



Clockwise from top left: A view down West Third Street in downtown Thibodaux in Lafourche Parish, La. Gumbo is a Cajun staple. The John Folse Culinary Institute offers classes in Cajun and Creole cuisine. E.D. White Historic Site. The owner of Chine's Cajun Net Shop still makes and fixes nets by hand. TIM MUELLER (WEST THIRD STREET, GUMBO, CULINARY INSTITUTE); LOUISIANA'S CAJUN BAYOU (E.D. WHITE, NET SHOP)

From grits to glory

Marsha Lederman fills up on beignets, fried shrimp and more in Louisiana, where the Acadian history is as rich as what's on her plate

Heading to Louisiana for the first time, the Cajun Bayou my destination, I was imagining overflowing seafood platters, late nights listening to live music, lots of swampy nature, maybe some reptile sightings.

I wasn't wrong; the Cajun food and fun that I had always associated with this part of the world were all on offer. And I enjoyed driving up and down Bayou Lafourche, southwest of New Orleans, checking out the views, the fishing boats, the exotic (to my eyes, anyway) birds and waterfowl. It is gorgeous here.

But what finally brought me down here was the area's history – and its close ties to Canada.

The history of Louisiana is closely connected with the history of Nova Scotia, once called *Acadie* or *Acadia*. The word Cajun, I was reminded on the Bayou, comes from “Acadian.” “*Les Acadiens*” or “*les Cadiens*” – say it fast – became “the Cajuns.”

In Lafourche Parish, about an hour's drive from New Orleans, evidence of this connection is everywhere: in the language, the music, the food, even in people's names and the architecture. On a walking tour of the parish's largest city, Thibodaux (pronounced TIH-bih-dowe, rather than how I've heard it in Canada, TEE-bih-dowe), there are Acadian-style cottages still in use as residences, with their steep, sloping roofs and dormer windows.

It's in the gene pool, too. Many people here are descended from Acadians.

At the E.D. White Historic Site, I enjoyed a traditional Cajun lunch with locals. There was gumbo with roux cooked over the fireplace, fish fried right on the porch, cornbread, coleslaw and mashed potatoes – which you spoon *into* the gumbo. I asked those gathered around the table to put up their hands if they had Acadian roots. Every one of them did (except for my guide, who moved here from New Jersey).

In 1755, amid war between France and England, the British expelled thousands of Acadians from what is now Eastern Canada; they had refused to swear allegiance to the king. This is now known as *le Grand dérangement* – the Great Upheaval. Families were separated, farms seized, people sent away on unseaworthy ships. Thousands were dispersed through the American colonies, some finally making it to safety in Louisiana after 10 years.

Others returned to France, where the Acadians originated. Then in 1785, hundreds sailed west across the ocean, this time to Louisiana to reunite with family and friends who had arrived earlier.

The best place to learn about this history in Thibodaux is the Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center at the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve.

The museum documents this migration – starting with their expulsion from what is now Canada to better times, as Acadian ways were adapted for life on the bayou, with its different climate, trees, swampy marine conditions and edible offerings, including shrimp.

“We had Acadian generations settling all the way down to the coast, carrying their culture with them in the wilderness,” said John Doucet, a professor at the Center for Bayou Studies at Nicholls State University. “So that lays the groundwork for an incredibly pervasive culture.”

That culture is on display far beyond the museum – including in food offerings up and down the Bayou. (That's how directions are given here – up the Bayou is north, down is south.)

“If it slithers, crawls, flies, we're going to eat it,” said Randy Cheramie, an instructor and former executive director of the Chef John Folse Culinary Institute in Thibodaux, which offers classes in Cajun and Creole cuisine. “That's what's so great about living in Louisiana is that it's a swamp-floor pantry.”

To the best of my knowledge, I ate nothing that slithers during my visit. But you may choose to be more adventurous than I was.

I did eat shrimp I don't know how many ways: fried, grilled, in pasta and po'boys; with sides of grits, slaw and French fries. I learned the delights of gumbo, in the bowl and in local lore. “I can tell who made a gumbo by tasting it,” Cheramie said. “We cook down family lines.”

In these parts, there's an enduring story locals tell concerning a quintessential Cajun delicacy and its mythical Acadian roots. When the Acadians were forced to leave what is now Canada, the legend goes, the lobster – so important to their diet back home – tried to follow them to Louisiana. But because the journey was so long and difficult, the lobsters got smaller and smaller and became crawfish.

You can eat your weight in crawfish around here. Dine at five participating restaurants or food festivals that are part of the Cajun Bayou Food Trail, and you'll earn yourself a Cajun Bayou T-shirt.

To work off some of those fried-fish calories, consider attending one of the twice-monthly jams hosted by the Cajun Music Preservation Society. Dancing is encouraged, as is jamming along – even if your instrument of choice is a chair you tap to the beat with your fork. Close your eyes and listen to this Cajun music with its fiddles, accordions and triangles, and you feel like you could be back in *Acadie*.

There is a pride in this history now, but it wasn't always like this. There was barely knowledge of it, even going back just a couple of generations.

At a French Table, or Cercle Francophone, where locals practise their French (visitors are welcome), person after person descended from Acadians here recalled how their grandparents were punished for speaking French at school because of prohibitive laws dating back to 1916.

In 1968, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana was founded to revitalize French here, bringing francophone teachers to the state from all over the world, including Canada. In the 1974 Constitution, the prohibitive linguistic laws were done away with. By the late 1980s, a cultural renaissance was under way.

“For me, being in Louisiana was sort of, in one sense, being home,” said Nova Scotia's Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie, Colton LeBlanc, who travelled to the state in 2022 to sign a memorandum of understanding recognizing the close ties between the province and the state, including tourism opportunities. “There are a lot of similarities between both Louisiana and Nova Scotia: the pride of our cultures, pride in our people and our history. And there's a joie de vivre that if you're in Nova Scotia, you see it, and likewise in Louisiana.”

The Acadian World Congress – or Congrès mondial acadien – celebrating Acadian and Cajun Culture, is held every five years. There's music, food, academic conferences and family reunions. Thousands attend. This year's CMA will be held this August in southwestern Nova Scotia, in the Acadian regions of Argyle and Clare.

There are 17 Acadian Odyssey monuments in eastern North America commemorating the expulsion of the Acadian people and their gruelling journeys. You can find them in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, PEI, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Miquelon Island and Louisiana.

Officials in Lafourche (the “r” is silent) Parish are hoping to make it 18, with plans to apply for their own monument. It will be one more important spot for Canadians with ties to Acadian culture – and the rest of us – to visit.

The writer was a guest of Louisiana's Cajun Bayou Tourism. It did not review or approve the story before publication.

IF YOU GO

While down here, be sure to make time for the great outdoors; there are swamp tours, where you can spot alligators and nutrias (semi-aquatic rodents). You can rent a kayak or paddle board and explore the bayou from the water. Or try your hand at fishing the Bayou waters.

A fascinating stop is Chine's Cajun Net Shop in Golden Meadow, which has been around for more than 50 years and where the octogenarian owner still makes and fixes nets by hand. Most of its nets these days are used to trawl for trash at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. Questions about local fishing culture are always welcome.

Hungry? Don't let the non-descript exterior for **Spahr's Seafood** (Thibodaux) fool you; inside, the breakfast offerings (crab-cake Benedict, shrimp and grits) are as Cajun as the decor, which includes an alligator skull with twinkly lights in its spiky jaws. I recommend sharing a plate of beignets – fried pastry dough balls in powdered sugar (think Timbits but warm and fancier).

At **Kajun Twist & Grill** (Lockport), fish chips (forget the “and”) are a big draw: thin-sliced catfish fried in batter served with a homemade tartar sauce. Also on offer: fried shrimp, fried oysters, fried fish and fried chicken. And a few things that aren't fried, including a variety of po'boys.

I ate probably the best brisket sandwich of my life at **Big Mike's BBQ Smokehouse** (Thibodaux and Houma) but just couldn't find room for the mac 'n' cheese balls.

Cinclare serves delicious contemporary southern cuisine paired with inventive cocktails – a fine-dining experience in a renovated historic space in downtown Thibodaux.

Gina's at the Legion (Thibodaux) hosts the Cajun Music Preservation Society's jams the first and third Wednesday of every month, from 6-9 p.m.

At the **Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve's Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center** (Thibodaux), visitors can find a comprehensive account of Acadian history. But the facility also houses a gallery for local artwork and a gift shop and offers walking tours of the historic downtown led by park rangers. Outside, head to the waterfront boardwalk to take a stroll and contemplate life on the Bayou.

The **E.D. White Historic Site** (Thibodaux) was once the home of Edward Douglass White, Louisiana's only U.S. Supreme Court justice, but the house and grounds are now a Louisiana state museum where visitors can learn more about the history of the area – Acadian and otherwise. Artifacts displayed include a framed honorary degree presented to White by McGill University in 1913.

When it's time to turn in, consider **Bouverans B&B** (Lockport) – an 1860 homestead, listed on the national registry of historic places, which has been restored by the original builder's great-great grandson. Named for the builder's hometown in France, the brick-and-frame house combines French Creole and American Greek Revival architectural features. The guest rooms are named for the current owners' daughters. Outside, there are gardens and a massive oak tree. bouverans.com

There's also **Hampton Inn & Suites** (Thibodaux), which offers comfortable rooms, a generous breakfast buffet and friendly staff. Conveniently located among big box stores in Thibodaux's business centre, it might not be able to boast much in the way of southern charm, but it more than makes up for it in its southern hospitality.

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