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**“New Orleans forms the richly atmospheric backdrop for a determined, eccentric family who found success in the steakhouse business...[a] zesty chronicle.”**

*– Kirkus Reviews*

**THE GORILLA MAN AND THE EMPRESS OF STEAK:  
A New Orleans Family Memoir**

By Randy Fertel

In 1965, a single mother mortgaged her house for \$22,000 to buy a small steak house in New Orleans. That woman, Ruth Fertel, grew it into one of the greatest restaurants in a city of great restaurants—Ruth’s Chris Steak House. What started as 17 tables is now the world’s largest fine-dining group, with over 135 locations worldwide.

This is the story we know. But, as with all things, the truth is stranger than fiction. In **THE GORILLA MAN AND THE EMPRESS OF STEAK: A New Orleans Family Memoir** (University Press of Mississippi; October 4, 2011), Ruth’s son, Randy Fertel, offers a poignant and bittersweet portrait of one of New Orleans’ most legendary families, and the famous steak house that bears their name. With a “**soulful Southern storytelling [that] captures you instantly**” (Alice Waters), Fertel weaves the stories of his late iconic parents, one nationally famous—Ruth, founder of Ruth’s Chris Steak House—and one locally infamous—Rodney, known as “The Gorilla Man” for his quixotic 1969 run for mayor and promise to get a gorilla for the zoo. And for the first time, we get a behind-the-scenes look at the famous restaurant, where Fertel first served as busboy, and later as Director of Marketing – until the day he sued the company, and by extension, his mother.

Fertel’s father once told him, “Don’t ever desert New Orleans, son,” and Fertel heeded his word. The lifelong New Orleanian is accustomed to receiving one of two reactions when he meets new people about town. If the person leans back warily, he’s about to hear, “Are you related to the Gorilla Man?” Rodney was, in Fertel’s words, “odd, self-centered, and nuts.” He grew up on New Orleans’ Rampart Street—the pawnbroking district where jazz was born—heir to a slew of pawnshops and ramshackle real estate investments. He inherited a healthy sum, which in turn fueled his eccentricities. He traveled the globe five times, raced horses, and led a nomadic existence, leaving behind a wife and two sons without so much as a phone number or return address. When he ran for mayor of New Orleans in 1969, the city was battling serious problems, from poor schools and a failing economy to segregation and political corruption. Rodney, however, campaigned on the sole platform that the Audubon Zoo needed a gorilla. His slogan? *Don’t settle for a monkey. Elect Fertel and get a gorilla.* He campaigned in a safari outfit and hired a man in a gorilla suit, garnered a paltry 310 votes, then went out and bought two gorillas anyway. He named them Red Beans and Rice, and declared that he was the only candidate in history who kept all his campaign promises, even though he’d lost.

With that, the infamous “Gorilla Man” legend was born, inspiring wary looks for decades to come. But if a person’s eyes light up at his last name, Fertel knows they’re thinking of his mother—or, more likely, her sizzling steaks. “Are you related to *Ruth’s Chris*?” they’ll exclaim. Ruth—or “Miz Ruth,” as she was colloquially known in New Orleans—was “the First Lady of American Restaurants.” The industry gave her every award it had: The



Silver Plate from the National Restaurant Association; Best Chain from *Nation's Restaurants News*; and Entrepreneur of the Year from Ernst & Young and Merrill Lynch, to name a few. Even Arnie Morton, founder of Morton's Steak House, her chief competitor, once told Randy that "Ruth Fertel created the prime steak business," despite the fact that Morton's had been in operation since the 1920s.

Raised 50 miles south of New Orleans in the Plaquemines Parish community of Happy Jack, Ruth was a tomboy who, in her father's words, "hung the moon." With a charm and presence that could fill a room, Ruth was headstrong and adventurous. She lived for gambling, duck hunting and fishing—she once caught a six-foot sailfish—went to college at 15, and was the first licensed female Thoroughbred horse trainer in Louisiana. When the divorce from Rodney was settled in 1965, Ruth, in need of a better income, saw a classified ad for Chris Steak House. Having grown up in a family of great culinarians in the Mississippi Delta, she knew she could handle a steak—so she mortgaged her house and bought the place. Her culinary background flowered on the menu—the famous creamed spinach, for one, is an old family recipe. Despite being an "accidental entrepreneur," Ruth leveraged her commanding presence and sheer guts to turn the restaurant into *the* place to "see and be seen" in New Orleans. First, Texas oil patch workers came for the steaks, followed by politicians who caught scent of the money, and finally the Uptown blue bloods, ready to line the pockets of the politicians who did their bidding. Chris Steak House quickly became the place for deals and celebrations of every kind, and regulars included everyone from Governor Edwin Edwards to Fats Domino. When the restaurant caught fire in 1976, Ruth moved it four blocks down the street. Because her sales agreement stated that if she moved locations, she couldn't keep the name, Ruth simply added her own—and, 35 years ago, the Ruth's Chris Steak House empire was born.

But, as the book makes clear, the Empress of Steak would sit her throne largely alone. For as generous as Ruth was with those at a distance, "the closer you got to her, the dryer the well." Ruth was widely beloved by customers, franchisees, and the community—she counseled young women starting businesses, paid tuition for countless children, and saved a Catholic grammar school from going belly up. But fiercely competitive and emotionally distant, Ruth was a one-woman show, and nearly everyone who worked closely with her ended up angry, terminated, or embroiled in a lawsuit. She surrounded herself with questionable partners—a Board of Directors who outwardly kowtowed to her, but brought a variety of personal agendas—leading to liquor-fueled board meetings and multi-million dollar lawsuits, including one between mother and son (see attached Q&A).

Fertel's relationship with his mother never fully recovered from the fallout, and while his feelings remain conflicted, the book, in many ways a tribute to her, leaves no doubt that he loves her. Indeed, **THE GORILLA MAN AND THE EMPRESS OF STEAK** shows one man's journey to come to terms with both his parents—an attempt to reconcile their gifts and shortcomings, the affection they withheld and the rare, but genuine, moments of tenderness. It is also a love letter to New Orleans, and the people, places, and cuisine that have made it one of the most unique locales in the world (see Fertel's *Smithsonian* piece on New Orleans, attached).

The story of the Fertel family is quixotic and infused with an alluring Southern Gothic flair. But the Gorilla Man himself puts it best. In response to hearing a piece Fertel wrote about the Gorilla Man campaign—a story which, in a way, serves as a microcosm of the book—Rodney responds in a moment of touching candidness. "It's good," he says proudly. "Do you know why it's good? Because it's all true."

**Randy Fertel** is president of both the Fertel Foundation and the Ruth U. Fertel Foundation, and co-founded the Ridenhour Prizes for Courageous Truth-Telling. He has taught English at Harvard University, Tulane University, Lemoyne College, the University of New Orleans, and the New School for Social Research. His work has appeared on NPR and in the *Huffington Post*, *Kenyon Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Smithsonian*, *New Orleans Magazine*, and *Gastronomica*. He lives in New Orleans and New York.

**THE GORILLA MAN AND THE EMPRESS OF STEAK:**

**A New Orleans Family Memoir**

**Author: Randy Fertel**

**University Press of Mississippi**

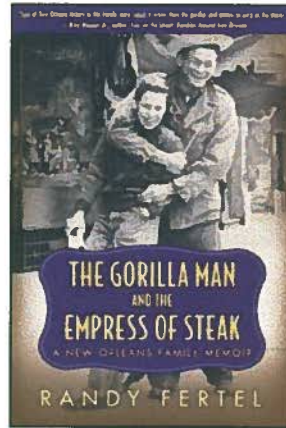
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[www.GorillaManOfNewOrleans.com](http://www.GorillaManOfNewOrleans.com)



**TOUR DATES for Randy Fertel,  
author of THE GORILLA MAN AND THE EMPRESS OF STEAK**



**NEW ORLEANS/LOUISIANA**

**October 9** – The Cabildo (Louisiana State Museum), sponsored by Faulkner Books

**October 11** – Octavia Books

**October 12** – Jung Society (Parker Memorial Church, 1130 Nashville Ave.)

**October 29** (Baton Rouge, LA) – Louisiana Book Festival

**November 10 – 13** – Words & Music Festival

**NASHVILLE**

**October 15** – Southern Festival of Books

**MISSISSIPPI**

**October 26** (Jackson, MS) – Lemuria Books

**October 27** (Oxford, MS) – Off Square Books (Thacker Mountain Radio)

**NEW YORK**

**November 2** – Housing Works Bookstore Café, sponsored by The Nation Institute

**NORTH CAROLINA**

**November 15** (Durham) – Regulator Bookshop

**November 16** (Chapel Hill) – Flyleaf Books, hosted by CHOP NC

**November 17** (Winston-Salem) – Barnes & Noble

**SAN FRANCISCO**

**December 7** – Chez Panisse (private dinner)

**December 8** – Book Passage, Ferry Building



## **ADVANCE PRAISE**

"New Orleans forms the richly atmospheric backdrop for a determined, eccentric family who found success in the steakhouse business...[a] zesty chronicle."

– ***Kirkus Reviews***

"Funny, smart, poignant, and richly redolent of New Orleans, Randy Fertel's *The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak* is a brilliant memoir by a very talented writer indeed."

– **Robert Olen Butler, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain***

"A vivid, engrossing evocation of New Orleans, an exceptional city, in part because of characters like his parents, Ruth and Rodney, the Empress of Steak and the Gorilla Man. A wonderful reading experience."

– **Susan Orlean, author of *The Orchid Thief* and *Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend***

"Randy Fertel's soulful Southern storytelling captures you instantly. I love how he uses the lens of family and food to tell the rich, complex history of New Orleans."

– **Alice Waters, Founder, Chez Panisse Restaurant**

"Ambition, abandonment, revenge, the Napoleonic code, broken promises, gorillas, bad contracts, evil intentions, and lawsuits never-ending; they're all here in Randy Fertel's feast of a memoir, served with a healthy side of New Orleans history, and, for dessert, *ville flottante!* Balzac would be envious, Tennessee Williams would feel right at home."

– **Valerie Martin, Orange Prize-winning author of *Property* and *Mary Reilly***

"A giant jambalaya of a book that throws into the pot a huge variety of ingredients that surprise, delight, burn the tongue, sear the heart, make you laugh until you cry—and beg for more. Randy Fertel's triumph, as a writer obsessed with history, is to have turned the story of his own disastrous family into the story of the city itself, and of its survival."

– **Betty Fussell, James Beard Foundation Award-winner and author of *Raising Steaks: The Life and Times of American Beef***

"His mother was the 'first lady of American restaurants.' His father was 'odd, self-centered and nuts.' Randy Fertel leverages a raucous New Orleans upbringing, in which Salvador Dali and Edwin Edwards play bit parts, to tell the story of an uncommon American family, defined, in equal measure, by bold swagger and humbling vulnerabilities."

– **John T. Edge, series editor of *Cornbread Nation: The Best of Southern Food Writing***

"Lots of New Orleans history in this family story, which is wilder than the gorillas and almost as juicy as the steaks."

– **Roy Blount Jr., author of *Feet on the Street: Rambles Around New Orleans***



"This memoir was a complete pleasure, beginning to end, full of love and zaniness and tenderness and absolutely fascinating detail. Randy Fertel was blessed with an incredible wealth of anecdote, and his prose brings it all vividly to life. What a fine piece of writing this is."

– **Tim O'Brien, National Book Award-winning author of *The Things They Carried***

"*The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak* is a one-of-a-kind real-life tale, as layered, rich, and full of surprises as a street map of New Orleans. Randy Fertel had the good fortune to be born to a pair of American originals, and his parents had the great fortune to live out their fascinating lives in front of a son who's a natural-born storyteller. This is one of my favorite books of the year."

– **Mark Childress, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Georgia Bottoms* and *Crazy in Alabama***

"With unsparing honesty and love, Randy Fertel unravels the mystery of his eccentric, legendary parents. *The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak* is by turns wry and sad, hilarious and heartbreaking, but always, always delectable."

– **Stewart O'Nan, award-winning author of *Emily, Alone***

"*The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak* is that rare memoir that manages to be both intimately personal and yet of broad appeal. For it is truly the portrait of a generation, even as it brings vividly to life a panoply of individual characters in New Orleans. They may be black or white or Creole; they may be male or female. But all fill the reader with joy and wonder, and a fair share of tears as well. Beautifully written, affectionate, witty, this book tugs us from one cover to the other."

– **David H. Lynn, Editor, *The Kenyon Review***

"This wonderfully affecting family memoir is a well-told tale of personalized social history, a sentient evocation of the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and feel of New Orleans and its sprawling interface with the mighty river and gulf that are its hope and despair, its inescapable fate. Drawing from 200 years of his family's thrive-and-survive presence on the lip of a watery grave, Randy Fertel gives us a palpable sense of its essence—as close as you can get without living there yourself."

– **John Egerton, author of *Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History***

"Who better to deliver the strange soul of New Orleans, a city we can't live without, than Randy Fertel? Ruth and Rodney's child, who suffered and gloried terribly at their hands, is New Orleans's latest beautiful family memoirist."

– **Paul Hendrickson, National Book Award finalist and author of *Looking for the Light: The Hidden Life and Art of Marion Post Wolcott***

"Fortune gave Randy Fertel this zany cast of characters: the shoplifting grandmother, the litigious, multi millionaire mother with a taste for the ponies, the father whose family made its money in pawn shops. But from this rich raw material he has added his own wit, meticulous research and gift for telling a tale. Read this book for the joy of it. But be forewarned. If you're not careful, you'll laugh your way into a knowledge of running a steak house, collecting debts from the mafia, and taking the *family* out of a 'family business.'"

– **Lois Eric Elie, Story Editor, HBO's *Treme*, co-producer, PBS's *Faubourg Treme***



## An interview with author Randy Fertel, author of **THE GORILLA MAN AND THE EMPRESS OF STEAK**

**Q: What inspired you to write this book?**

**A:** After years of teaching literature at the college level and writing about it, I attended the Kenyon Review Summer Workshop, a course in creative nonfiction. Both my parents were in their final days and, writing about what I knew about, the family stories started pouring out. My colleagues liked the colorful characters and the rich texture of New Orleans culture and history that I feel one needs to know to understand the family story. They kept urging that there was a book there. I resisted. The next year, Mom died in April. When I got on the plane to go back to Kenyon, the stories came pouring out again — I didn't even need the prompting of the class assignments. That summer when I hit on the name, *The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak: A New Orleans Family Memoir*, I knew I had to see it through. All told, that was ten years ago. A lot of work, but very satisfying.

**Q: Your mother, Ruth Fertel, was widely heralded as one of the great female entrepreneurs of her time. How would you describe her business sense? What made her so successful?**

**A:** I call Mom the “accidental entrepreneur.” While she had a vision of quality that infused and drove her career, she didn't have a vision of expansion. Opportunities came her way and she seized them, like the customer from Baton Rouge who insisted she let him open a franchise “or else I'll kill myself on the highway driving home drunk.” That's how her expansion began. She rode the wave of 60s franchising but, as far as I know, Ruth's Chris was the first upscale restaurant to franchise. So, quality and opportunism were important pieces of her success. Too, while Mom enjoyed the power that came with success, she didn't pull rank. She was present, right there with you, eye to eye. I can't tell you how many servers and cooks from around the country tell the story of seeing Mom in the kitchen slaving away during one of her three-week visits to open a new Ruth's Chris. If the shrimp needed peeling, there she was—with her 7-carat emerald-cut diamond—over the sink, peeling away.

**Q: Ruth came from a long line of great culinarians. What were family dinners like in her hometown of Happy Jack, down in Plaquemines Parish?**

**A:** Mom came from south of New Orleans in the Mississippi Delta — not the delta 200 miles to the north where the Blues were born, but the estuary at the mouth of the river. In that true alluvial Delta, there was nothing but topsoil, two hundred feet thick before bedrock, the result of eons of silt left by the river in its annual spring inundation. So, besides being great cooks, the family enjoyed an incredible abundance. They were rice farmers and orange growers. (Little-known fact: the best oranges in America come from Plaquemines Parish). Mom grew up in the Depression but used to say, “We never knew we were poor.” The deep Delta's land and the waters brimmed with redfish, trout, shrimp, crab, and oysters, duck, geese, dove and quail, deer, and rabbit, ripe for the picking, the foodstuffs that graced their bountiful table.

On top of that, they were Alsatian, “French French,” they'd explain, not Cajun, and so brought a bit of extra finesse to the table. Holiday dinners were Mom's opportunity to recreate the food she grew up with. Every Thanksgiving and Christmas saw a table that started with gumbo and ran through daube (roast beef braised in a red gravy), pork roast stuffed with whole toes of garlic, pique duck (stuffed with chopped garlic and parsley laced with cayenne), fricassée of rabbit, whole fried sweet and Idaho potatoes, broccoli and cauliflower au gratin, and creamed spinach from the expert hand of Uncle Martin. The stuffed turkey was almost an afterthought, a token gesture to local tradition. The pièce de résistance was oyster dressing made in the old days, as my cousin Audrey recalled, “in a giant washtub with 17 sacks of oysters that had been fished by the men in the family from the bottom of the bayou and then shucked.” It ended with half a dozen pies and cakes. Sometimes 35 people sat down to this rich repast, all cooked in a house with neither electricity nor gas, on a wood-burning stove without a thermostat. Ruth Ann, as she was known back then, looked on with eyes wide. I suspect nothing was lost on her.

**Q: A journalist once wrote that the original Ruth's Chris was “a place for carnivores to behave carnivorously.” Any favorite memories?**

**A:** Like many Ruth's Chris Steak Houses around the country, but especially so in New Orleans, the flagship



restaurant, which I ran in the late 80s, was a place to see and be seen, a place for power lunches and power dinners. Ruth's Chris was a place to cut deals — not all of them savory — and to water them. In the early days, Jim Garrison's JFK conspiracy grand jury had lunch in a private dining room on a weekly basis for months. The district attorney in New Orleans is powerful in part because of his generous budget to feed and water his flock. What do you say to the guy who is buying you your third Beefeater martini and piling your plate with more Lyonnaise potatoes and creamed spinach? *Sure, hang the guy . . . hey, would you pass the Chateaufort du Pape?* Then, there was the guy who sold the market short on Black Monday in October of 1987. He was about 5'2" but a giant that day and we had to run out to get more Dom Perignon. There were famous fistfights — as the one between the head of the city council and the mayor's majordomo (former Police Chief Joe Giarrusso vs. Jesuit-trained Hank Braden — in one punch). But most of the time, Ruth's Chris was infused with the spirit of *les bons temps* — that's what we pride ourselves on in New Orleans, the life well-lived.

**Q: Your book candidly details the circumstances that led you to sue your mother. Can you explain?**

**A:** Mom was wildly successful in the restaurant business, but she loved the gamble and was always getting into deals that went south. In 1975, when a real estate deal did so, she had to hide her principal asset, Ruth's Chris, by creating a trust in the name of her kids, my brother and me. In 1990, the same banker who had gotten her into that bad deal—and whom she rewarded by making him trustee—had gotten her into another. Everyone, including the trustee, looked to Ruth to bail them out. Trouble was, Ruth — and the trustee — needed the trust to put up as collateral to a Japanese bank, just at the time when the Japanese were scooping up Rockefeller Center and other iconic pieces of America. The trustee's signing over the trust would erase his \$3 million exposure. I thought that was self-dealing and I sued to stop it. It got very ugly; Mom and I didn't talk for several years. We eventually reconciled, but it was reconciliation on her terms.

**Q: You write that "my continuing motivation was not to be crazy like my father." Yet in reading your book, we come to see his true virtues, as well. Can you tell us a bit about these two sides of the Gorilla Man?**

**A:** Dad was charming to many and so managed to not seem "certifiable" — which, with the wisdom of youth, was how I saw him. Being determined "not to be crazy" means I spent a lot of time looking over my shoulder, worried about being "normal." I admire and envy Dad's freedom from that worry. In fact, he loved to stir it up. He was blessed with a certain self-assurance. He knew just what was good for you and was happy to tell you so. Dad was all-state in basketball, swimming and football, but the money he inherited at too early an age poisoned his one great gift, his passion for coaching. Instead of mentoring kids, he spent his life telling us all what to do. Being on the receiving end aggravated me all my life. In writing the book, I came to understand better where all that came from. When I cared for him on his death bed, I found I had a newborn sympathy that I never anticipated.

**Q: There's another main character in this story: New Orleans. What is it about New Orleans that so captures the imagination?**

**A:** After Katrina, one heard a lot about New Orleans as "the soul of America." There's something to that. There is no place in America more in touch, more accepting, of its dark side. Faulkner said that the only thing worth writing about was "the heart's conflict with itself." In New Orleans, dark and light are in open combat, and have been for centuries. So New Orleans culture and history are a deep mine that one can never get to the bottom of: race, sex, politics, music, food, indigenous culture, high culture — New Orleans is a very rich stew of all these complex topics. My research for the book was deeply rewarding. I feel I came to a new appreciation of a lot of the things that I love about New Orleans. I always loved them, now I understand them better and love them all the more.

**Q: What kind of work are you doing in New Orleans to carry on your mother's legacy?**

**A:** I run two foundations. The Fertel Foundation supports arts and educational initiatives, and is the primary supporter of the Ridenhour Prizes for Courageous Truth-telling, which celebrate whistleblowers and investigative journalists and documentarians ([Ridenhour.org](http://Ridenhour.org)). The Ruth U. Fertel Foundation is devoted strictly to education in New Orleans. It's being said that, since Katrina, New Orleans has been incubating the future of American education. I'm proud that, with our support of the Edible Schoolyard (ESYNOLA.org), the Artist Corps, and many other programs, we are part of this transformative work. We are also providing the lead grant for the Ruth U. Fertel Culinary Arts Building at the John Folse Culinary Institute at Nicholls State, which will break ground in 2012.



UNIVERSITY PRESS  
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# My Kind of Town NEW ORLEANS



## BEYOND BOURBON STREET

From out-of-the-way jazz joints to po' boy shacks, a native son shares his favorite haunts in the Big Easy **BY RANDY FERTEL** PHOTOGRAPHS BY TYRONE TURNER

**WHO CAN RESIST NEW ORLEANS? GUMBO AND OYSTER** po' boys, jazz and funky blues, the French Quarter and the Garden District. Eyes light up, mouths water, toes tap. I'm obsessed with New Orleans—explaining its uniqueness to myself and to visitors. My need to understand the city is perhaps inescapable. When I was 15, my mother bought Chris Steak House with its small but loyal clientele. I busbed its 17 tables and learned how to butcher heavy short loins. Before long, Mom added her name, and the famous Ruth's Chris Steak House chain of restaurants was born. Meanwhile, my father was making a name for himself too, running for mayor on a platform of bringing a gorilla to the New Orleans zoo. He got only 310 votes but kept his campaign promise by going to Singapore

and buying two baby gorillas he named Red Beans and Rice. As the son of the Empress of Steak and the Gorilla Man, how could I not become a New Orleans obsessive?

I take friends on what I call the "Fertel Funky Tour," meandering through sites the tour buses mostly miss. Once, some Parisian guests politely asked, "What ees thees 'fun-kee'?" I explained that "funky" means smelly. Buddy Bolden, arguably the first jazzman of them all, played at the Funky Butt, a music hall named for his song that begs us to "open up that window and let that bad air out." But funky also has come to mean the music played by groups such as the Funky Meters. Full of soul, it's the kind of music you gotta dance to—unless there's something wrong with you.

New Orleans is a Southern anomaly: in the



The author (above) takes friends on an insider tour that highlights New Orleans' "funky" soulfulness (top: an Uptown Mardi Gras parade).

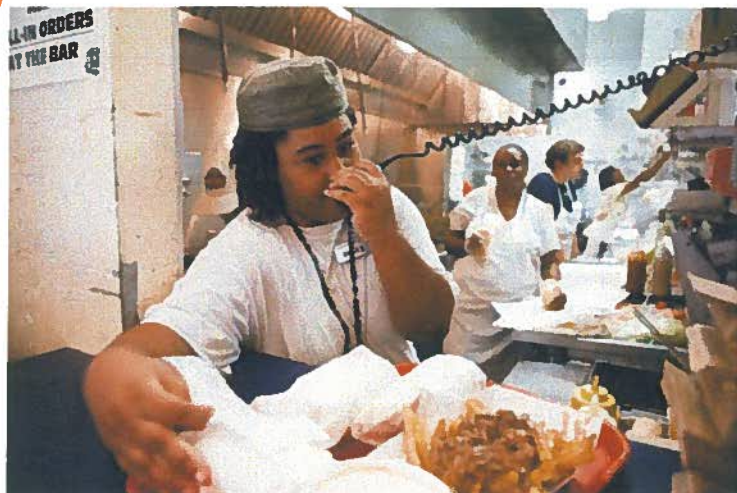
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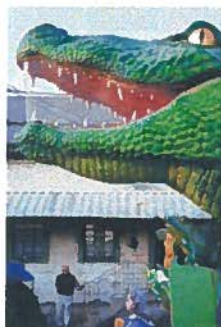


South but not of the South, more Catholic (or pagan) than Baptist, as much Caribbean (or Mediterranean) as American. Almost everything here bears explanation, even how we orient ourselves. Because of the curve in the Mississippi River that makes us the Crescent City, we look to its West Bank for the sunrise. North Rampart is east of South Rampart. Since standard directionals are unreliable, we use our own: Lake Pontchartrain is on one side of the city; the Mississippi River on the other. Riverside and lakeside, Uptown and Downtown, as the river flows: those make up our compass rose.

In our checkerboard of neighborhoods, accents tell a tale Professor Higgins might appreciate. The frequently satirized Yat dialect—from “Where you at?” meaning “How are you?”—was influenced by Irish immigrants and sounds more Brooklyn than Southern. But just lakeside of Magazine Street, the Uptown gentry never say Yat, except in jest, and never say “New Orleans.” They say “New Awe-yuns.”

Gentry. Yes, we do share the South’s love of bloodlines. For almost a century, colonial New Orleans was stratified by parentage, a society of exclusion shaped by the aristocratic traditions of France and Spain. Canal Street—said to be the widest street in America—separated the mutual animosities of the French Quarter and the American Sector. New Orleans medians are still called “neutral grounds” after the Canal Street no man’s land that separated their rival domains.

That impulse to exclude didn’t stop with the French. The Pickwick Club is a social club whose Anglo-American membership has, since the mid-19th century, manned the old-line Mardi Gras krewes—the groups that create the parade costumes and floats. In 1874, Pickwickians led a volunteer militia to the Battle of Liberty Place that



**New Orleans abounds in mouthwatering cuisine: Parkway Bakery (top) offers a roast beef po’ boy, which the author calls “terrestrial ambrosia.” An alligator Mardi Gras float (above) makes for impressive eye candy.**

overwhelmed the metropolitan police and struck the blow that led to Reconstruction’s end and to Jim Crow’s birth. In 1936, my great-grandfather Sam, a pawnbroker known widely as Money-Bags Fertel, wanted to play pinochle at the Pickwick, whose clubhouse on Canal he owned. Denied membership as a Jew, he refused the Pickwick a new lease. In 1991, some krewes, challenged by the city council to admit blacks and Jews, chose to withdraw from public parading.

Our city is bedeviled by such ingrained hierarchies. In 2010, the *Times-Picayune* noted that an old-line krewe had chosen a “relative newcomer” as Rex, King of Carnival. The newbie was in fact an Uptown pillar of the community who had lived here for 37 years.

Nor is prejudice the province of whites alone. The black Creoles of New Orleans, many descended from the colonial aristocracy and their slaves or the free women of color they took as concubines, embraced some of the same biases. Not that long ago, black Creole clubs like the Autocrat tendered a “paper bag test”—anyone darker than a paper bag was turned away.

Yet New Orleans slaves, under the French and Spanish colonial law, fared better than those in English colonies. Allowed to congregate on Sundays, they held market, danced to native drums and sang their call-and-response chants. Congo Square, in the heart of Tremé, the Downtown neighborhood across from the French Quarter, was the center of their social and spiritual world. Now called Louis Armstrong Park, Congo Square is the ur-birthplace of jazz and a key stop on my Funky Tour.

My worst fear is that, unguided, visitors will seek out the “true” New Orleans on Bourbon Street: drunken frat boys, bad music and T-shirt shops. After Congo Square, the lower French Quarter is where I take my guests—quiet, residential eye candy wherever you look. On lower Chartres Street, the Ursuline Convent dates from 1752, the oldest surviving French colonial building as well as the oldest structure in the Mississippi River Valley. Nearby, wrought- and cast-iron railings line the balconies—we call them galleries—adding shade to sidewalks and outdoor space to second and third floors. The vernacular architecture of the French Quarter is in fact largely Spanish. When Spain controlled the city (1763 to 1800), two fires swept away the typical French colonial plantation-like homes.

Highbrow and lowbrow intermingle at lunch. Galatoire’s, that bastion of haute Creole cuisine, still requires a jacket for evenings and Sundays, even

**IN OUR  
CHECKERBOARD OF  
NEIGHBORHOODS,  
ACCENTS TELL A  
TALE PROFESSOR  
HIGGINS MIGHT  
APPRECIATE.**



though its patrons must shoulder their way past strip clubs on Bourbon Street that call for only tassels on their dancers. On my tour, we lunch at the Parkway Bakery, which drew a thousand people when it reopened after Katrina. Most came for the roast beef po' boy, a kind of terrestrial ambrosia.

On the lakeside edge of Tremé, I head for the crossroads of Orleans and Broad, where my mother's flagship Ruth's Chris once stood. (She died in 2002, my father in 2003. After Katrina's flood, the corporation that now owns Ruth's Chris relocated the restaurant near the Convention Center.) Here, the power elite once clinched their deals over 16-ounce rib-eyes drowned in butter, creamed spinach (my great-uncle Martin's recipe) and generous martinis. When things got rowdy, Mom would take her servers aside and warn, "Easy on the drinks, girls, easy on the drinks."

Catty-corner from where the original Ruth's Chris stood lies the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the black Mardi Gras krewe that Louis Armstrong once proudly presided over as king. Across the street at F&F Botanica, my visitors ogle *gris-gris* jars filled with magic powders.

The Fertel Funky Tour then lands on South Rampart Street, which once housed the pawnshop of my immigrant great-grandparents, Sam and Julia Fertel. In the early decades of the 20th century, their world was an odd mixture—a claustrophobic, Orthodox Jewish mercantile enclave and the epicenter of a musical whirlwind. At the corner of Perdido and Rampart, in 1912, a young boy was arrested for firing a weapon and sent to the Colored Waifs' Home where he learned to play the cornet. Little Louis Armstrong later bought his first cornet, one door off that same corner, from Jake Link,



"Almost everything bears explanation, even how we orient ourselves," says Fertel (top: aerial view of New Orleans affirms why it's called the Crescent City; above: streetcar on Canal St.).

whose son Max, a jazz musician of note himself, married my great-aunt Nettie.

At that time, South Rampart Street sat on the edge of Back o' Town, with hundreds of joints saturated in music, booze and vice. These Uptown musicians drew upon an African musical template and preferred improvisation to written music.

While jazz was aborning Uptown in Back o' Town and South Rampart, the Downtown black Creole musicians in Tremé, having been trained in the orderly traditions of European classical music, disclaimed Buddy Bolden's "ratty" sounds. Separated geographically only by Canal Street, the Uptown and Downtown musicians hailed from different cultures and different worlds. But when Uptown greats such as Armstrong came into their own, Creoles could no longer look down their noses at them. As musicologist Alan Lomax put it, marrying the "hot blasts from black Bolden's horn" with "searing arpeggios from light [Lorenzo] Tio's clarinet burned away the false metal of caste prejudices."

Visitors on the Funky Tour enjoy the fruits of that marriage at the Thursday gig of Kermit Ruffins and the Barbecue Swingers at Vaughan's, a Downtown dive in Bywater—his band so named because trumpeter Ruffins often brings his grill and serves ribs and red beans during the break. On Fridays, we travel a bit farther Uptown to Snug Harbor to hear the cooler contemporary jazz stylings of pianist Ellis Marsalis, father to four great jazz musicians and teacher to many more.

In such musicians you can hear the jazz marriage of Uptown and Downtown, high-toned and down-low funky that reshaped American and world culture. My visitors are drawn to New Orleans to pay homage to that union. Still heard in joints all over town, that music, at once heavenly and earthy, makes me forever proud to be both *from* and *of* New Orleans. ○

**WHEN THINGS  
GOT ROWDY, MOM  
WOULD TAKE  
HER SERVERS  
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DRINKS, GIRLS.**

**RANDY FERTEL's memoir, *The Gorilla Man and the Emperor of Steak*, comes out next month.**

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