

THE SUN DAILY BULLETIN

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Creole and Cajun food at The Quarter in Claremont rivals what's served in New Orleans



Every once in a while you discover a restaurant that transports diners back in time to wonderful culinary experiences in some of this country's great regional cuisine capitals.

One such place is The Quarter in Claremont, where the Creole/Cajun fare reminds me of the best of New Orleans (Galatoire's, Arnaud's, Commander's Palace, Emeril's, K-Paul's and August to name a few).

The Quarter is the brainchild of chef/owner Norm Theard, who previously oversaw the kitchen at Roux Creole Cuisine in Laguna Beach, one of the most decorated restaurants of 2107-18. He and his wife, Tracy, have transformed the



Theard was born and raised in New Orleans and hails from five generations of chefs on his mother's side, spanning 100-plus years of restaurant and cooking expertise. He began working in the kitchen at the tender age of 5!

At The Quarter, floating panels of pressed tin ceiling painted a copper color are a perfect accompaniment to the crystal chandeliers hanging from each panel. They add a romantic ambiance at night. A beautiful full bar with seating graces the far corner of the room adjacent to the entryway, decorated with a large wrought iron lamp post. A separate room in the back can accommodate larger parties. The kitchen is partially open to allow patrons to watch Theard work his culinary magic

During a recent visit, we began with the spectacular Crawfish Biscuit. The biscuit was dotted with green onions and roasted garlic inside and was literally floating in a sea of crawfish tails and crumbled Andouille sausage. An intact crawfish garnishes the biscuit. You'll never think of biscuits and gravy any other way. This dish had everything you'd want in a starter — full-bodied flavors that excite the palate.

And then there's the Shrimp & Grits, a classic low country dish. The shrimp are outrageously plump, literally snapping in your mouth when you bite into them. The grits were perfectly creamy, infused with garlic cream, thyme, bay leaf and Yvonne Sauce, named for Theard's mother, who was an outstanding chef in her own right. I've never had anything like the "Swine Salad" — a blend of baby kale, toasted pecans, red beans, tomatoes, iridescent pickled red onions, and rectangular pieces of pork belly crisps all tossed in a spicy pork Andouille dressing. Two toasted bread slices were additionally smeared with pate and each was decorated with a pork belly crisp.

Talk about the whole being greater than the sum of its parts — this is the case both from a textural viewpoint and the triumph of complimentary flavors.

The Seafood File Gumbo starts with a peanut butter colored roux (made with either oil or butter and flour) that was nutty in flavor with a slow-building heat from cayenne pepper. In addition to the crab leg, oysters and shrimp, there was also chicken, Andouille sausage and tasso, a spicy ham. Each ingredient is distinctly flavored and the spiciness level changes depending on which item you're ingesting. Sassafras powder only adds to the overall dish's allure. This was one of the finest seafood gumbos I've ever encountered.

Do not miss the oyster po boy — 10 fried oysters from the gulf dressed with lettuce, tomato and garlic butter in a first-rate French roll. Supremely authentic Remoulade sauce (Dijon mustard, dry mustard powder, Worcestershire sauce, cayenne pepper, horseradish, ketchup, etc.) accompanied the classic sandwich and the cup should be licked clean after using the bulk to drizzle over the po boy!

The Quarter Catfish is imported from Thailand and has a sweeter and cleaner taste than the Mississippi catfish which is muddier in its taste. Two generous filets are sauteed in very hot olive oil, blackened around the edges and topped with one of those aforementioned amazing shrimp with lump crab meat and a browned butter sauce. Creole rice and ratatouille complete the dish which is Theard's favorite.