

Best of Besh

New Orleans chef and native son John Besh shares his love of cuisine—and of Louisiana.

BY JENNIFER MCKENZIE FRAZIER



LEFT: The flavors of local shrimp, Moroccan spices, and couscous infuse the Gulf Shrimp Tajine at La Provence. **ABOVE:** John Besh at his restaurant August

John Besh has become the face of New Orleans. When you drive into town, you see his inviting, kind smile on billboards. Commercials for “My Louisiana” show him singing the city’s praises. When he talks of his many successes (including a James Beard Award, a win on *Iron Chef America*, and dozens of Top lists), he always gives credit to his beloved home.

He runs four restaurants (August, Lüke, Besh Steak, and La Provence), with another (Domenica) just opening. He stuck through Hurricane Katrina and helped by feeding many of those who lost their homes.

The next time you’re in New Orleans, plan to experience one or more of his restaurants. Read on to see what sets each apart.

August

Personality: This James Beard Award winner is elegant, sophisticated, and impressive. White tablecloths, fresh flowers, and candlelight set the mood.

Before You Go: You won’t get in without reservations. Men will want to dress in a coat. Open seven nights a week and Fridays for lunch.

www.restaurantaugust.com

What To Order: Menu changes with the season. A must: the signature appetizer, potato gnocchi tossed with blue crab and Perigold truffle. John suggests the sugar-and-spice duckling with Anson Mills grits.

Price: Three courses with wine, \$85 per person. August offers a five-course chef’s tasting for \$75 per person (without wine).

Lüke

Personality: A tribute to the old brasseries that used to be popular here. Expect newspaper reading and meeting locals in this casual favorite.

Before You Go: This is one of the hottest places in town (open 7 a.m.-11 p.m. daily) so you’ll want a reservation for lunch, although they aren’t required. You can don casual Saturday hangout clothes in this easygoing atmosphere.

www.lukeneworleans.com

What To Order: Known for its impressive raw bar. Go for some oysters followed by the Louisiana red fish amandine or the jumbo shrimp “en cocotte.” Also try the custom house brews.

Price: \$25 a person if you go for breakfast or lunch.

TRAVEL

Besh Steak

Personality: While dining here in Harrah's Casino, you can hear the slot machines ching-ching. This local steak house, with Blue Dog art hanging on the walls, features New Orleans classic cuisine more than any of the other restaurants.

Before You Go: You can go without reservations to this dinner-only spot, but if you want a quieter table, call ahead. The atmosphere is casual, and you'll see a little bit of everything.

(504) 533-6111

What To Order: Steak, steak, and more steak. Go for the Besh Barbecue Shrimp as an appetizer. Order the 38-ounce Cowboy Steak, if you dare, or the house-made Natchitoches meat pies.

Price: The Cowboy Steak costs \$55 and comes with roasted potatoes and root vegetables. Average steak entrées cost \$35-\$45; fish plates run \$25-\$27.

La Provence

Personality: Bring the entire family for an evening meal at this working farm in Lacombe, across Lake Pontchartrain. The menu pays tribute to Provence and all of its flavors. Browse the grounds, and see the pigs and chickens before leaving.

Before You Go: Reservations recommended. Open for dinner Wednesday-Sunday, Sunday brunch, and Friday lunch. They describe dress as "smart casual" (you might feel underdressed without a jacket). www.laprovencrestaurant.com

What To Order: Salad of heirloom beets with blue crab, arugula, and Plaquemines Parish citrus; the house-made Assiette de Charcuterie (foie gras, sausages, and pâtés); Ma Bouillabaisse.

Price: \$60 per person if you do three courses (this includes wine). Without, you can get an entrée for \$22-\$25 each.

Q&A With John Besh

When did you know you wanted to be a chef?

A family tragedy at age 9 and my father's convalescence that followed prompted me to cook breakfast for my family each morning. I began working in local restaurants at age 13 where I caught the "chef bug."

Why do you remain in the New Orleans area? Have you ever thought about relocating out of the South?

I remain here perhaps because no other city would have me...The South is who I am, and I'm doing my best to see to it that my four boys grow up with the same appreciation for both our New Orleans and Southern cultures.

What are your favorite New Orleans food haunts?

For breakfast, Elizabeth's in the Bywater—don't miss the praline bacon and calas "tout chaud." For Vietnamese it would be Ba Mien in the New Orleans East. For a po'boy it's Parkway Bakery on Bayou St. John; for creole it's the Bon Ton on Magazine and Natchez; for the scene and for my favorite waiter, Mr. John, I go to Galatoire's on Bourbon. Then there are my chef friends like Donald Link at Cochon, Scott Boswell at Stanley, and John Harris at Lilette. The best ice cream is La Divina Gelateria. ●



South of France meets South Louisiana at La Provence.



LEFT: Fried chicken and waffles (\$20) served with local kumquats is a favorite Southern breakfast item at Luke.



BELOW: John and chef de cuisine Erik Loos cultivate a French feel in both decor and dining at La Provence.