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{After a disastrous fire, the
French Quarter's Peristyle dusts
itself off and starts cooking again}
Big Easy Bistro

Horseradish-dressed crabmeat atop pickled red onions and chilled roasted beets is a vibrant example of Peristyle's fresh take on French cuisine.



IT'S LUNCHTIME ON FRIDAY. AT THE RAGGED edge of the French Quarter in New Orleans, a 62-seat restaurant called Peristyle begins filling with a loyal crowd. Beneath a romantic 1918 mural of City Park, in which ladies and gentlemen promenade among sprawling oaks, the manager of the symphony is holding court. A group of businessmen occupies another table; they are known informally as the wine guys, and each arrives brandishing a rare vintage. The husband-and-wife owners of Faulkner House Books, a French Quarter treasure, settle into banquettes, while a *Vogue* writer and her cohorts slink into their seats near the bar. They were in here last night, clinking glasses and wisecracking into the wee hours. "Why go home?" the sommelier jokes with them. "You should all just move your cots in here."

"People feel like this restaurant belongs to them," says co-owner and chef Anne Kearney, a pretty, down-to-earth blond who greets nearly every patron by name. "They come here to have a dining experience, not simply to feed themselves. They know they're going to be here for a couple of hours, that there's a ritual to it." They also come for Kearney's food, a sparkling rendition of traditional French cuisine with a regional American twist.

Three days before Thanksgiving 1999, Kearney's island of civility almost went up in smoke. A fire tore through the top floors of the old building housing the restaurant, >

WINE

- 1999 Sancerre, Merlin Cherrier, Loire Valley, France
- 1994 Sauvignon Blanc, Kalin Cellars, Potter Valley, California
- 1999 Sauvignon Blanc, Kim Crawford, Marlborough, New Zealand

which was forced to close for nine months. Kearney looked on the disaster as an opportunity for a major overhaul and asked her friend Patrick Dunne, a local antiques dealer, for decorating help.

“The most divine thing to happen during the fire was that the artificial acoustical-tile ceiling caved in, revealing the building’s 19th-century scale,” says Dunne, who scraped the walls to discover old Creole paint colors and then used one of them—a flattering, pinkish hue—in the dining room. He cleaned up terrazzo floors, uncovered the flowery capitals of iron columns, and had trompe l’oeil fanlights painted above some squat 1950s windows. The banquettes were reupholstered and their backs raised for comfort. Almost everything else stayed the same—classic ceiling fans, simple bentwood chairs, and small tables with snowy white cloths, the ubiquitous accoutrements of New Orleans restaurants for more than a century.

“It was a very subtle renovation,” Dunne says. “Patrons who have been here know something is different, but they can’t put their finger on it. And that’s exactly what we wanted.” ●



Jumbo Lump Crabmeat Salad on a Bed of Roasted Beets with Fresh Horseradish Dressing

For roasted beets and beet vinaigrette:

- 8 small beets, washed and trimmed
- 1¼ cups water
- 2 tablespoons rice vinegar
- ½ cup light olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste

For horseradish dressing:

- ½ cup mayonnaise, preferably homemade
- ½ cup sour cream
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated horseradish, or to taste
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste
- ¼ cup finely chopped chives

For jumbo lump crabmeat salad:

- 1 pound jumbo lump crabmeat
- Horseradish dressing

For herb salad:

- ¼ cup fresh Italian parsley leaves
- ¼ cup fresh tarragon leaves
- ¼ cup fresh chervil sprigs
- ¼ cup ½-inch-long fresh chive pieces

- 1½ teaspoons light olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste

For assembling salad:

- 1 cup drained pickled red onions

Prepare roasted beets and beet vinaigrette: place beets in a shallow baking pan, add water, and cover. Roast in a preheated 350°F oven for 20 minutes, or until tender. Remove beets from pan and strain roasting liquid, reserving ½ cup. Rub off beet skins and cut beets into ⅛-inch-thick slices. Place slices in a bowl. Mix together reserved roasting liquid, rice vinegar, olive oil, and salt and pepper, and add to beets. Marinate 30 minutes. Remove beets and place in a bowl, cover, and refrigerate. Reserve beet vinaigrette.

Prepare horseradish dressing: In a bowl, mix mayonnaise and sour cream and stir in horseradish, salt, pepper, and chives.

Prepare crabmeat salad: Place crabmeat in a bowl and mix in just enough horseradish dressing to lightly bind.

Prepare herb salad: Toss herbs, olive oil, salt, and pepper in a bowl.

To serve: Place beet slices in overlapping concentric circles on 8 dinner plates. For each serving, add 2 tablespoons pickled red onions, sprinkle with 2 tablespoons beet vinaigrette, top with about 4 tablespoons crabmeat salad, and garnish with herb salad. Serves 8.



In the newly restored space, two murals [above and right] glow luminously: the one above the copper-topped mahogany bar depicts the City Park peristyle, from which the restaurant takes its name. [left] Co-owner/chef Anne Kearney.

