The Story of La Louisiane

by Lyle Saxon
Who's Who says:


Contbr. short stories and articles to magazines; stories were chosen for O. Henry Memorial Award, 1926, O'Brien's Best Short Stories, 1927. Home: 612 Royal Street, New Orleans, La.
Those who know and love old New Orleans will rejoice with me in the news of the preservation of La Louisiane—for this famous restaurant and the magnificent group of buildings which houses it have been restored to their former grandeur.

“Former Grandeur” is not an empty phrase, either, for these buildings have a history which extends back for a century, a glamorous history which begins when the structure was erected in 1837 by that famous merchant-prince, James Waters Zacharie, as a home for his family. The residence-building was truly magnificent with its balconies of filigree cast-iron, its stately green shutters and its simple but elegant façade of shining white. Within were white walls and woodwork; curtains of crimson brocade cascaded from high windows, and chandeliers of shimmering crystal reflected themselves endlessly in mammoth mirrors. And before those glittering mirrors the gay world of New Orleans society—both American and Creole—smiled and spread its peacock feathers.

Those, in truth, were good old days, which lingered for the first fifty years of the history of the house. Then the remaining members of the Zacharie family moved uptown into the American section, and the old residence became La Louisiane.

The restaurant was founded by Louis Bezaudun and his wife, and
La Louisiane

later passed into the hands of their nephew, Fernand Alciatore; from him to his son, Fernand Alciatore, Jr., its operator for several decades, and with the passing of the years, the reputation of the restaurant grew and grew. The food was always delicious, and travelers carried tales of the wonders of New Orleans cookery to the far corners of the earth.

When Fernand Alciatore died in 1931 there was much speculation as to the future of La Louisiane; and there were many—and I among them—who wondered somewhat fearfully what the future held, not only for the famous hostelry, but for the buildings themselves.

La Louisiane has been saved! The buildings, all three of them, which constituted the restaurant, the private dining-rooms, and the hotel, were purchased by Solari’s. The purchasing price was in the neighborhood of $200,000, and included all realty, furnishings, equipment, and good will.

Immediately the transaction was completed, Mr. Omar H. Cheer, owner of Solari’s, announced, “La Louisiane will continue as a restaurant, with the same cooks, the same waiters. But there will be additional cooks and waiters, for, although French cooking in the grand manner will be continued as usual, American dishes will be added. There will be many more dining-rooms than at present—in fact, the whole structure will be given over to banquet rooms, private dining-rooms, ball-rooms, and so on. La Louisiane will no longer operate as a hotel; all of the rooms will be
used as part of the restaurant, and as private apartments for my family." What has been accomplished in the renovation of La Louisiane is best told by newspaper and other accounts, which appeared the day of the formal reopening, and here presented as a connected story under the title:

A LITTLE JOURNEY TO LA LOUISIANE

Stepping from a modern taxi under a gay striped awning, I stopped a moment to admire the old world façade with its six antique lanterns fitted with simulated oil lamps. The architecture of La Louisiane belongs.
to the early nineteenth century, with its lace-like iron, its ventilated shutters, and its walls of white.

The leaded plate glass doors, opened as if by magic, but in reality by a smiling darky, give promise of beauty of another day, which is quickly fulfilled, for overhead, as I entered, was the finest Baccarat crystal chandelier I have ever seen. Product of that colony of Belgian glass-makers who crossed into France in 1815 and set up their furnaces in the little town shortly afterwards and still called Baccarat, it is a scintillant mass of sparkle and fire. Beau-

Reception Hall
Since 1881

Beautifully cut, hung with pendants and interlacing garlands, and fitted with candle-simulating lamps, it echoes the warm welcome of the century-old building which is the home of La Louisiane. It is a gem already coveted by collectors, I am told.

To the left of this richly carpeted and spacious hall is the Main Dining-Room—a symphony of crystal, silver, and white. Like the finest restaurants in Paris, it is consecrated to the service of Lucullus. Its charm is difficult to describe. It is quiet, dignified, restrained.

From the doorway, the room seems half an acre in area. Its oyster-white walls; its mirrors—not too many of them; its white organdy curtains; its crystal lustres... all call to mind the cleanliness of snow, without
La Louisiane

losing any warmth of hospitality.

Here are served the "specialités de maison", those delectable dishes, encomiumized by
gourmets the world over. Here one may eat delicious food in peace. Here one may savor good cooking and conversation.

And there will be no music at La Louisiane—praise the powers!—except orchestras and entertainers brought in for banquets and private functions.

Through the swinging doors at the rear of the Main Dining Room, I passed into the kitchen. Shades of Vulcan! Gleaming rows of ranges and ovens over a block in length. Pots, pans, caldrons of every conceivable shape and size. Innumerable devices for the proper preparation and care of food. Everything spic and span... the kitchen of a model home multiplied a hundred times...
presided over by chefs whose dishes have made La Louisiane internationally famous for two generations.

To the right, to the office to meet Andre de Marcillac, a Frenchman from Paris, who has learned to cater to Americans at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh, the Stafford in Baltimore, the old Belmont in New York City; but whose real training was received in Paris. For a restaurant such as La Louisiane, the choice of Monsieur de Marcillac seems ideal. And one feels sure he will hold to the tradition of fine cookery which is associated with the name of Alciatore in New Orleans; the Alciatore who studied under that great chef, Brabant—originator of Potatoes Brabant! Smile if you will, but it seems to me that the creations* of famous cooks bring as much pleasure—if not as much elation of spirit—as those compositions of writer and artist.

Our steps turn toward the Grill, an immense oblong room, much used for fraternity dances, banquets, etc., I was told.

And I find myself again in the familiar entrance hall. Past the crystal newel, I wend my way upstairs. A turn to the right brings me to the entrance

*At the Autumn Salon of 1927 of l’Institut de France the art of cooking was officially recognized along with painting, literature, and sculpture as one of the Fine Arts.
of the Ballroom identified as Empire A; the old double par-

Empire "B" Ballroom

lors of the Zacharie mansion returned to their original scheme of decoration of nearly one hundred years ago; chalk white walls and woodwork, with the only ornamentation a carved frieze of medallions just below the ceiling line; two plaster ceiling plaques from whose centers suspend crystal chandeliers, twin cascades of radiant jewels; acanthus leaf carvings on the urns which conceal the indirect lighting reflectors, and similar carvings on the mantle mirror frames. The two mantles are simple in design and are each topped with magnificent mirrors and two black and gilt urns particularly interesting because of their cameo medallions of Napoleon and Josephine.

Six crystal sconces complete the lighting equipment and lend
elegance to the quiet simplicity of the room.

The tall windows overlooking the street are curtained with glowing garnet satin caught high at opposite sides with golden yellow cordeliers, and trailing to the floor.

Empire B is similar in detail, has concealed cove lighting, and eight crystal sconces like those in Empire A. These sconces were especially made for La Louisiane and are the only ones of their kind in America.

By means of sliding doors the two rooms can be thrown into one, should occasion require the seating of two hundred or more guests at a banquet, etc.

Adjoining is Lounge No. 1 with its Victorian furniture and
furnishings. The chandelier of or doré with crystal festoons, daisies, and bobeches signed by Baccarat, a heritage from the Bezaudun family, is particularly noteworthy.

At the other end of the hall is the Powder Room, in a red, taupe and ivory scheme executed in the Victorian manner, with furniture and furnishings of the period. The chandelier and wall sconces are of ormolu, of the Louis Seize period, electrified and fitted with shades of white parchment, bound in red velvet.

The dressing tables have elicited considerable comment because of their practicability, rivaling as they do the best "star" dressing tables in Hollywood.

More conventionally beautiful are the twin rooms which are now called simply the "Yellow Rooms." Here are two more apartments which are beautiful in architectural detail; particularly interesting are carved baskets of fruit in the white woodwork above the sliding doors which connect the rooms, and acanthus leaves which appear again and again in the moulding around the doors and windows. These rooms have yellow walls and white woodwork; "Sunlight" windows curtained with English Flower prints in which the fruit-basket motif is repeated; have their original black marble mantles, each topped with mirrors, a pair of
Since 1881

Girandoles and a white Tole centerpiece. Yellow and white, with occasional touches of brilliant blue, and lighted by crystal chandeliers, make warm, pleasant, informal rooms for smaller banquets or parties, with dining tables which may be made small enough for six or eight or stretched out to accommodate forty guests or more.

The other and smaller dining-rooms are all unlike, each with some pleasing color scheme and some original touch, but in character with the house itself. All are available for small or informal private luncheons, dinners, suppers, etc.

Lounges No. 2, sometimes called the Louis Philippe Room, is furnished in the regal manner. It is a convenient rendezvous for before or after luncheon, dinner, or supper assignments.

The smaller dining-rooms are serviced from an auxiliary kitchen located on the same floor, assuring prompt, individual attention. There are numerous retiring rooms for men and for women, each with its own scheme of decoration. There are rooms for bachelor parties; there are dressing rooms for entertainers, and retiring rooms for orchestras, etc.

The rooms which formed the “hotel” part of La Louisiane have been used as described; there will be a place for every-
thing—and certainly there was room enough in these huge old buildings, for La Louisiane is really three large old residences, of which the Zacharie house forms the central structure, but for years they have been connected and have served as a hostelry. Now additional doors have been cut through the walls. One may pass from the Empire rooms into other banquet rooms equally attractive. And with these additional passages and openings, La Louisiane will lose something of its labyrinthine quality that made progress so confusing in the old days; one might easily have been lost heretofore in the corridors and maze of empty rooms.

The entire third floor of each of these three houses has been converted into living quarters for Mr. Cheer and his family—or rather into three large apartments, one for each name member of the family, so that each has his own sitting room and living quarters. It seems an ideal arrangement. Even these private apartments are decorated in the spirit of a century ago, with modern touches necessary for comfort, of course.'

For one like me, a man who has stood by and watched so much wanton destruction in the Vieux Carre within the last decade, the restoration of La Louisiane seems almost too good to be true. Nevertheless, it is an actuality. The old restau-
Since 1881

rant closed its doors early in 1932, and Mrs. Fernand Alciatore, Jr., the widow of the former proprietor, handed over the keys and good will to Mr. Cheer. The restaurant re-opened under its new management in the Fall.

So much for La Louisiane of today. Let me speak for one last moment of the past.

When James Waters Zacharie and his family lived in this old house, they entertained many notables, among them Emperor Iturbide who preceded Maximilian as Emperor of Mexico. A brilliant ball was given in his honor. The Zacharies also entertained General Henri Gratien Bertrand, who accompanied Napoleon to St. Helena and who was subsequently named by the French government as one of the commission to bring Napoleon's body back to France. William Makepeace Thackeray, the great English novelist was also a visitor there — and oddly enough (coming events casting their shadows before, as it were) wrote a verse about a noble dish called Bouillabaisse, now one of the specialties of La Louisiane. Among other distinguished visitors were General Hardee, General Joseph E. Johnston, and Admirals Farragut, Porter, and Bailey.

Nor did the stream of notables cease when the Zacharies sold their house. But these times the notables came expressly to eat the delicious concoctions of the Alciatores, father and son. A list of the famous ones who have signed the Golden Book of La Louisiane would fill many columns of type; suffice to say that nearly
every profession and art is represented. Among actors, there are scores of fine names, beginning with Sarah Bernhardt and running through the years to Al Jolson; among presidents there were Theodore Roosevelt and William McKinley; in the Golden Book we find the signatures of such world figures as Admiral R. E. Byrd, Suzanne Lenglen, and Emile Coue—to choose three from as widely different walks of life as possible. The pages are dotted with such names as William Randolph Hearst, Harold Lloyd, General John J. Pershing, Otis Skinner, David Wark Griffith, Emma Calve, Harry Houdini, Fritz Kreisler, Tito Schipa, George Ade, Rube Goldberg, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Dix, Fritzi Scheff. And one could keep this up indefinitely.

Will YOU, perhaps, sign the Golden Book in the near future?

La Louisiane

Owned and Operated by Solari's
Iberville near Royal
New Orleans, La.