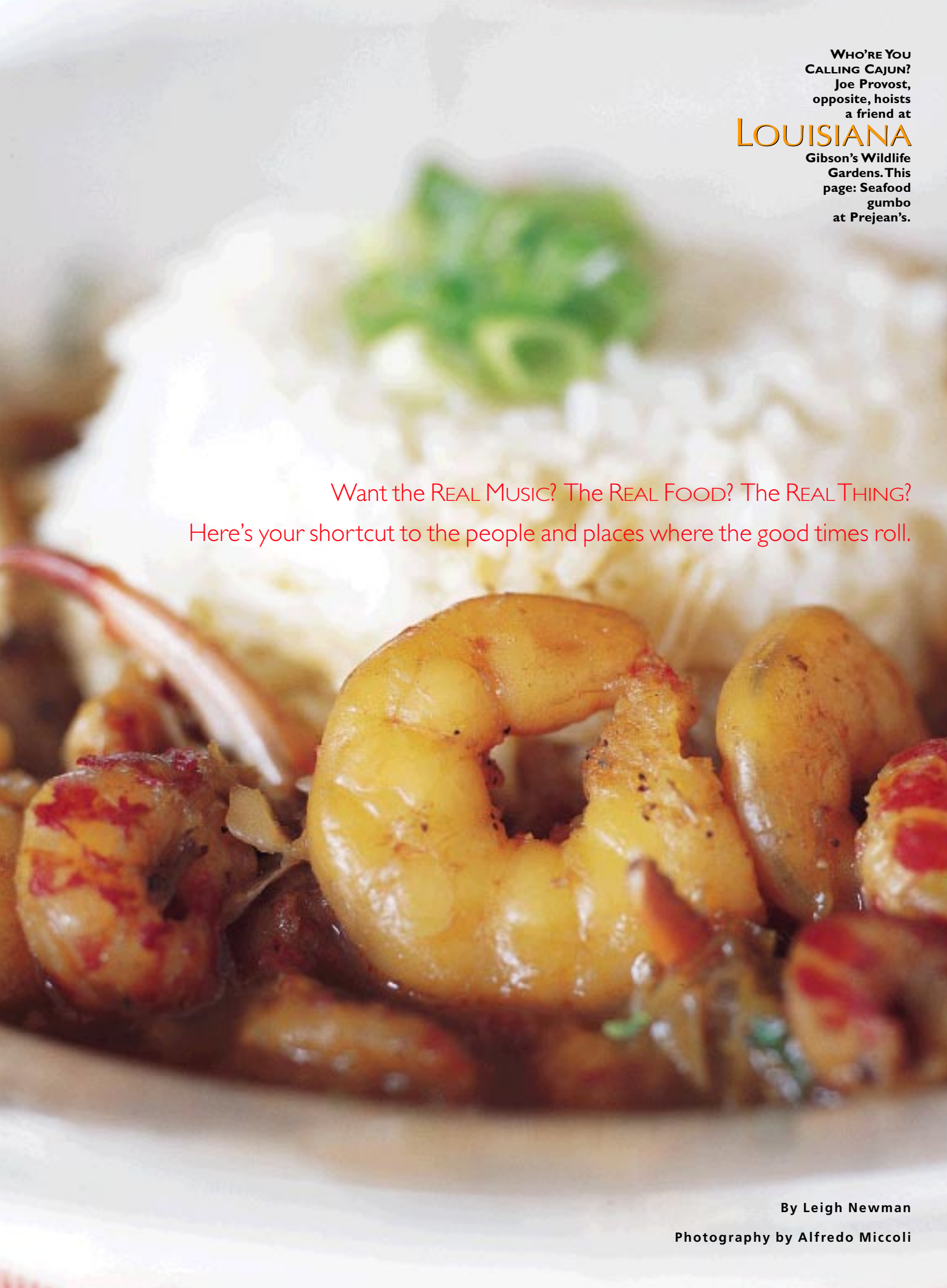


A photograph of a man with short brown hair and a light beard, wearing a white t-shirt and light blue jeans. He is smiling and holding a large, dark brown turtle with a textured shell. The turtle is held in front of him, and its head is visible on the left side. The background is a dense forest with green foliage and trees. The text "Doing The Wild Cajun Thing" is overlaid on the image.

Doing The

Wild Cajun Thing



WHO'RE YOU
CALLING CAJUN?
Joe Provost,
opposite, hoists
a friend at

LOUISIANA

Gibson's Wildlife
Gardens. This
page: Seafood
gumbo
at Prejean's.

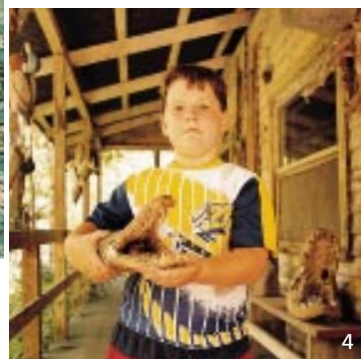
Want the REAL MUSIC? The REAL FOOD? The REAL THING?
Here's your shortcut to the people and places where the good times roll.

By Leigh Newman

Photography by Alfredo Miccoli



LOUISIANA



Fred's Lounge must be one of the most famous places in the whole world," whispers a bystander as a Cajun cowboy whirls past, his girl's skirt flying up with the music. It does occur to me to say, "Yes, sir. Right there behind your Eiffel Tower and your Egyptian pyramids, there's Fred's Lounge in Mamou, Louisiana."

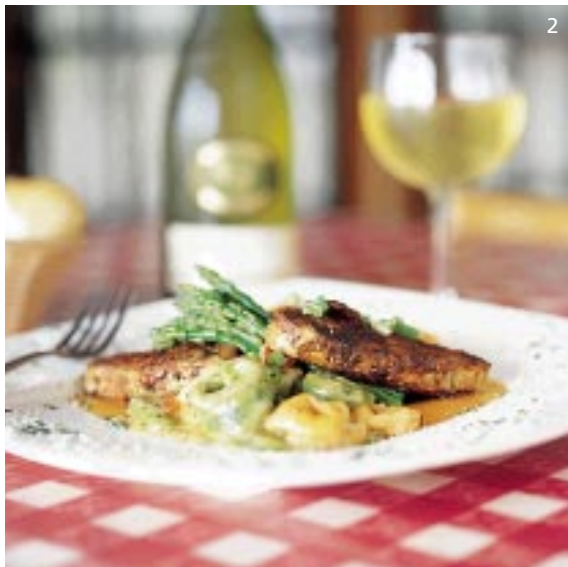
Then again, I wonder if he's right. Anybody who walks through these doors has themselves a story for the folks back home. Where else can you find a club so packed by 9:30 on Saturday that the four-piece band gets squeezed inch by inch into the bathroom door? And that's 9:30 A.M., mind you. The triangle player is banging, the fiddle is crying, the drums are thud-thudding the cracked linoleum off the floor. The decor is Early Beer Banners, Late Neon Sign. And the crowd is loving it. "*Dansez*," cries the announcer into his microphone, calling out to his French-speaking audience. Yes, "*Dansez*," echoes Aunt Sue, the 60-something unofficial hostess of this weekly celebration, as she passes me a cardboard box filled with steaming hunks of boudin sausages, then two-steps across the floor.

Yes, Fred's Lounge might look like your average dive bar from the outside. But inside, it's a shrine to those in search of Cajun music, Cajun food, Cajun dancing, and the whole Cajun universe. Which, by the way, does exist. The question, I've discovered on my road quest through southern Louisiana, is where? More and more visitors tramping the highways and bayous of the region mean more and more signs pointing this way or that to a "Cajun" restaurant, serving fried frozen catfish and watery gumbo, or a "Cajun" wildlife museum, where you can see a 50-year-old giant turtle living in a wooden bathtub or feed dog kibble to a pet 'gator named Hungry Boy.

However, all's not lost. In fact, it's not even that hard to find. Real Cajuns love showing anybody who bothers straying a few miles off a major thoroughway around. And by real Cajuns, I don't mean your tour boat Cajuns, your roadside attraction Cajuns, your Cajuns doing historical reenactments of traditional spinning and weaving at a Williamsburg-style cultural center. All

AND THE LIVIN' IS EASY: 1. Passing the time of day in downtown Houma. 2. A mural in Eunice. 3. Prejean's famous mascot, a 14-foot stuffed alligator. 4, 6. Gibson's Wildlife Gardens give interactivity a new meaning—get up close and personal with a live 14-footer at snack time or try a little show-and-tell with some, phew, skulls and bones. 5. Get into the heart of bayou country on a swamp tour. 7. Swinging to the beat at Eunice's Liberty Center.





that exists, of course. It's just not Aunt Sue, lecturing in rapid-fire French to young college boys on how to dance. It's not Audrey Babineaux-George, who takes you straight into her kitchen and whips up a plate of alligator *beurre et ail*. It's an entire culture of hospitality—be that welcome in the form of a dance, a song, or bowl of creamy crawfish bisque floating over with whole crawfish head dumplings. And mostly, it's a good time, as in *les bons temps* that keep rolling and rolling. From the Cajun prairie (the farms and fields on the northern tip of south Louisiana) to the Cajun capital of Lafayette to the Cajun swamp (the coastal bayous that feed the Gulf of Mexico), you'll never go hungry, you'll never go thirsty, and you'll never leave without a story filled with tall tales and short cups of hot, dark coffee.

PARLEZ-VOUS CAJUN? Though Fred's is a pilgrimage stop of its own, just a short drive down the road, past rice fields swamped with water to cultivate farmed crawfish, lies the even more authentic Savoy Music Center in Eunice, run by



LOUISIANA



one Mr. Marc Savoy. In case I had any doubts about being in the right place at the right time, a company truck with the motto "Live Crawfish, Clean Tails" painted on the side parks next to me. Inside, the Savoy looks like a standard-issue music store, with low ceilings and new guitars hanging on the walls. The overhead light's fluorescent. The couch is a grim 1960s green. But sitting on it are some of the most talented, and serious, Cajun musicians in the parish. Savoy basically invites the entire Cajun world to join in here on one pickup session after another. And they come, toting their guitars and fiddles, triangles and accordions. Cajun artists

DISHIN' UP THE GOOD TIMES: 1. A living blanket of duckweed deep in the swamp. 2. Prejean's blackened tuna with tortellini. 3. Gettin' down at Fred's Lounge in Mamou. 4. You can have the catch of the day—every day—dockside at Houma. 5. Ron "Black" Guidry jamming with pal Gaitor Bait. Guidry has burned a CD of swamp tunes, and the highlight of the swamp tour he leads features feeding raw chicken breasts to alligators while Gaitor Bait barks like a hyena.

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