

Culinary

TRENDS

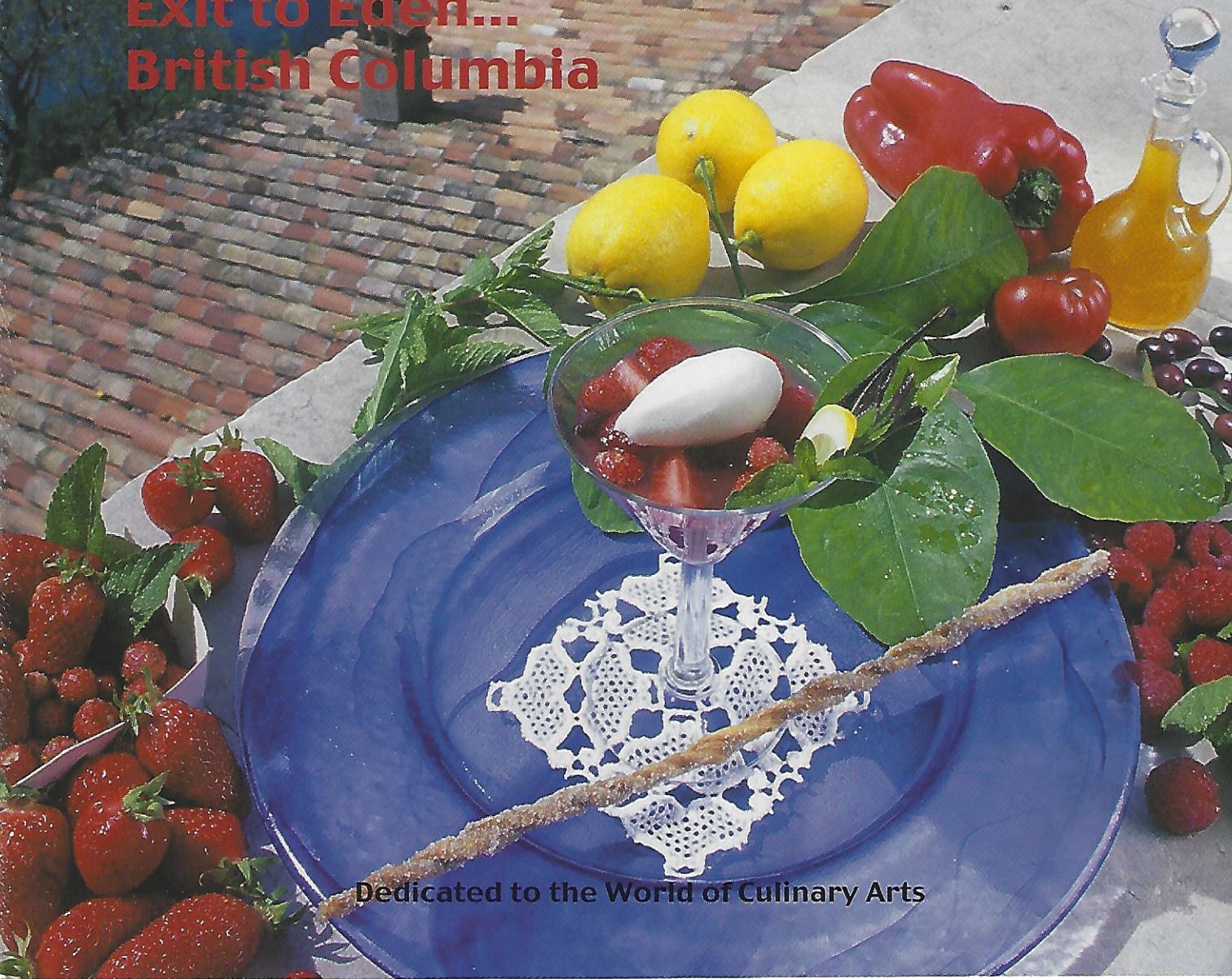
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La Chevre d'Or

The Lure of Lavender

Exit to Eden...
British Columbia



Dedicated to the World of Culinary Arts

BY FRAN SEVERN

North of N'Awlins

New Orleans' lively cooking scene is peopled with chefs whose equally lively personalities reflect their approach to food and dining. Two of the finest eschew the Big Easy for the parishes north of the city. For John Folse it's a homecoming, while Kim Kringlie adopted Louisiana without abandoning his Midwest prairie roots. Together, they provide an overview of the delight chefs find when they work near other enthusiastic professionals. Their ideas blend like ingredients in a marinade, enhancing everyone's kitchen.

John Folse

John Folse is not so much a chef as he is an industry. His restaurant, Lafitte's Landing at Bittersweet Plantation in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, is a magnet for lovers of good food – and in Louisiana, that's everyone who can hold a knife and fork. In addition, he has six cookbooks to his credit and is working on the seventh, hosts a weekly radio show and TV series, oversees the John Folse Culinary Institute at Nicholls State University, owns a food manufacturing company, a catering company, events management company, and White Oak Plantation – a special events venue. He opened the first US restaurant in Moscow, with Presidents Reagan and Gorbachov cutting the ribbon and organized the first state dinner given by the Vatican.

With all that, he still thinks of himself as a local boy, doing well professionally and trying to do good by participating in the economic development of his town. While any city would welcome him, Chef Folse chose to establish himself in Donaldsonville, a dab of a town on the Mississippi River. When his original restaurant burned in 1998, he

declined several offers to open establishments elsewhere. Instead, he restored what was then his personal residence into an 80-seat restaurant and inn. To him, it was the natural progression of his career.

"It may be a little difficult to pinpoint what has been the most satisfying thing in my career, but I have to say it's probably what I'm doing now. Everything prior has been a learning experience, I think, to prepare me for what we are doing now. And that is taking a small, unique restaurant in a very interesting, historic town, and creating an ambiance and a cuisine that will inspire people to drive 70 or 80 miles to experience it."

Chef Folse bucks the trend of developing eclectic recipes that combine ingredients alien to each other. His style is traditional, focusing on fresh local ingredients and classic cooking techniques. How then does he account for his enduring popularity and esteem?

"I think historically and culturally prepared cuisine authentically presented is a trend. I think it's been a trend forever. People are always trying to do new and exciting things, but to try to create something that is to-



Chef John Folse

tally opposite to the ingredients, the climate, the ambiance of an area that you're in makes no sense. Fusion is great as long as you remember to have the strongest foundation. I think cultural can be trendy and that remaining true to your roots is trendy too, as long as you're ever evolving and ever growing with what you are doing."

From the popularity of Lafitte's Landing, it's obvious that his message is as accepted and welcome as iced tea on the veranda on a sultry summer afternoon.

"People know us now. They understand the types of foods that we do. They understand the cuisine we are involved in. They understand our mission a bit better. It's not only about serving food. It's about serving great food with historical and cultural inspiration."

One of the proofs of that is the response to his annual Easter dinner. The menu was built around items served in the region in 1860. Brown roux-based oyster stew served in puff pastry, shoulder roast of lamb braised with fresh vegetables, soft-shelled crab stuffed with cornbread, and trout en papillote graced the table. He served 160 guests at three settings that day.

"We gave everybody not only a good meal, but a bit of historical significance as well, which I think is very important in a house and a restaurant like this."



Lafitte's Landing Restaurant at Bittersweet Plantation

But whether the style of cooking is traditional, avant guard, or down-home, he feels all great chefs share the same fundamental trait.

"A great chef is someone with huge passion—someone who is so inspired by learning that they can never get enough and they have just an unquenchable desire to taste that flavor that they have never tasted before. And that fabulous passion comes back to be interpreted in their cuisine."

Kris Kringlie

It's a long drive from the plains of North Dakota to the Louisiana bayou country. While Chef Kris Kringlie enjoys the South, he still appreciates his roots. So much so that he named his restaurant in honor of his home. It's Dakota, hailed by *Gourmet Magazine* as one of New Orleans' area best restaurants.

A close associate of John Folse (he played a major role in opening Folse's Moscow restaurant and worked at several of his properties), Chef Kringlie worked in kitchens around the country before deciding to return to Louisiana and opening Dakota. Since then, he's opened two other restaurants: Cre Ola, a casual restaurant in Mandeville (also on New Orleans' North Shore), and his newest venture, the very upscale Cuvee on Rue Magazine in the city. Overseeing the properties keeps him very busy, but he knows he can trust his staff.

"The menu at Cuvee is a little different. I have an executive chef down there and I kind of let him do his own thing to a strong degree. Any time he implements menus, I just kind of sit in and get a feel for what he's doing. I kind of oversee, but it's

been real good."

While each restaurant caters to a different audience, the principles behind the style and techniques are similar.

"I think textures are real important with food. I like simplicity so you can taste what it's supposed to taste like. We'll go into other influences. It's not really Louisiana food, but it's something more of a lighter fare. We'll do different things – like lobster pot-stickers or smoked lamb and goat cheese enchiladas. We'll go into a lot of different styles of ethnic cooking, but still keeping it in the Louisiana fare as much as we feel possible."

Developing new recipes at one time meant browsing through cookbooks to see what other chefs were thinking, but "there doesn't seem to be much going on." While still paying attention to trends and his contemporaries, Chef Kringlie concentrates on keeping his own menu fresh and seasonal.

"We obviously try to lighten things up in the summer. We get into a few more exotic vinaigrettes and more salads. We've have a lighter style and a lot of exotic vegetables, like popcorn shoots, pea shoots, micro greens, daikon sprouts. In the winter, we get into a little more heavier items. We do wild game and things like that."

As a chef, "It would be fun just to be on the creative side, but in the business sense, you have to ask what



Chef Kris Kringlie

the customer is looking for. You always have to do new and interesting things and really bring in the ingredients that the customers really want. You can't become too arrogant about what you want to do."

For example, while he loves sweetbreads and orders them whenever he spots them on a menu, "in this market, things like that never really sell. People would rather have crab meat or lobster."

So he carefully balances his menu. "We try to keep some things almost mainstream. We are not trying to intimidate our customers by coming up with bizarre words that nobody understands." Some of his regulars want things "very cut and dried. Those are people who are very comfortable with who we are and what we are."

Dakota also has a wine cellar that's impressive even in a city well-stocked with well-stocked wine cellars.

"We have an over \$100-thousand wine inventory. We are allocated a lot of wines that most people can't get. My partner, Kenny LaCour, does all the wine buying and he travels quite often to California, where he tries to buy wines that aren't commonly available."

He also has a large following of "feed me" folks. "People say they don't want a menu, just want a five-course meal or a seven-course meal. That's where we cut loose and put together whatever we want to. It's spontaneous. You put together something you've never put together before, you taste it, and you look at it, and the response is, "That's great." ☞

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