

Barnett on Business Travel: Cajun cocktails - avoid the tigers at Baton Rouge's riverfront bar

by *Chris_Barnett*

Avoyelles on the River has a history as colorful and mysterious as Louisiana itself. This cavernous upstairs bar in Baton Rouge used to be the tailoring and mending room for Joan Eddy's Dress Shop back in the early 20th century. You can almost see rows of foot-powered sewing machines and steam pressers, and seamstresses nipping and tucking away, cinching waists and fluffing up bustles.

Today, Avoyelles (333 Third St., 225-381-9385; avoyellescafe.com) is probably the best gathering place in Louisiana's state capital for a great drink, Creole cooking, a game on TV or a view of the parade of commerce floating up and down the Mississippi River. The clothing store's original red oak floor, restored of course, is still underfoot and also part of the back bar. Wood columns, well-seasoned brick walls and plaster are the unpretentious backdrop for a whopping 9,200 square feet of airy space under 14-foot ceilings. That's not counting the outdoor deck facing the river.

"We're an old New Orleans atmosphere right on the 50-yard line of the downtown Baton Rouge entertainment district," says Jay Dykes, an electrical contractor who bought Avoyelles 10 years ago and has refashioned it into more than just a bar.

The first floor, where the frocks and gowns were once sold, is now the Third St. Bistreaux, a cafe with prices so low, you'll wonder if they're 20 years out of date. Where else can you get a dish like alligator bayou teche - a blackened or fried "tender cut of gator" seasoned with Creole honey mustard - for \$8?

Let's go back upstairs, where drinks are served on top of a 35-foot-long bar crafted out of sinker cypress from a tree rescued from the Louisiana swamps. All the knots, scars and grain remain intact beneath a coat of varnish, adding to the local lore.

Dykes and his main mixologist, Erik Adams, wisely haven't gone over the libational edge with "real Gatorade" or crawfish cocktails. But there's no shortage of imagination. The Avoyelles Sunset is a potent blend of Sailor Jay and Malibu rums, triple sec, pineapple juice and grenadine, \$7.50. Enjoy one on the deck late in the afternoon for maximum return on your reasonable investment.

Adams also makes what he calls a Creole cosmo, using the more expensive Stoli Orange and Cointreau along with the de rigueur cranberry juice and splash of lime juice, \$7.50. Other inspirations: the calorie-packed Mississippi Martini, which is a beyond-the-pale potion made with Stoli Vanil, Godiva and Baileys liqueurs, and chocolate syrup, also \$7.50.

Thanks to Dykes' deft hand, Avoyelles has somehow managed to avoid a reputation as simply a "Tiger bar,"

even though Dykes himself is a Louisiana State University grad. There are plenty of saloons here that cater almost exclusively to the LSU crowd. But Dykes knew that the lawyers, lobbyists, legislators, cane and cotton growers, brokers and bankers would want to caucus, drink and chin-wag in a more sophisticated setting.

That may be why Kip Holden, Baton Rouge's mayor, drinks a Budweiser here now and then, and locals say you never know who you'll run into at Avoyelles. Not long ago, actors Beau Bridges and Judd Nelson were here at a cast and crew wrap party for a movie partly filmed in Baton Rouge called "Dirty Politics."

Dykes says with a smile, "It's a comedy about two presidential candidates."

For anyone who believes in a frugal fiscal policy, Avoyelles is the place to come for bargains in a glass. Weekdays from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., American long-neck beers, house wines and well drinks are \$2 apiece. Imports - Heineken, Becks, Bass Ale - are \$3, and martinis are doubles for the price of a single during those hours.

Mike Ederon, a Baton Rouge executive with the Boy Scouts of America and a regular at Avoyelles' \$10 buffet lunch, advised me try an Abita, brewed down the road in Abita, La. - a place said to be hopping with Louisiana flavor and personality. Just like Avoyelles itself.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassle.

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