Kerageorgiou says.

To top it off, Chef René Bajeux of France has become the restaurant's executive chef and was recently named one of The Times-Picayune's "8 to Watch in '08: Movers and Shakers to Keep Your Eye On In The New Year."

Bajeux is one of the select few in America named a certified master chef and he touts his own



Inside La Provence's comfortable sitting area. Submitted image

Food Notes

ROMA'S LAMB SHANKS:

A fellow foodie friend raves about this recipe for lamb shanks. Friends of hers who opened and ran a Virginia inn for 20 years developed the recipe and were willing to share. It's not a recipe for those frightened by inexact measurements, but for the rest of you, be sure to call (preferably just as you're getting ready to set the table) and let us know how it turned out.

(Make one day ahead)

Ingredients:

30 cloves of garlic

Vegetable or olive oil

Butter

Lamb shanks, one per person

Carrots



accolades from publications such as Esquire magazine's Best New Restaurants, 2001 Chef of the Year from the American Tasting Institute, inclusion among America's Top Tables in Gourmet magazine and a James Beard Outstanding Member, 1997-2000.

A recent trip to Lacombe confirmed that the restaurant is alive and kicking and serving up tremendous French country fare. An enthusiastic and genuinely friendly Bajeux welcomed us into the restaurant's enormous kitchen to give us a demonstration on how to create liver mousse; the restaurant plans to offer master classes with the chef beginning this spring. After a quick tour of the newly created smokehouse where homemade sausages will be cured, plus a side visit to the unfortunate pigs on the backside of the property, we settled into the cozy restaurant for a delicious meal.

La Provence's cuisine includes fresh vegetables and meats, butters and cream from area dairies and locally caught seafood. For instance, the crawfish bisque francaise contained a hint of saffron and crème fraîche while the grouper was topped with a wild oyster mushroom fricassée. Wild game included pheasant sausage, wild boar parmentière and venison ragout.

Desserts range from Louisiana strawberry bavaois, Satsuma coulis and the traditional bread pudding with whiskey sauce.

Got your attention yet?

La Provence is about a 2.5-hour drive from Lafayette and makes for a great complement to a day trip to either the north shore or New Orleans. The restaurant is also open for long and leisurely Sunday brunches.

Besh hopes to soon implement a limo service from Restaurant August to La Provence and back, so those wishing to visit New Orleans and La Provence can enjoy a fine meal and wine without the hassle of driving back across the causeway.

Chéré Coen is a freelance journalist and author working on a cookbook with "Cajun" Karl Breaux. Send restaurant suggestions to timesedit@timesofacadiana.com.

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Celery

Celery leaves

Chicken broth

Two onions

White wine, dry, un-oaked

Parsley

Bay leaves

Thyme

Salt and pepper

In a large roasting pan, heat oil plus a little butter on the stovetop. Cook about 30 cloves of garlic until tender. Sear off one lamb shank per person until nicely browned on the outside. Transfer to a plate.

In the same pan, cook the onions until translucent. Add carrot, celery, and celery leaves to the pan, and cook until tender and glazed with pan juices. Add chicken broth, white wine, parsley, bay and thyme to the pot. When warmed thoroughly, add shanks back in. Remove from stovetop and place in 375 F oven.

Braise for an hour. Remove from oven; let cool overnight. Next day, skim fat off top and return to a 375 F oven for 1.5 hours before serving. The meat should be falling off the bone and tender enough to remove with a fork.

Deglaze by heating pan and adding a little white wine to the pan. Stir until pan juices form a liquid sauce. Pour pan juices over the lamb.

Serve over cannelloni beans, accompanied by steamed broccoli rabe finished in a skillet with garlic, oil and chili pepper. Plate up and give to your friends who will groan with pleasure, drink all your wine and love you forever. Pair with a light red wine.

Got a local favorite dish you think others should try? E-mail us your ideas to timesedit@timesofacadiana.com. Put Have you tried? in the subject line. We'll check out your suggestions and may include them in an upcoming edition.