

food reservations

FIRE

Chef and owner Danny Lassiter flavors his Cajun cuisine with the spirit of family.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH



Building on his experiences working in the restaurant business in New Orleans, Danny Lassiter envisioned bringing the good times and festive flavors of the Big Easy back to his native Birmingham. His restaurant, Fire, is the culmination of Lassiter's dream of creating a relaxed, fun and friendly neighborhood grill serving up the flavors of New Orleans for anyone who enjoys such Creole staples as po' boys (don't dare call them "poor boys"), jambalaya, or steaming and spicy cups of fresh gumbo.

Having grown tired of the traditional fine dining experience—stuffy atmosphere, quiet dining rooms, and over-inflated culinary visions—Lassiter decided he wanted to scale things back on the intensity meter by the time he decided to move back to Birmingham. Starting his career in New York, Lassiter developed his love of Creole cuisine and the celebratory nature of the culture's food while working at Commander's Palace following a move to New Orleans.

A couple of years ago, Lassiter came to the decision to return to the Magic City and open his dream restaurant, with a less-formal, more casual approach.

"When I bought the restaurant, it was set up for fine dining, so we became a fine dining restaurant. As we



Photos: B. Gustafson

made money, our goal was to move into something else," Lassiter says. "I've been in fine dining for 12 years and was starting to get a little tired of it. I don't want to do fine dining in the middle of a strip mall in a nice neighborhood.

"Creole and really hot cuisine doesn't really lend itself to fine dining. It can be made that way, but Cajun cuisine is really based around a celebration and families," Lassiter adds. "That's what we're moving towards, a much more casual, family friendly restaurant. It's important for the people in this community to be able to dine with their kids and for us to not become just a date place or special occasion restaurant."

Lassiter wants customers to wander into Fire in search of a good time, a good meal and a celebration without worrying about emptying their bank accounts. He is fashioning Fire after the types of restaurants he visited during his time working in restau-

rants such as Canoe, as he scraped together a living as he learned the trade.

"When I lived in New York, I couldn't afford to go to the Russian Tea Room, or Grammercy's Tavern or Park 21, but I could afford a neighborhood restaurant where they were doing really excellent food," Lassiter said. "That's what I'm trying to become, more of a bistro like you find in France, England, or New Orleans; something that has become lost in America."

Lassiter couldn't have found a better location for his vision of a family-oriented Creole restaurant than the space he uncovered. Sandwiched in between Crestline landmarks La Paz and O.T.'s in the Piggly Wiggly shopping center in Mountain Brook, Fire draws from the tight-knit communities that surround the shopping district. Here, Lassiter lures hungry diners into Fire with the smells and flavors of New Orleans as only he can

create them.

"This is the food that I love, the food I grew up on. Red beans and rice just speak to me," Lassiter said. "It's something I can feel, remember and taste and know it's going to be a great experience. Jambalaya is the same way. I hear music when I think about jambalaya."

These are the types of foods you will find at Fire—New Orleans country gumbo, corn fried oysters with homemade cocktail sauce, oyster and crawfish po' boys. And, while many may use the words Creole and Cajun interchangeably, as Lassiter explains, there are some key differences between the two styles.

"Cajun is one-pot cooking. Red beans and rice is Cajun, where everything is cooked in the same pot, and it's cooked for a very long time," Lassiter said. "There's no sauce, there's no nothing."

"What Creoles did was take those one-pot dishes and begin to use them

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as sauces or sides and present a piece of meat cooked properly with a nice hollandaise or other sauce," Lassiter adds. "They added some European technique to it and put it on a plate and took it out of the bayou."

One of Lassiter's feature items is grilled shrimp and grits. For this dish, Lassiter starts with several fresh and plump shrimp from the Gulf Coast on his special-made hickory fired grill and serves them on a bed of fresh grits cooked in a Crystal hot sauce and beurre blanc sauce. Lassiter then adds bits of savory andouille sausage to the dish, creating an exciting New Orleans variation on the signature dish of Charleston, South Carolina.

Lassiter's Southern heritage is on full display on many of Fire's specialties, such as corn flake crusted fish of the day (usually Mahi Mahi or grouper) served with a creamy southern slaw and tartar sauce or the chicken breast and crawfish jambalaya with a barbecue vinaigrette. Red meat lovers aren't forgotten about at Fire, however. Lassiter prepares a pepper grilled black angus ribeye, seared on the hickory-fired grill and accompanied by a plate of mashed potatoes with cayenne butter.

If you're especially hungry when you arrive at Fire then you should begin your journey with one of its starters. Assuming they are in season,

Fire's corn-fried Appalachian oysters, French fries and red pepper remoulade are a great beginning for any culinary explorer. Or, for something more familiar, Fire's country gumbo, with andouille sausage, shrimp, turkey, onions and bell pepper simmered in a dark and rich roux, is the perfect appetizer.

For dessert, Lassiter, along with his assistant in the kitchen, Ty Cofield—the only two cooks you will find preparing the food at Fire—offer such fare as a strawberry shortcake served over biscuits that are prepared from a family recipe enhanced with sugar for a refreshingly light dessert. Lassiter also bakes a chocolate soufflé prepared in small foil tins reminiscent of pecan pie containers. This soufflé is dense, rich and, as Lassiter says, "just oozes all over the plate."

As for the wine list at Fire, Lassiter prefers to keep things simple. Rather than offering tons of wines to gather dust and languish in obscurity, Lassiter keeps only a dozen or so reds and whites on hand at any one time. Popular reds include the Schuetz-Oles "Rattlesnake Acres" Petite Sirah and the Murphy Goode Merlot which Lassiter says are the perfect complement for the pepper grilled black angus. Among the whites on Fire's list, Lassiter suggests

THE DETAILS:

Fire

Address: 212 Country Club Park, Mountain Brook

Phone: 802-1410

Hours: Monday-Thursday, 5:30-9 p.m.
Friday & Saturday 5:30-10 p.m. Sunday brunch from 10:30-2.

Full bar
No Smoking
Handicap Accessible
Reservations Accepted

the Santi Apostoli Pinot Grigio to go along with the corn fried oysters, or the Cakebread Cellars Sauvignon Blanc to accompany Fire's seared Carolina trout pecan, a great summer dish served with summer vegetables and brown butter.

While many of the wines on the list are favorites of his regular customers or well-known to most people with a rudimentary knowledge of wines, Lassiter does have some more obscure vintages on hand. For instance, the Laetitia Estate Chardonnay is a white wine that is only available at Fire in the state of Alabama. To go along with Fire's po' boys and gumbo, Lassiter has only suggestion: "You've got to have a beer."

Places like Fire are becoming something of a dying breed in Birmingham. However, if you're in the mood for an interesting meal and fun time at a reasonable price, take advantage of Fire's spice and Southern charm and take in the uniqueness of this zesty neighborhood spot. ☐

