

FORK IN THE ROAD



Kermit Ruffins, one of New Orleans' most famous musicians, performs at his namesake bar on Monday nights when he's in town. The proprietor also considers himself a "master chef."

4 BARS WITH A TWIST

New Orleans watering holes serve up plenty of quirk in city that embraces eccentricity, bountiful booze

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JAY GENTILE
Chicago Tribune

NEW ORLEANS — In a city whose taverns include a dungeon purportedly haunted by vampires and a toilet-themed watering hole, the standard is pretty high in New Orleans when it comes to quirk.

The city's proud allegiance to the unconventional is a big part of the Big Easy's charm.

Check out these four offbeat bars, where you can soak up that singular charm and let the good times roll — sometimes until the wee hours.

Don't forget to raise a glass to the city itself: New Orleans is celebrating its tricentennial this year.

Snake and Jake's

Christmas Club Lounge

At this beloved dive, it's Christmas year-round, closing time is 7 a.m. and those who show up nude may be rewarded with free drinks.

Owner Dave Clements bought the famously ramshackle joint in 1994, when "a big night would be like \$40," he said. Eventually the place caught on, thanks to its one-of-a-kind vibe and anything-goes attitude.

The stories are legendary, from Jim Belushi "chasing a crackhead down the street" and George Clooney "making out with a hot blonde" in a dark corner back in the day to bartenders passed out on the floor and the famous nudist policy.

It's still possible to get free drinks by attending the bar in the buff, but it's not as common as it used to be. And it's up to the discretion of the bartender. Most of the time, this is just an intimate, laid-back dive to drink in red-light-tinged darkness until "God knows when," Clements said.

"It's just such a unique bar, and what I like about it is there's no video poker, there's no pool tables. There's barely a TV," Clements added. "You sit down, and you talk."

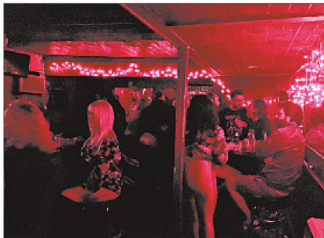
The crowd is a mix of local college students from the Uptown neighborhood (the dilapidated bar is in the middle of a residential area), service industry people fresh off their shifts and curious visitors from around the world.

If you're planning to visit, Clements offered this bit of advice: "Drink heavily first. Have a glass of water when you're here. And then keep drinking."

7612 Oak St., Uptown/Carrollton, 504-861-2802

Kermit's Tremé Mother-in-Law Lounge

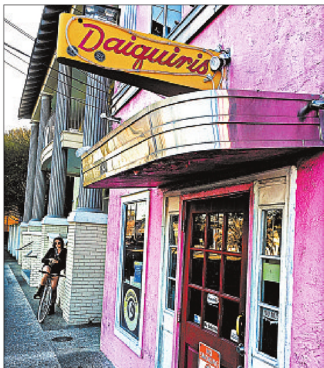
The first thing you notice is the brightly colored murals outside.



Customers drink in red-light-tinged darkness at the beloved dive bar Snake and Jake's Christmas Club Lounge. Nudity may get you a freebie.



Customers can get in a few games of pool while they do their laundry at 'Igor's'. The machines were put in before most folks had them at home.



Gene Theriot opened the tiny, bright pink joint across the parking lot from his old-school restaurant Gene's Po-Boys in 1995.

But what's most unique about this place is how you're treated once you're inside.

"It's like family," said owner Kermit Ruffins, one of New Orleans' most famous musicians. He performs here with his band, Kermit Ruffins and the Barbecue Swingers, during Monday night jam sessions.

In addition to being the co-founder of Rebirth Brass Band and having made numerous appearances on the HBO series "Treme," Ruffins knows his way around a kitchen too.

"I'm a master chef, and I play music on the side," he joked. "I can cook almost anything."

That includes barbecue and fried chicken, turkey necks and gravy, cabbage and rice, and a variety of soul food dishes Ruffins regularly whips up and

gives to bar patrons for free at the Mother-in-Law Lounge.

The only time there's a cover (\$20) is when Ruffins plays Monday nights and once or twice a month when other bands jam (\$10). The rest of the time, you can expect a variety of live performances, from jazz and brass bands to hip-hop and DJs.

The place is a magnet for birthday parties, wedding receptions and neighborhood kids' graduation parties, which are held in the back, where there's a huge grill, tiki bar and outdoor stage.

"My mom and uncles come by Sunday after church," said Ruffins, adding that a lot of local musicians including Trombone Shorty and members of Rebirth are regulars as well. "We all still hangin' together like family," he said.

"I just love people to death," said Ruffins, who lives above the bar when he's in town. (He currently splits his time between New Orleans and Houston.) "I'm gonna be doing this forever. I found the perfect spot."

1500 N. Claiborne Ave., Seventh Ward, 504-814-1819

Gene's Curbside Daiquiris

At this New Orleans institution, there are no bar stools. Or bartenders, per se. There's just a long counter with an employee stationed behind it, ready to take your order for a highly boozed-up concoction served in a plain white Styrofoam "to-go" cup from one of the dozen or so daiquiri machines churning out fresh flavors daily.

Taking advantage of New Orleans' status as one of the few American cities to allow public consumption of alcohol, Gene's is at the leading edge of the local cultural phenomenon of to-go daiquiri bars. Dozens of such establishments dot the city, but Gene's claims to be the best, thanks to the strength of its drinks, a strict "no powder" only "real mixes" policy and a wide array of flavor combinations.

"We knock 'em out," said owner Gene Theriot, who opened the tiny, bright pink joint across the parking lot from his old-school restaurant Gene's Po-Boys in 1995. He said business peaked in the '90s but has been down since Hurricane Katrina, when large numbers of regulars were forced to leave town. The place still instills cultlike devotion among its acolytes, whom Gene described as 70 percent locals and 30 percent tourists.

While there are just 11 machines churning out flavors like Orange 190 and Jungle Juice, the possibilities are endless, thanks to Gene's liberal policy of letting customers combine any flavors they want — topped with an unlimited number of extra shots

at \$1 each.

For visitors looking to save money, Gene recommended ordering a large (\$9) and just strolling around the French Quarter with it, observing the insanity.

Keep in mind that there are no stools here for a reason: You get yours, you get out. What you do after that isn't Theriot's problem.

"I don't wanna baby-sit," he said. "Bars are nothing but baby-sitting and refereeing."

1030 Elysian Fields Ave., Faubourg Marigny, 504-309-4634

Igor's Lounge & Garameroom

New Orleansians can find any occasion to drink — even when that occasion includes mundane tasks like doing your laundry. Igor's is the city's original 24-hour bar/laundromat, where patrons can do shots of Jagermeister while waiting for their clothes to be done.

Inside is a typical pub atmosphere, where they're serving beer and burgers. But once you step into the back room to shoot some pool, you know something is different. There are four washers and four dryers which, according to Igor's manager Darren Brooks, were installed around 40 years ago, shortly after the bar opened. "Back when people didn't have washers and dryers in their homes," he explained.

Today, Igor's owns several other bar/laundromats in town, including Lucky's, Checkpoint Charlie and Buddha Belly.

While "bardromats" exist in other cities, they seem especially suited to New Orleans.

"It's a 24-hour city," said Brooks, who added that Igor's offers a "Sunrise Special" happy hour from 5 to 7 a.m. Local college students have been known to stop in for a bloody mary before graduation — and after being out all night.

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