

EVERYBODY LUNCH NOW

On midday possibilities, old and new

BY JOHN KESSLER

NEW ORLEANS—I HAVE A QUESTION. IF YOU ARE PART OF THE insane scene having lunch at Galatoire's on Friday, and it's not just any Friday but Friday the thirteenth before Halloween, so women wear witches' hats and capes over their pearls and cardigans, and boisterously celebratory groups intersperse with tables of blue-suited burghers, and a young woman from a birthday party next to you has just glitter-bombed your table, and wine bar owner and mayoral candidate Patrick Van Hoorebeek makes the rounds in a pork pie hat and lavender blazer (he would win less than one-half percent of the vote in the primary the next day), and your waitress shows you iPhone pictures of her childhood with the Neville Brothers' kids, and you're already a couple of drinks in—with all this going on, is it okay to say, "Excuse me, sir, but would you get your ass off my foot?"





The posterior in question was ensconced inside a tailored seersucker suit, and it landed on my crossed leg not once, not twice, but three times as its owner leaned over and sometimes squatted to talk to the comely glitter-bomber next to me. He moved loudly through cramped spaces with a kind of white-male-in-a-seersucker-suit-in-New-Orleans privilege that would have infuriated me had I not been having such a good time. Had not everyone been having such a good time, had not the very spirit of that ambient good time told me to just go with it. I briefly considered daubing a bit of the silky béarnaise sauce served with our soufflé potatoes on the sole of my shoe, but that would have been churlish.

Friday lunch at Galatoire's is, as far as meals go, a most specific dining experience. In a town that ritualized this particular meal (many local restaurants only open for lunch on Fridays), Galatoire's holds a special lore. It is famous for its first-come, first-served democracy: To be seated in the restaurant's main dining room with all the action, you must get in line early. It is famous for its line-sitters, the paid men who game the system by camping out on folding chairs for most of the night and secure reservations for their patrons. It is famous for the sweetness and ecumenism of its front-door staff, who try to accommodate everyone, making room for curious tourists as well as regulars and city grandees. If you miss a spot at the 11:30 a.m. seating, they may agree to text your phone if and when they turn a table. If you are politely beseeching, they work with you. It's a club, but not always an exclusive one.

Is Galatoire's the best lunch in the best lunch city in America? I think so.

When I worked as a line cook in Denver

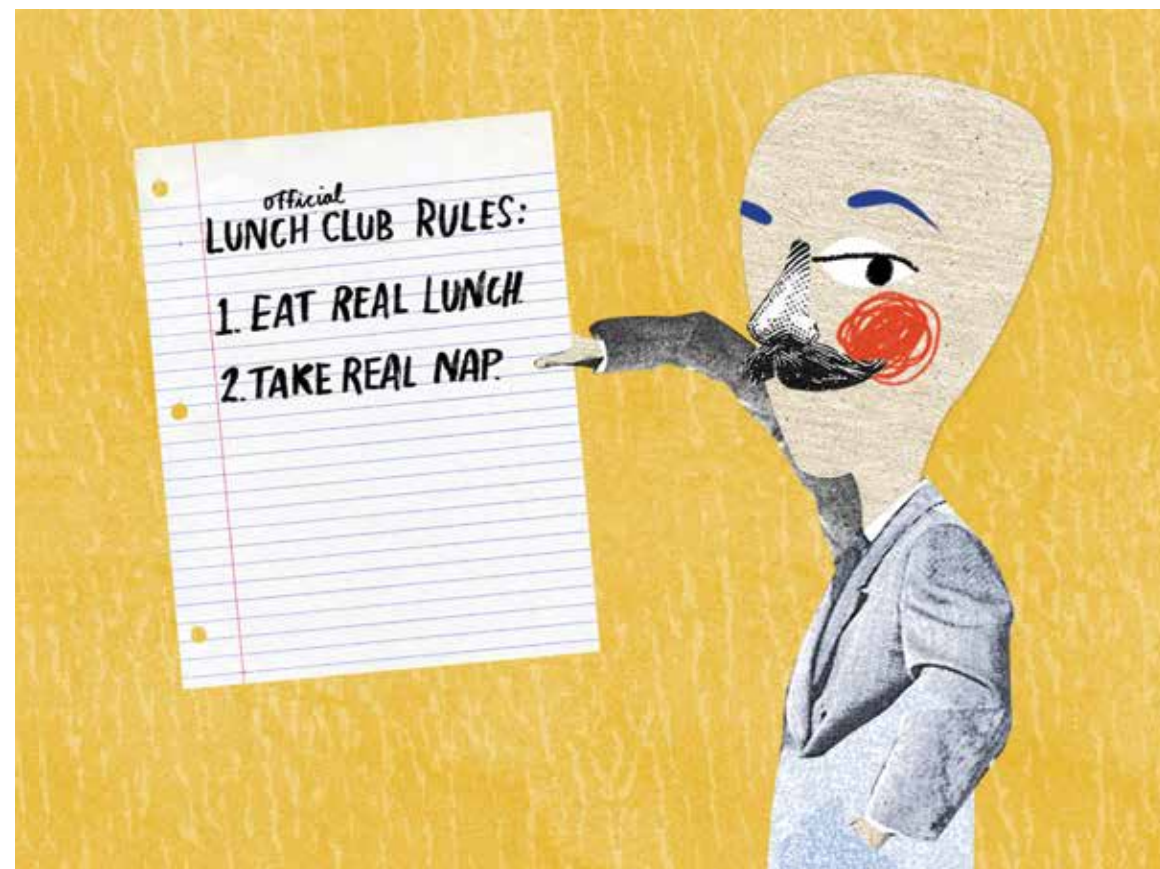
thirty years ago, Friday lunch was still a thing there. On Thursdays I could run the entire kitchen at an expensive restaurant, moving from grill to broiler, from salads to desserts, and comfortably serve our ten or twelve guests. On Fridays we brought in two more cooks and often topped out at sixty covers. People came and stayed. They drank, they tipped well. One waiter received a line of cocaine in his check fold. It was a different crowd.

But in 1990, I began reviewing restaurants and discovered that the culture of lunch had been eroding for decades. A few spots still attracted the Friday crowd, but mostly I reviewed "express lunch"

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menus at the city's favorite steakhouses to keep from blowing my budget on a second dinner. The bigger story I tracked as a reporter was the emergence of fast-casual dining, which Denverites took to like ChapStick on a ski slope. I can still visualize the lines snaking around the first Chipotle.

By the time I moved to Atlanta in 1997, the indulgent lunch seemed a thing of the past. Yes, of course, the beloved institutions were packed—places like Mary Mac's Tea Room and Busy Bee Cafe, Carver's Country Kitchen, and Matthews Cafeteria, which I approached more as an anthropologist than a diner. Atlanta was and in many ways still is a city of



lunchrooms—a midday meal that comes from a completely different tradition.

I was reminded when I went to Mexico City this past spring and used as my guide the estimable Jennifer V. Cole, who knew the town and where to eat. "Why do all the restaurants close at six?" I texted her from Mexico. "Because it's a lunch town!" she texted back.

On Jennifer's recommendation my wife and I visited the seafood restaurant Contramar with friends, arriving around noon. The first thing our head waiter did was stop time. He and his team had us soon drinking wine and looking at an iced platter of clams and shrimp. There were whole fish to consider,

and soft-shell crabs to crisp on the plancha, hack into chunks and roll in fresh tortillas. How hungry were we? Did we want courses or platters? We ordered a few dishes; he pushed for one or two more, including sopas, little masa cakes topped with beans and adobo-rubbed kingfish that came just at the point in the meal when stomachs growled for more than clams and ceviche. When I turned to order another bottle of wine, he had already brought one to the table, just in case.

We spent four hours there. How, I don't know; we ate and drank but not to excess. We looked at the desserts, then ordered a couple. We had espresso and talked,



the conversation lively but not absorbing. Here we were—4 p.m.!—suddenly rushing across town to change for a too-early dinner and then a concert. What we really needed was a nap.

When you eat a real lunch, it opens up a wormhole where time and space don't matter, yet before you can reenter the real world you must take a nap. That's the first rule of Lunch Club. That's why business executives in the 1960s had sofas in their offices. That's why people from Spain to Iran build naps into their days.

New Orleans is the only American city I can think of that still *gets* lunch—both the lost tradition of lunch I'm obsessed with and a development I will dub New Lunch. But let's hold on to that thought and get back to Galatoire's with its bentwood chairs and its green fleur-de-lys wallpaper, its octagon-tile floor and that light. That butter-yellow afternoon light that seems to cast an Instagram filter on one's very existence. I am so happy to have survived the morning line, to have that man off my foot, to have a French 75 in my hand, and to be toasting my brother, Tom, sitting across the table from me with a martini. The drinks are potent, so we sip slowly; we're not going anywhere, and inebriation happens in good time.

Having blown the stray bits of glitter off my butter plate, I turn from the soufflé potatoes to long batons of fried eggplant. I eat them with my fingers, as people here have for decades, dipping them in powdered sugar, which make no earthly sense except it does. The sugar runs roughshod over the trace of bitterness in the eggplant, and leaves the sensation of biting into vegetal cream.

Tom compliments a passing woman on her hat, which has a brim as wide as

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a manhole cover, and she hugs him. We have green salads, named here for the color of the dressing rather than the leaves, and black drum meunière with chunks of buttery crabmeat scattered atop. We get to know our waitress and some folks at a nearby table celebrating a birthday. We drink Chablis, eat caramel cup custard, and three hours pass. I feel kind of floaty by the end of it.

I DIDN'T FEEL that old-school lunch magic anywhere else in New Orleans, though I understand the mood gets close at Clancy's in Uptown. Dooky Chase's Restaurant was delightful if quiet, with ninety-four-year-old Leah Chase stopping by the tables. Boucherie also seemed subdued despite its many porcine pleasures. But here's where New Lunch comes in.

Consider New Lunch a meal psychically tied to breakfast and not a Mini Me dinner. If you loosen the definition of breakfast to make room for grain bowls and tartines amid pastries and bacon, then lunch becomes the next logical next step. Jessica Koslow's Los Angeles restaurant, Sqirl—with its bible-thick brioche toasts smeared with ricotta and jam, and its sorrel rice bowl—has led the way.

While New Lunch didn't start in New

Orleans, the Crescent City has embraced it. The link that binds New Lunch to breakfast is, of course, avocado toast, a creation so versatile in execution that you can't roll your eyes at it and dismiss it as a stupid trend. At Willa Jean in the Central Business District it arrives with a poached egg, serrano chiles, pistachios, and sunflower seeds, and it looks equally at home across the table from huevos rancheros and a loaf of chef Kelly Fields' cornbread as it does from a fried chicken biscuit, a grilled wahoo sandwich, or kale Caesar salad. You'll probably be tempted at lunch to order a "frosé, y'all" (a rosé wine slushie that has become a Willa Jean hallmark), and then another, and the lunch space opens up just a bit. No, you're not staying for three hours, or even two hours, but you have reclaimed the midday fulcrum: You feel balanced, and for the instant you're not going anywhere.

New Lunch breaks down old orthodoxies, nowhere more so than at Turkey and the Wolf, the fast-casual spot *Bon Appétit* chose as its new restaurant of the year. Mason Hereford creates sandwiches, salads, and a few other items that suggest the realm of food trucks and Tasty videos, mashups so over the top they defy reason. You bite into his fried bologna and potato chip sandwich—impossibly thick, but not so thick an unhinged jaw cannot fit over it—and you don't care that your hands turn greasy with mayo and butter, and your head is ringing with the sheer crunchitude of the whole business. He sells it. Then you have a forkful/faceful of cabbage salad shot through with fried pig ears and gobs

of roasted chile vinaigrette. Are you running out of steam? No worries: A tallboy and sheer animal desire keep you company throughout lunch. It is a meal of snarfable serotonin.

New Orleans-based chef and writer Tunde Wey wrote a thoughtful piece for the *San Francisco Chronicle* questioning *Bon Appétit's* recognition of Turkey and the Wolf. Why, he asked, would the magazine pick a modest, done-on-the-cheap lunch restaurant run by a white chef who caters to a predominantly white crowd in a majority black town, when a similar black-owned restaurant would go unnoticed? Is this not the ultimate white privilege, to fetishize the thrift-store aesthetic in a place that presents it with a wink? I thought a lot about Wey's words as I ate my way through New Orleans.

With the exception of Dooky Chase's Restaurant, I encountered few black diners. For the twenty years I've been writing about dining in the South, I've noticed that some restaurants self-segregate while others don't. Your choice of restaurant telegraphs to your sense of identity. The other diners are your tribe.

Lunch should be the meal where your tribe consists of people who eat whatever the hell they want, need, or crave; who decide they need to escape the tyranny of time and the heavy weight of expectation; who want to park at a table and find pleasure in a meal without urgency or stress. The smart people who figure out how to create this space while attracting a diverse crowd will reclaim lunch and define it for the future. Of course, it will happen in New Orleans. 🍷

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