

The Best of New Orleans

New Orleans should come with a warning label.

See, there's a growing group of residents whom locals call the "never lefts." They are the people who came to New Orleans as tourists: came for Mardi Gras, came for Jazz Fest, or just came. And the city worked its magic on them. They listened to street musicians around Jackson Square. They danced to brass bands in clubs at night. They gazed at lush tropical courtyards hidden behind unassuming building fronts. They strolled down streets time seemed to have forgotten. They kissed beneath flickering gas lamps. They ate incredible meals and topped them off with beignets at 3am at the Café du Monde while watching the passing human parade. They found themselves perusing newspaper ads for houses and apartments, because as their trip's scheduled end date came and went, they were still in New Orleans. They came for Mardi Gras, came for Jazz Fest, just came—and *never left*.

New Orleans does that to people.

This is one of the few cities in America (if not the only one) where you do not feel as if you are in America. It may sound cliché to call New Orleans magical and seductive, but it happens to be the truth. Every one of your senses will be engaged from the moment you arrive here. The city is a visual delight, from the lacy ironwork wrapped around the buildings of the French Quarter to the stately, graceful old homes of the Garden District to the giant oaks that stretch across Esplanade Avenue or drip with ghostly Spanish moss in City Park. But to just call New Orleans picturesque is not doing it justice. Music flows from every doorway or is played right in the street. Jazz, Cajun, blues, whatever—you'll find yourself moving to a rhythm and wondering if the streets really are dancing along with you. There are delicious smells in the moist, honeyed air, which seems to carry a whiff of the Caribbean while caressing your skin, almost as if it were alive.

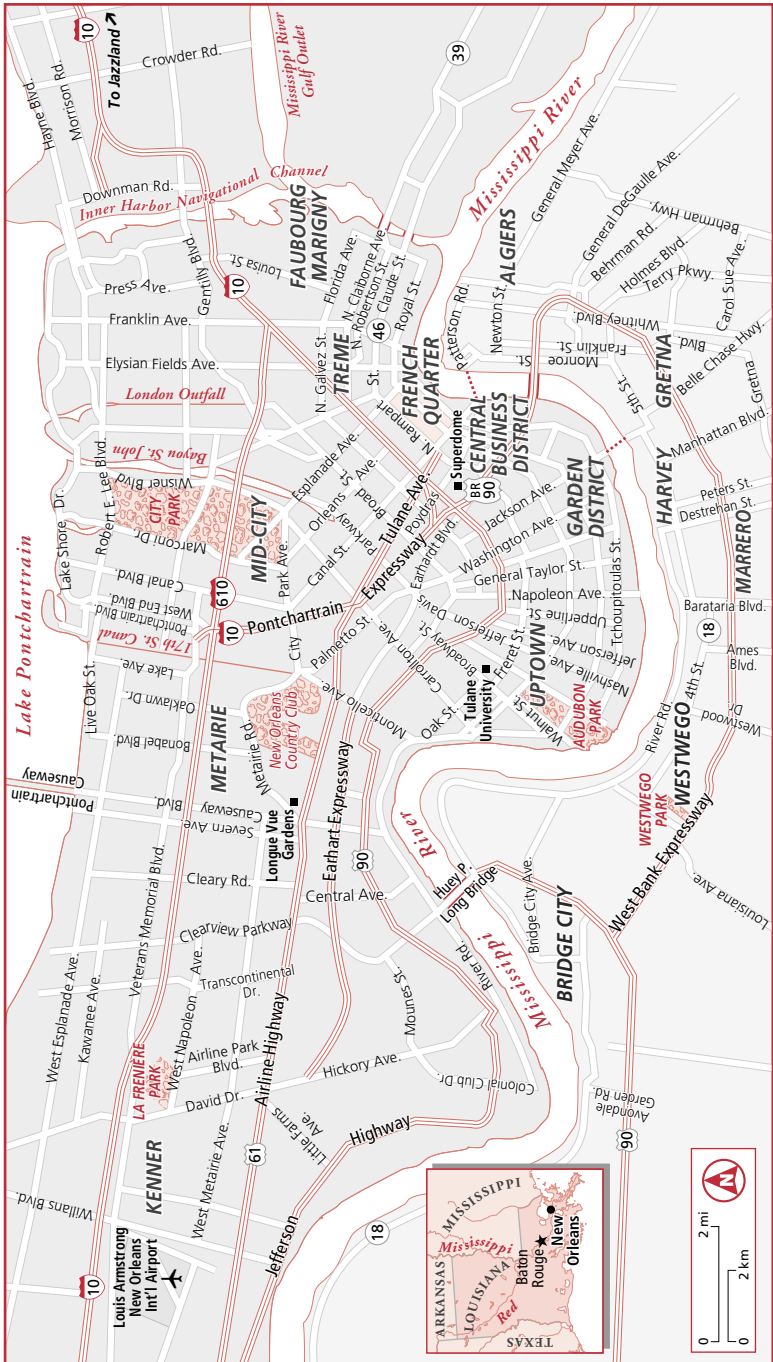
And then there's the food. Don't get us started on the food.

This is a city that is fully, totally alive. It's sensual and joyous, decadent but not exploitative. Indulgences are many but for the right reason—they are fun. This is a city where every business entirely closes for Mardi Gras; after all, *carnival* roughly means "farewell to flesh." No one's going to say good-bye to such things (as if they ever really do) without a big party.

We tell people that all we do when we go to New Orleans is eat, drink, listen to music, dance, and walk. That's it. In New Orleans, you can do just that for days without getting bored. That's the kind of town it is. In fact, that may be the simplest way to sum up its appeal—which is not an easy task. For years, countless authors have tried to explain its gestalt. You could fill entire bookcases with New Orleans-based or -inspired literature, some written by natives, even more by authors who came for a visit and never left.

We won't kid you, though. There is a downside to all this fun. New Orleans has always been the city of permissive attitudes—it was the first U.S. city where

Greater New Orleans



Moments **Aaron Neville's New Orleans**

Multiple Grammy winner Aaron Neville's unmistakably angelic voice has been a New Orleans landmark for several decades, in his career as a soloist and as one of the Neville Brothers. His latest solo album, a compilation of jazz standards, is entitled *Nature Boy* (Verve Records). He recently recounted what he loves about his hometown.

"I'm a homebody these days, but I still like riding the St. Charles streetcar and going to the Camellia Grill for breakfast or having blackened redfish or crawfish at K-Paul's, where there's always a line. Is the wait worth it? Oh, yeah! And I like riding the riverboat and checking out Audubon Park now that they have the beautiful natural habitats. I used to go up there a long time ago when they had cages, and I didn't like it. The animals didn't look happy.

"New Orleans has a mystique to it, and it's got a hold on me. This place is like a melting pot, a mixture of so many cultures, with nothing pure. It's got its own attitude. And music for any occasion—people walk here with a musical rhythm. This is one place where you can walk down the street and greet people. Do that in New York or L.A. and people look at you like you are crazy. Here, people say, 'What's up?' and you say, 'Where y'at?' When I play different cities and someone in the audience calls out, 'Where y'at?,' I know where they're from. When I was growing up, I thought everyone said that.

"I travel to different countries and cities all over the world, but when I'm coming back from the road, the greatest sight to me is looking out the airplane window and seeing the swamps."

prostitution was sort of legal. Today, loose liquor laws mean not only a party atmosphere but also obnoxious drunks and disgusting displays in the streets. Crime has been high; at one time—1995 and 1996, in particular—this was the most dangerous city in America, although concerted efforts to fix that have paid off with lower crime rates of late.

But those who love New Orleans remain amused by its flaws—they're part of what makes the town real. And it *is* real—it only looks like a movie set because of remarkable historic preservation; the city continues to largely resist efforts to turn itself into an amusement park. For every tacky souvenir store and theme restaurant, there are 10 places that defy commercialization. This town refuses to be turned into something shiny and clean. That wouldn't be the natural order of things, anyway: Thanks to the climate, the city began to decay the moment it was built. Buildings may be worn and shabby, but every brick has a story. You want tidy and sterile? Go elsewhere. You want history and character? Come here.

The best way to get inside New Orleans is to plunge right in. Don't just go for the obvious. Sure, we've met people who never left Bourbon Street and had a terrific time, but the city has so much more to offer. We've also met people who went for recognizable names and quick and easy decisions and then were disappointed that their experiences were no more than adequate.

Look over the advice that follows, and you should be able to sidestep the inevitable tourist traps. We want you to go home having passed a real good time,

as the locals say. We won't promise that you won't get your hands dirty—but if the dirt comes from the powdered sugar on a beignet, then you did your trip right.

That is, assuming you do go home. Remember: We warned you, so don't blame us if you come to New Orleans and one day discover that you never left.

1 Frommer's Favorite New Orleans Experiences

- **Beignets & Café au Lait at Café du Monde:** Sit on the crowded patio gazing at the action on Decatur Street and Jackson Square. Gorge on hot French-style doughnuts liberally coated in powdered sugar (everyone will know what you've been doing from the sprinkles on your shirt) and washed down with potent chicory coffee. And do it at any hour of the day—3pm or 3am. It's open 24 hours! See p. 151.
- **Jazz at Preservation Hall:** Drop your five bucks in the hat and squeeze into one of the country's time-honored jazz institutions. Your feet will be moving and your ears will be happy, even if they never knew they liked jazz before. See p. 240.
- **A Crowded Night at the Maple Leaf:** The Maple Leaf is a very "New Orleans" club and a fun place to hang out. On nights when popular bands fill the place to hot, sweaty capacity and the crowd spills over into the street and dances right on the sidewalk, it's sublime. See p. 246.
- **Dinner at Commander's Palace:** This is one of those legendary restaurants that continues to deserve its reputation after many decades. It's romantic, gracious, attentive, and delicious. Though it's perfect for a special occasion, eating there makes *any* meal a special occasion. See p. 143.
- **A Streetcar Ride:** The streetcar named *Desire* may no longer be with us, but the historic St. Charles line still is. Not only is this a convenient way to travel from downtown to uptown (or vice versa), but the route also shows off some of the most beautiful homes in New Orleans. See p. 62.
- **A Cemetery Tour:** New Orleans's above-the-ground tombs are hard to forget once you've seen them, and touring these ghostly cities of the dead provides you with a unique look into the history and culture of the city. See p. 179.
- **A Stroll Through the Garden District:** These elegant (not flashy) old homes, nestled among lush trees, are wonderful to gaze at and envy. At the right time of day, you might have the streets largely to yourself and feel you've slipped back in time—or into an Anne Rice novel. See p. 205.
- **A Stroll Along St. John's Bayou:** Most tourists don't get much beyond the Quarter or else they speed past this low-slung body of water as they head for City Park. Slow down Big Easy-style, finally away from the hordes as you meander along the bayou and admire the less high-profile, but no less romantic, neighborhood around it. See p. 169.
- **Bourbon Street After Dark:** Even if you end up hating it, you have to see it at least once. Music spurts and oozes out of windows and doors, drinkers reign supreme, and sex is widely available—on paper, on stage, and on video. It's wild, disgusting, and strangely exhilarating. See chapter 11.
- **Club Hopping in the Frenchmen Section:** This portion of the

Faubourg Marigny (the neighborhood that borders the French Quarter to the north and east) features at least five clubs and several bars, each with its own personality and charm. Stroll from one to the other, dipping in for a bit or just listening to the music pouring out the doors before moving on to sample something farther down the street. See chapter 11.

- **Food, Glorious Food:** With a nearly infinite selection of outstanding restaurants and other food sources, meal planning in New Orleans is very serious indeed. There is never time to do it all: a muffledetta from Central Grocery eaten on the banks of the Mississippi; boiled crawfish or oyster shooting at Acme or Felix's; and amazing, innovative cuisine at the Upperline, Brigten's, Emeril's, or Bayona. Can

you eat five meals a day here? We've tried! See chapter 7.

- **Seeing New Orleans Piano Great Eddie Bo:** One of the last in the tradition of New Orleans piano professors is charming and saucy, his playing is marvelous, and his band is hot. See him at his family club, **Check Your Bucket**, 2107 Banks St. (☎ 504/581-5505; www.checkyourbucket.com) when he's in town.
- **Dancing to the ReBirth Brass Band, the Wild Magnolias, and/or Kermit Ruffins:** Dancing to three of the best musical acts New Orleans has to offer (a brass band, the ultimate Mardi Gras Indian combo, and a jazz musician in the tradition of Louis Armstrong, respectively) is the physical manifestation of the word *fun*—and the truest spirit of New Orleans. See chapter 11.

2 Best Hotel Bets

Selecting just one accommodation in New Orleans is a little like picking your favorite flavor of ice cream—there are just so many great options to choose from. You'll find full reviews of all these places in chapter 6, "Where to Stay," plus some other choices that we like almost as much.

- **Best for a Romantic Getaway:** Take an old indigo plantation some blocks away from the Quarter, outfit it with some of the nicest furnishings in town, add in a full lavish breakfast, and you've got the **House on Bayou Road**, 2275 Bayou Rd. (☎ 800/882-2968 or 504/945-0992).
- **Best New Orleans-Specific Hotel Value:** Why stay in an admittedly comfortable, but ultimately generic, luxe hotel room when for the same price you can have a two- or three-room suite, complete with wide oak floors, tall

ceilings, fireplaces, antiques, and balconies overlooking the Quarter (in short, all the elements that make for a truly atmospheric stay)? They start at \$195 at the **Hotel Ste. Hélène**, 508 Chartres St. (☎ 800/348-3888 or 504/522-5014), and can be even cheaper in June, July, August, and December. See p. 76.

- **Best Basic Hotel:** You know, just a hotel, albeit a hotel that looks sufficiently NOLA-like. It's friendly, it's sweet, and it's better than *basic* allows it to sound—it's the **Maison Dupuy**, 1001 Toulouse St. (☎ 800/535-9177 or 504/586-8000). See p. 77.
- **Best Breakfast:** Not to say that the fancy meal served over at the **House on Bayou Road** isn't fabulous, but just as good is the multi-course bonanza served up at the **Olde Victorian Inn**, 914 N.

Rampart St. (☎ 800/725-2446 or 504/522-2446), where you get the additional bonus of the adorable owners (who say they have so many menus that it takes 30 days before they repeat a breakfast) cooking for you. See p. 81.

- **Best Reason to Stay in Mid-City:** Soon, this will be the new hot neighborhood to stay in, particularly now that the Canal Street streetcar line has started running again. Beat the crowds we think are coming and bunk at the gorgeous **Block-Keller House**, 3620 Canal St. (☎ 877/588-3033 or 504/483-3033), where the skilled owners know their B&B business, or at the friendly, antiques-filled **1896 O'Malley House**, 120 S. Pierce St. (☎ 866/226-1896 or 504/488-5896). See p. 86.
- **Grandest B&B:** Big rooms filled with big beds and big furniture in a big mansion on St. Charles, a big street, **The Grand Victorian Bed & Breakfast**, 2727 St. Charles Ave. (☎ 800/977-0008 or 504/895-1104), is stately and, well, grand. See p. 95.
- **Best More Modest B&B:** **Chimes B&B**, 1146 Constantinople St. (☎ 800/729-4640 [for reservations only] or 504/488-4640), is a delightful family-owned guesthouse in the Garden District. The charming owners have been operating the B&B for over 15 years, generating loyal return guests. See p. 96.
- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel:** The **Bourbon Orleans Hotel**, 717 Orleans St. (☎ 504/523-2222), is the best value in its price range. It's centrally located (make sure to ask for a room *not* facing Bourbon Street unless you're sure you want to keep an eye on the nonstop partying) and is undergoing a face-lift. See p. 79.
- **Best for Travelers with Disabilities:** Two of the most accessible and accommodating choices are the **Hotel Monteleone**, 214 Royal St. (☎ 800/535-9595 or 504/523-3341), and the **Windsor Court**, 300 Gravier St. (☎ 800/262-2662 or 504/523-6000). See p. 76 and 90.
- **Best Hotel for Hip Executives:** The innovative minimalist style and myriad of comforts at the **International House**, 221 Camp St. (☎ 800/633-5770 or 504/553-9550), have justly made this every film and record-company dude's (and gal's) favorite hotel. It's the perfect palate cleanser if you can't stand Victorian frills. See p. 91.
- **Best Hotel for Hip Families or Couples:** Well, they could stay at the ultra-hip W, but if you want something a bit more NOLA-specific, try the **Hotel Monaco**, 333 St. Charles Ave. (☎ 866/561-0010 or 504/561-0010), where the robes are leopard-colored, foot massages are offered at night, and, on request, you can have an in-room goldfish. See p. 91.
- **Best Health Club:** The hands-down winner is the **Hilton New Orleans Riverside Hotel**, 2 Poydras St. (☎ 800/445-8667 or 504/561-0500). Its Rivercenter Racquet and Health Club features outdoor and indoor tennis courts, squash and racquetball courts, a rooftop jogging track, tanning beds, massage, a hair salon, and a golf studio. See p. 87.
- **Best Little Hotel:** The **Hotel Maison de Ville**, 727 Toulouse St. (☎ 800/634-1600 or 504/561-5858), is a highly regarded member of both the Small Luxury Hotels of the World and the Small Historic Hotels of America. Once you submit to its pampering, you'll understand why. See p. 71.

- **Best Funky Little Hotel:** The **Frenchmen**, 417 Frenchmen St. (☎ 800/831-1781 or 504/948-2166), is small but full of pure New Orleans charm. But bear in mind that someone's "funky" may be someone else's "dingy." See p. 83.
- **Best Brand-Name Hotel Addition:** The Loews chain took over an old office building in the Central Business District, and not only refurbished the **Piazza D'Italia**, a silly bit of public art that had long needed a fix-up, but they've brought their brand of style and comfort to a city that probably has enough hotels but is always glad to have another swell place to stay.

It's **Loews New Orleans Hotel**, 300 Poydras Street. (☎ 800/23-LOEWS or 504/595-3300.)

- **In a Class by Itself:** Of all the hotels in New Orleans, the **Windsor Court**, 300 Gravier St. (☎ 800/262-2662 or 504/523-6000), stands head and shoulders above the rest. Most guest rooms are suites with Italian marble bathrooms, balconies or bay windows, living rooms, kitchenettes, and dressing rooms. If you choose one of the two-bedroom penthouse suites, you'll have the added luxury of a private library and a terrace that overlooks the mighty Mississippi. See p. 90.

3 Best Dining Bets

It's always hard to quantify such things as restaurant comparisons, particularly in a town that has so many wonderful choices. Below is a list to guide you.

Some of you may wonder why there are no "Best Cajun" and "Best Creole" categories. Our feeling was that New Orleans has no exceptional Cajun restaurants (they're adequate at best), and just about everyone has a different definition of Creole cooking, so narrowing it down was nearly impossible. When we consulted with hard-core New Orleans foodies who like nothing more than debates of this nature, fists were waved in the air. But when the dust settled, a compromise was met—"Best Contemporary Creole." Even that caused some to wail, "But those restaurants aren't Creole!" and the whole thing started up again.

For more complete listings of New Orleans restaurants by cuisine and neighborhood, see chapter 7, "Where to Dine."

- **Best Restaurant in the Quarter:** When you finish a meal and every single dish you had was perfect, you know you've eaten somewhere

special. That's happened to us at **Peristyle**, 1041 Dumaine St. (☎ 504/593-9535), more than once. Note, however, that in spring 2004, the restaurant was sold to a new chef/owner, so only time will tell if Peristyle can maintain its excellence. See p. 118.

- **Best Neighborhood Restaurant:** (and the winner of Best Breakfasts and Best Dish: the praline bacon) **Elizabeth's**, 601 Gallier St. (☎ 504/944-9272), serves monster portions of delicious and curious food and is just flat-out wonderful. See p. 129. A little farther to the north is **Liuzza's by the Track**, 1518 N. Lopez (☎ 504/943-8667), a contender for "City's Best Gumbo" and home to gorgeous salads and fat, perfect po' boys. Everything one could want in a neighborhood joint. See p. 133.
- **Best Neighbahood Restaurant:** You know, the old neighbahood where the locals still ask, "Hey, dahwlin', wheah y'at?" This category is a toss-up between the

Italian and Creole dishes at **Mandina's**, 3800 Canal St. (☎ 504/482-9179), and those found at **Liuzza's**, 3636 Bienville St. (☎ 504/482-9120), though the deep-fried dill pickle slices at the latter may tip the scales. See p. 133 and 132.

- **Best Spot for a Business Lunch:** Local business folk favor the casual but classy atmosphere at **Mr. B's Bistro**, 201 Royal St. (☎ 504/523-2078), not to mention the fine food. See p. 122.
- **Best Lunch Special: Cobalt**, 333 St. Charles Ave. (☎ 504/565-5595), has a delectable lunch menu, with everything well under \$15, plus a \$10 daily blue-plate special. You have your choice of large sandwiches, thoughtfully prepared comfort food (think fried chicken and meatloaf), and haute entrees like nicely seared tuna. See p. 138.
- **Best Wine List:** The wine cellar at **Brennan's**, 417 Royal St. (☎ 504/525-9711), is unsurpassed in New Orleans. (Prices range from \$20 to \$1,000.) See p. 114.
- **Best for Kids:** Take them to **Café du Monde**, 800 Decatur St. (☎ 504/581-2914), where getting powdered sugar all over yourself is half the fun. It's large and open-air, and street performers are always around. See p. 151.
- **Best Really Old Restaurant:** Truth be told, **Antoine's**, 713 St. Louis St. (☎ 504/581-4422), isn't all that good, but it's been around and in the same family for 150 years, so find a restaurant older and better—we dare you. Plus, they invented oysters Rockefeller and make the only authentic version (the recipe is a secret). See p. 110.
- **Best Gumbo:** More fighting words, but you can't go wrong at **Dooky Chase**, 2301 Orleans Ave. (☎ 504/821-0600), or **Gala-toire's**, 209 Bourbon St. (☎ 504/525-2021). See p. 132 and 116.
- **Best Barbecued Shrimp:** That's Cajun-style, in a spicy, garlicky butter sauce, and while **Pascal's Manale**, 1838 Napoleon Ave. (☎ 504/895-4877), invented it (and has the largest shrimp), the sauce at **Mr. B's Bistro**, 201 Royal St. (☎ 504/523-2078), is perfect. If only the two elements could be combined. And for fans, **Liuzza's by the Track** (see above) does it on a po' boy! See p. 147 and 122.
- **Best Oysters:** Or "ersters" as the locals would say, and then they would insist that **Felix's Restaurant & Oyster Bar**, 739 Iberville St. (☎ 504/522-4440), has the best, unless they insist that **Acme Oyster House**, 724 Iberville St. (☎ 504/522-5973), does. We think they are identically good (and let's not even discuss **Casamento's**, 4330 Magazine St.; ☎ 504/895-9761). See p. 126, 125, and 148, respectively.
- **Best Hope for Vegetarians:** Be sure to ask for the special vegetarian-only menu at the brand-new **Ralph's on the Park**, 900 City Park Ave. (☎ 504/488-1000). For once, non-meat eaters are treated like diners with palates. No falling back on "pasta with tomatoes and garlic"; these are well-constructed dishes that might lure even a carnivore to the other side for one meal.
- **Best Contemporary Creole:** The food at **Brightsen's**, 723 Dante St. (☎ 504/861-7610), and **Upperline**, 1413 Upperline St. (☎ 504/891-9822), is consistently interesting, innovative, and delicious. But **Dick & Jenny's**, 4501 Tchoupitoulas St. (☎ 504/894-9880), should also make this list. See p. 143, 144, and 145.

- **Best Italian:** We almost hate to tell you, because there are already too many people ahead of us in line (they don't take reservations), but New Orleans's strong Italian presence is best represented at **Irene's Cuisine**, 539 St. Phillip St. (☎ 504/529-8811). Get there early or expect a wait. Or don't bother with a wait: **Tommy's**, 746 Tchoupitoulas St. (☎ 504/581-1103), is owned by one of Irene's original creators, features a nearly identical menu, and takes reservations! See p. 119 and 141.
- **Best Pasta Dish Elsewhere:** The black-truffle fettuccine (or whatever) at **Bacco**, 310 Chartres St. (☎ 504/522-2426), where the Brennan family (the most prominent name in New Orleans dining and the family that collectively operates over half a dozen restaurants) delivers up yet another marvelous restaurant—eat Italian here, too, and you'll be glad you did. See p. 112.
- **Best Classic New Orleans Restaurant:** Of the three mainstays of New Orleans dining (the others being Galatoire's and Antoine's; see p. 116 and 110), **Arnaud's**, 813 Bienville St. (☎ 504/523-5433), is the one where you can count on getting a consistently good (and maybe even great) meal in the same way, and in the exact same surroundings, that generations of New Orleanians have done before you. See p. 112.
- **Best Desserts:** Desserts in New Orleans tend to run to the familiar; everyone serves bread pudding or flourless chocolate cake. But there are places (most often run by people named Brennan) that stray into more interesting territory with practically Bacchanalian choices. **Commander's Palace**, 1403 Washington Ave. (☎ 504/899-8221), serves a justifiably famous bread pudding soufflé, but don't ignore other possibilities served there, including the chocolate Sheba. Then there is the banana cream pie at **Emeril's**, 800 Tchoupitoulas St. (☎ 504/528-9393), which reduces grown men to quivering fools. Others are brought to their knees by the white-chocolate bread pudding at the **Palace Café**, 605 Canal St. (☎ 504/523-1661). Try 'em all and decide for yourself. See p. 143, 135, and 140.
- **Best Local Dive with Outstanding Food:** **Uglesich's Restaurant & Bar**, 1238 Baronne St. (☎ 504/523-8571), is nearly always crowded, looks only slightly better than a dump, and features food so sublime you won't care a bit. (Secretly, we think this is the best restaurant in New Orleans.) See p. 142.
- **Best Burgers:** Locals swear by **Port of Call**, 838 Esplanade Ave. (☎ 504/523-0120), but its cow-size half-pounder might be too much for some. We throw the vote to the more manageable third-of-a-pound juicy delight at the **Clover Grill**, 900 Bourbon St. (☎ 504/598-1010). See p. 122 and 126.
- **Best Outdoor Dining:** Go to **Bayona**, 430 Dauphine St. (☎ 504/525-4455), to eat the fabulous food in the beautiful, quiet, and fairly secluded courtyard. It's especially delightful on starry nights or balmy spring afternoons. See p. 113.
- **Best View:** The amazing moonlit view of the Mississippi makes **Bella Luna**, 914 N. Peters St. (☎ 504/529-1583), hard to beat for a special occasion. See p. 113.
- **Best Po' Boys:** The drippy monster creations at **Mother's**, 401 Poydras St. (☎ 504/523-9656),

are the bomb and the buttah. See p. 141.

- **Best Muffulettas:** You really haven't had a sandwich until you've tried a muffuletta, and no one beats **Central Grocery**, 923 Decatur St. (☎ 504/523-1620). See p. 128.
- **Best Sazerac:** This famous locally invented cocktail can be found all over the city, but connoisseurs agree that **Arnaud's** tops the pack

right now—though as of this writing, the bartenders at **Bayona** and **Tommy's** seem to have learned their lessons well. See p. 112, 113, and 141.

- **Best Original Dessert: Lilette**, 3637 Magazine St. (☎ 504/895-1636), serves little rounds of goat-cheese crème fraîche with poached pears, and it's a combo made for the gods. See p. 146.