Food and Wine: New Orleans po-boy pairs richly with sauvignon blanc

by Ron James

Jimmy Bannos is an ambitious Greek-American from an Italian neighborhood with a story that's all over the map.

This chef/restaurateur morphed a Jewish delicatessen on the seventh floor of an office building into Heaven on Seven, one of most successful New Orleans restaurants in the country. But Heaven on Seven isn't anywhere near Bourbon Street. It's about 950 miles away in Chicago.

Bannos is a third-generation restaurateur. By the time he was 9 years old, he was working with his brother George in the steakhouse run by their father, an ex-Marine.

JIMMY BANNOS - Jimmy Bannos converted a Chicago Jewish delicatessen on the seventh floor of an office building into Heaven on Seven, one of most successful New Orleans-style restaurants in the country. CNS Photo. PO-BOY - What makes most po-boys different from other sandwiches is that they are made with a delicious Louisiana French bread. Bannos uses Honey-Jalapeno Dressing instead of the traditional mayonnaise for his Fried Oyster Po-Boy. CNS Photo."He acted the part in the kitchen," Bannos writes of his father in the introduction to his recent cookbook, "The Heaven On Seven Cookbook: Where It's Mardi Gras All the Time" (Ten Speed Press, $18.95). "He ran a steakhouse with a discipline that applied to himself and to everyone who worked for him. I got my work ethic from him."

After attending chef's school, Bannos and family opened the Garland Coffeeshop in 1979 on the seventh floor of a Chicago office building, where Jimmy expanded traditional coffee-shop fare using fresh produce and from-scratch preparation.

"I cooked Italian or Greek or American as the spirit moved me," he writes. "For years, our Reuben sandwich was voted best in all of Chicago - a city with a lot of Reubens."

In the mid-1980s, Bannos happened on a cookbook by Louisiana chef Paul Prudhomme that dramatically changed his life. Intrigued, Bannos called Prudhomme, who invited Bannos to his famous restaurant in New Orleans, K-Paul's.

"New Orleans became real for me: a spectacular new world of music, attitude and best of all, unbelievable food," Bannos said. Soon after, Bannos began adding Cajun dishes to his coffee-shop menu.

"The Reuben sandwich orders kept shrinking, and the oyster po-boys kept growing," Bannos said. "In 1985, right before Lent, I pulled together about 10 of these specials, decorated the whole place in purple, green and gold and called it Mardi Gras."

Suddenly the coffee shop was a dining destination. Bannos changed the menu to all New Orleans cuisine and renamed the restaurant. Today, with three successful Heaven On Seven restaurants in Chicago, Bannos still makes frequent trips to New Orleans for inspiration.

THE DISH

The first po-boy is generally believed to have been prepared by two New Orleans brothers, former streetcar operators, who ran a restaurant in the 1920s. During a streetcar-driver strike in 1929, the brothers made an inexpensive sandwich of French bread and beef with gravy to serve to strikers. When they spied a striker coming toward the restaurant, the staff would say, "Here comes another poor boy!"

What makes most po-boys different from other sandwiches is that they are made with a Louisiana French bread that is crusty on the outside, but less dense in the middle than most baguettes. In New Orleans, po-boys are usually dressed with lettuce, tomato and mayonnaise. They can be made with most meats or seafoods common to the Gulf Coast.

Bannos uses honey-jalapeno dressing instead of the traditional mayonnaise for his Fried Oyster Po-Boy. He also likes to use corn flour rather than corn meal for a better texture in the breading. You can find the Cajun seasoning called for in the recipe at most supermarkets and specialty food stores.

THE WINE

An oyster po-boy goes great with a yummy Silverado 2005 Sauvignon Blanc Miller Ranch, Single Vineyard ($18.95). The crisp acidity and fruity flavors are a tasty contrast to the savory fried oyster sandwich. The wine is rich with passion fruit, tangerine and green apple flavors with a long crisp finish.

Owners Diane and Ron Miller founded Silverado Vineyards in the 1970s. The Winery is located in the Stags Leap district of the Napa Valley. They named the winery after the mine made famous by Robert Louis Stevenson's book "The Silverado Squatters."

FRIED OYSTER PO-BOY

1/2 recipe Honey-Jalapeno Dressing (recipe follows)

Garlic-butter spread:

6 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened

4 teaspoons grated Asiago cheese

2 teaspoons roasted garlic puree

1/2 teaspoon chopped fresh parsley

Pinch of salt

Pinch of freshly ground black pepper

Seasoned corn flour:

1 1/4 cup corn flour

3 tablespoons cornstarch

1 teaspoon Cajon seasoning

1 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon white or black pepper

1/4 teaspoon paprika

1/8 teaspoon onion salt

Sandwiches:

4 (6-inch) deli-style or hoagie rolls, split lengthwise

Vegetable oil, for frying

24 medium-size shucked oysters

2 teaspoons plus 1/2 teaspoon Cajun seasoning

2 large eggs

1 tablespoon water

2 cups shredded lettuce

1 tomato, thinly sliced

Yields 4 servings.

Prepare Honey-Jalapeno Dressing.

For garlic-butter spread: In bowl, mix together all ingredients until creamy.

For seasoned corn flour: In medium bowl, mix together all ingredients.

For sandwiches: Spread cut side of each roll with garlic butter. Heat large, nonstick saute pan over medium heat. Toast buttered side of each roll for 2 minutes; flip over and toast outside for 1 minute. Set aside.

Heat 2 1/2 inches of vegetable oil to 350 F in heavy, 4-quart saucepan. Season oysters with 2 teaspoons of Cajun seasoning. Place Seasoned Corn Flour in 1 pie plate. In another pie plate, beat together eggs, water and

remaining 1/2 teaspoon Cajun seasoning. Coat each oyster in flour, dip into egg mixture, and coat again with flour. Stirring to keep oysters moving in oil, fry 3 minutes per batch, until golden brown. Drain on paper towels. Season with salt, if desired. Keep warm in 200 F oven until all oysters are fried.

To serve: Place lettuce and tomato on toasted rolls. Divide oysters equally among rolls and serve with dressing.

HONEY-JALAPENO DRESSING

2/3 cup mayonnaise

1/2 cup heavy whipping cream

1/3 cup thinly sliced green onion, white and green parts

1 1/2 teaspoons seeded and minced jalapenos

4 teaspoons honey

1/4 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

1/4 teaspoon hot pepper sauce

1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1/8 teaspoon ground white pepper

1/8 teaspoon ground cayenne

Yields ample dressing for 4 sandwiches.

Whisk mayonnaise and cream together in medium-size bowl. Add remaining ingredients and stir to incorporate. Cover and refrigerate until ready to serve.

- Adapted from "The Heaven On Seven Cookbook: Where It's Mardi Gras All the Time."

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