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## Nobody Comes to Galatoire's Only for the Food

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"Coming to Galatoire's is a drama," said W. Kenneth Holditch, editor of the Tennessee Williams Literary Journal.

He was sitting at the great American playwright's favorite table, at the great American playwright's favorite restaurant, a timeless Bourbon Street bistro run by the Galatoire family since it opened behind curtained windows in 1905.

"I'll have my usual," Holditch said. An Old Fashioned with its sweetened cherry appeared.

It was 11:24 a.m., a respectable hour considering the scramble for seats that marks the start of Galatoire's ritual Friday lunch. "These drinks were invented for medicinal purposes," added Holditch, nodding to the whiskey and bitters. "You can take some comfort in that."

He was soon joined by Kristina Ford, New Orleans' planning director and the wife of Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Richard Ford; Quinn Peeper, a gynecologist and concert pianist who flies to New York every six weeks for classical lessons; Maggie Eldred, a French Quarter actress who pays her bills by watering plants in executive suites; and Marda Kaiser Burton, a travel writer who, more or less, stopped traveling after falling in love with New Orleans.

"I had a very good work ethic before I moved here," said Burton, a Mississippi native with shimmering platinum hair. "But it just sort of eroded."

Holditch's regular waiter, the regal, tuxedo-clad Gilberto Eyzaguirre, greeted her with a kiss.

"Hi, sugar," Burton cooed.

Everyone ordered drinks, including another Old Fashioned for Holditch, recently retired after three decades of teaching Southern literature at the University of New Orleans. A lyrical man with a salt-and-pepper goatee, he first ate here in 1949, at the age of 16. It has been a transcendental experience ever since.

Nobody comes to Galatoire's just for the food, a century-old menu of French-Creole standards, usually featuring fresh Gulf seafood in unrepentant pools of butter and cream. (There are no chef's specials, or even head chefs; every dish is prepared by line cooks, following recipes that have remained constant under four generations of Galatoire rule).

Situated on a raucous stretch of Bourbon Street, between gaudy T-shirt shops and frozen Hurricane to-go bars and a strip joint that advertises "Le Premiere Topless du Monde," Galatoire's is in a time warp all its own. The mirrored walls and brass chandeliers, the granite floor and tarnished silverware, the white linen tablecloths covered with crumbs of crusty French bread—you can almost see the ghosts of famous, and not-so-famous, New Orleanians toasting a town that Tennessee Williams once described as "one of the last frontiers of Bohemia."

"When I'm in Galatoire's, I feel very close to the great literature of the city," said Holditch, noting that in "A Streetcar Named Desire," Stella invites Blanche to Galatoire's for dinner. "It's an emotional thing. When I'm out of town, I yearn for it."

Another round of Old Fashioneds arrived, although Ford—who had to return to City Hall by 1:30 on this November afternoon—opted for a single glass of Chardonnay. Then came plates of fried eggplant strips and souffled potato puffs. Holditch concocted a dipping sauce of powdered sugar and Tabasco.

"How are we doing, doctor?" asked his waiter, who selected every dish, never offering menus or prices.

More drinks appeared, followed by lumps of crab meat sauteed with shrimp and portobello mushrooms. "Oh, dear, are you going to take care of me this afternoon?" Eldred asked her host. An angular woman in a black dress with lunar white polka dots, she added: "When Kenneth calls and says, 'Are you available for lunch?' what he really means is, 'Can you devote your entire day to this?' "

The conversation turned to eroding traditions—and how a place like Galatoire's, by clinging to a conservative vision of dining, somehow became a bastion of eccentricity. The restaurant accepts no reservations, forcing even VIPs to wait in line, often for an hour or more, to secure one of its 40 tables. On coveted days—especially the Fridays before Christmas and Mardi Gras—diners pay upward of \$100 to anyone willing to camp overnight, holding them a spot outside the door.

Yet in just the last few years, the modern world has begun encroaching on Galatoire's sanctity. Credit cards are accepted now. Men can lunch without jackets or ties. A woman, Angele Wells, has joined the wait staff. And, of all horrors, an ice-cube machine was installed earlier this year; until then, ice was delivered in blocks and chipped by hand.

"There's been a real stir about that," acknowledged Holditch, one of 6,000 longtime patrons with their own Galatoire's accounts, billed to them monthly in the mail.

Two bottles of chilled white wine came with lunch, which consisted of fried shrimp for Holditch and a delicately toasted pompano, slathered with crab, for everyone else. Afterward, Holditch was struck with a stubborn case of hiccups. He tried drinking backward from a glass, licking sugar and breathing into a napkin.

Nothing worked.

"It doesn't matter how much things change . . . there's still real people here, still real stuff happening, still an element of sin . . . which you don't get in, say, Seattle," said Eldred, speaking both of Galatoire's and its home, The City That Care Forgot. She had stepped outside into the afternoon glare of Bourbon Street to smoke a filterless cigarette.

Almost as soon as she spoke, a toothless man with a beer in his hand and a scar on his forehead staggered by, dancing around her to a silent beat.

"This is New Orleans," Eldred proclaimed.

"We are here," agreed the man, who called himself Jim Beam. He burped loudly, then grabbed Eldred's hand and sucked on one of her fingers.

"And you know," said Eldred, retreating into Galatoire's, "he's not really any different from the rest of us; we've all been drifters in our lives." A moment later, she added: "He had a certain grace about him."

Lunch, if it could still be called that, was followed by a flaming urn of coffee, spiked with Grand Marnier, brandy and cinnamon schnapps. As he ladled it into cups, Eyzaguirre made sure to spill a few drops of the brew, momentarily setting the tablecloth ablaze.

Across the room, a crowd sang "Happy Birthday." A film producer handed out Cuban cigars. A lawyer draped a napkin over his head, tying it like a bandanna, gangster-style.

"Are we going to your house for after-dinner drinks?" Peeper, the physician, asked the professor.

"You may, if you want to watch me lie down," Holditch said.

Peeper withdrew the suggestion. After all, he had to wake up early the next morning and perform Pap smears at Planned Parenthood.

It was nearly 6 p.m. by the time the party ended. But a few all-day stragglers remained in the restaurant. They were debating whether to do what many a hardy soul has done after a Friday lunch at Galatoire's: eat and drink their way right on through Friday dinner.