

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman, Julia Reed, standing in a courtyard. She is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved top and light-colored trousers, holding a long piece of bread. To her left is a dining table with a blue and white striped tablecloth, set with plates of food, glasses, and a white pot. The courtyard is filled with lush green plants and vines hanging from above. The building has green-painted wooden doors and shutters.

Julia Reed's New Orleans

Food, Fun, and Field Trips for Letting the Good Times Roll

Photography by
PAUL COSTELLO

RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

A “Festival” of Strawberries and Crawfish



Soundtrack for the cook: Allen Toussaint, “I Could Eat Crawfish Every Day”



Louisiana is a state in almost perpetual festival mode: There’s the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival (better known as Jazz Fest), of course, and the Essence Festival, put on by the eponymous magazine, each of which draws hundreds of thousands to the city. But on a smaller scale, there are festivals to celebrate everything from Creole tomatoes, po’boys, oysters, Louisiana peaches, andouille sausage, sugarcane, and rice to Zydeco music, Swamp

Pop music, alligators, “Fur and Wildlife,” bonfires (right around Christmas), and Tennessee Williams, who lived for a time in the French Quarter and found his voice there. Then there’s the excellently named but sadly discontinued Yambilee Festival, held in Opelousas to promote the local sweet potato crop. And there’s that priceless juxtaposition, the Shrimp and Petroleum Festival, held to honor the two primary industries of Morgan City (a place which is at least as notable, to me at least, for being where Kris Kristofferson wrote “Me and Bobby McGee”).

April, a month of glorious, mostly humidity-free weather, is when two of the most popular shindigs are held: the Ponchatoula Strawberry Festival and the Breaux Bridge



Crawfish Festival. The former features a parade, a king and queen who wear crowns of “ruby” strawberries embedded in the rhinestones, and an auction of the blue ribbon-winning berries. The latter is a slightly more raucous event that includes thirty Cajun bands, a ton of food stands, a crawfish-eating contest, a crawfish étouffée cook-off, a crawfish race (yes, a live crawfish race, in a round tub), and a Cajun and Zydeco dance contest.

The good news is that you can hold your own festival of both strawberries and crawfish right at home because the markets are full of both at their peak. I held mine in the gorgeous

double courtyard of my next-door neighbor, the ever-generous Vaughan Fitzpatrick. We had a tiny Cajun band, tasty strawberry cocktails, and my étouffée, which is inspired by Paul Prudhomme and roux-based, though lots of folks prefer a simpler sautéed version. (As with most Cajun and Creole dishes, there are as many versions as there are cooks.) We accompanied the food with lots of rosé wine and Champagne, since the accidental theme seemed to be “Think Pink.” As it happened, the dinner took place on the last night of the first weekend of Jazz Fest, so we had lots of hungry and thirsty music lovers drifting in, and a festive time was had by all.



Strawberry Basil Mojitos

Makes 6 to 8 cocktails

2 cups white rum

2 cups Strawberry Basil Syrup

(recipe follows)

Club soda

*Strawberry halves and basil
sprigs for garnish*

Use the word “mojito” fairly loosely here, as I substitute lemon for the usual lime juice and basil for the mint. By any name, this is a refreshing cocktail that makes excellent use of the bounty of berry season. I make mine with Old New Orleans Crystal Rum, distilled from sugarcane grown in southeast Louisiana, but any good white rum will do.

In a large pitcher, stir the rum and berry syrup together to mix well. Pour into highball glasses over ice and top each one with a splash of club soda. Garnish with two or three strawberry halves and a leafy sprig of basil.

Makes about 1 quart

*4 cups strawberries, washed,
stemmed, and halved*

Juice of 2 lemons

2 1/4 cups sugar

1 bunch basil

STRAWBERRY BASIL SYRUP

Place the berry halves in a large bowl and crush them using a potato masher (or pulse briefly in a food processor). Place the crushed berries in a large, heavy-bottomed pan, add the lemon juice, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook for 25 minutes until the fruit is very soft.

Strain the mixture into a medium saucepan, pressing as much juice from the berries as possible with a ladle. Bring the mixture to a boil and add the sugar. Stir until the sugar is just dissolved.

Remove from heat and add the basil. Let steep for about 20 minutes. Remove the basil and strain the syrup into a pitcher. Any leftover syrup can be refrigerated for up to two weeks.







Ellen's Strawberry Mignonette

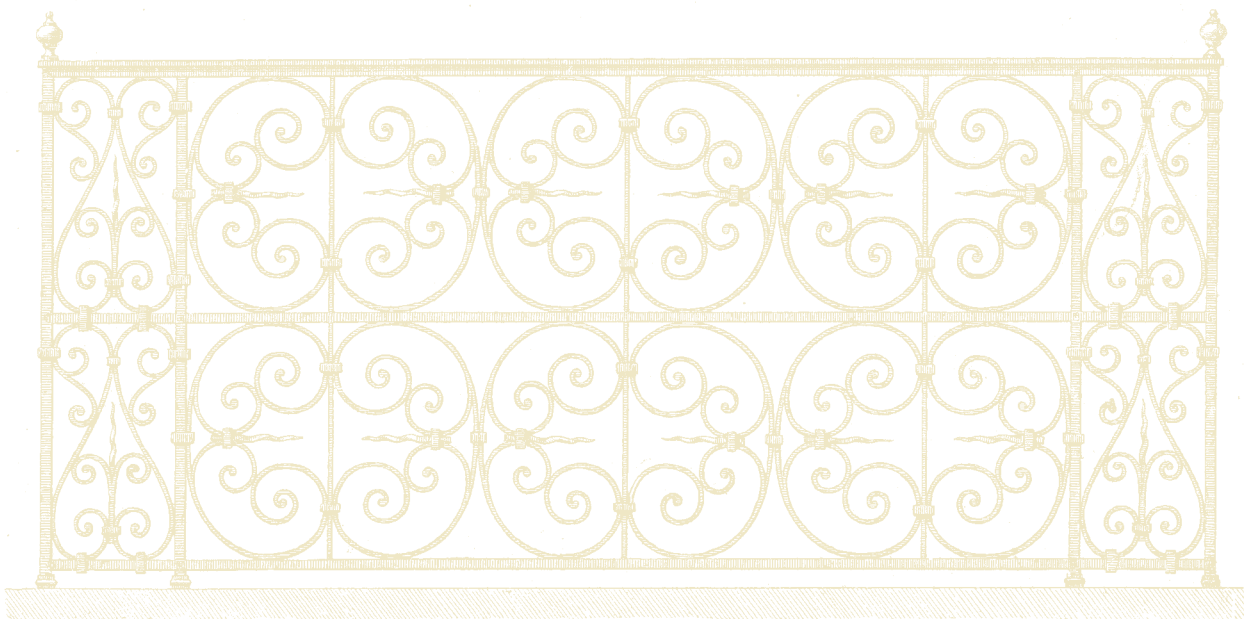
Makes a generous ½ cup

I have always loved mignonette sauce with oysters but sometimes the vinegar can be overpowering. The genius addition of the strawberries and sugar is the perfect foil for the acid and it gentles things up in an interesting way. Or as my dear, dear friend Ellen Stimson herself says, “The tang of vinegar next to the sweetness of strawberries and the heat of the pepper behind the brininess of the oysters, is almost too many good flavors to take in all at once. But you don’t have to. Because they merge into a sweet little symphony of taste. It is a perfect bite.”

*1 tablespoon coarsely ground
black peppercorns
¼ cup champagne vinegar
2 tablespoons
finely chopped shallots
1 teaspoon sugar
2 tablespoons Ellen’s
Strawberry Salsa
(recipe follows)
Sea salt, to taste*

Combine all ingredients in a small bowl. Serve alongside oysters.

NOTE: For diehards, I also offer a classic cocktail sauce made of ketchup, prepared horseradish, and lemon juice, along with a dash or two each of Worcestershire sauce and Tabasco. When the great Mike Rogers was the oyster shucker at the late and much-lamented Uglesich’s (he now toils—and entertains—at Casamento’s), he told me the secret to a perfect cocktail sauce was a few drops of olive oil. He was right.



Ellen's Strawberry Salsa

Makes 3 cups

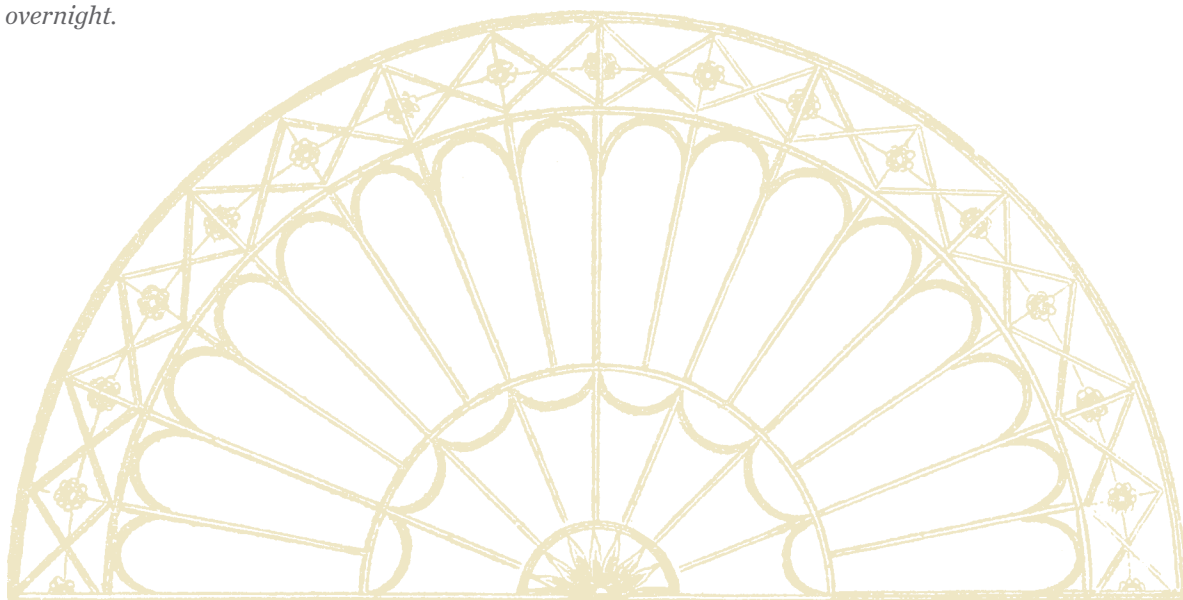
4 cups strawberries
1 cucumber, seeds removed and
roughly chopped
1 jalapeño, seeds and membrane
removed (for more heat,
include a few of the seeds)
1/2 teaspoon salt,
or more to taste
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground
pepper, or more to taste
1/2 to 3/4 cup brown sugar,
depending on the sweetness
of the strawberries
1 bunch cilantro, chopped

Ellen Stimson is one of the best cooks I know and this is one of her entertaining go-tos. Whenever she throws a party in her divine farmhouse in landlocked Vermont, she flies in a pile of oysters and serves them on the half shell with an improbable strawberry mignonette that I fell in love with at first bite. Since this salsa is required for the mignonette, she always makes more than she needs and puts it out with a bowl of tortilla chips. It's so yummy that it usually disappears before the guests arrive. Try to hold out. They'll go mad for it.

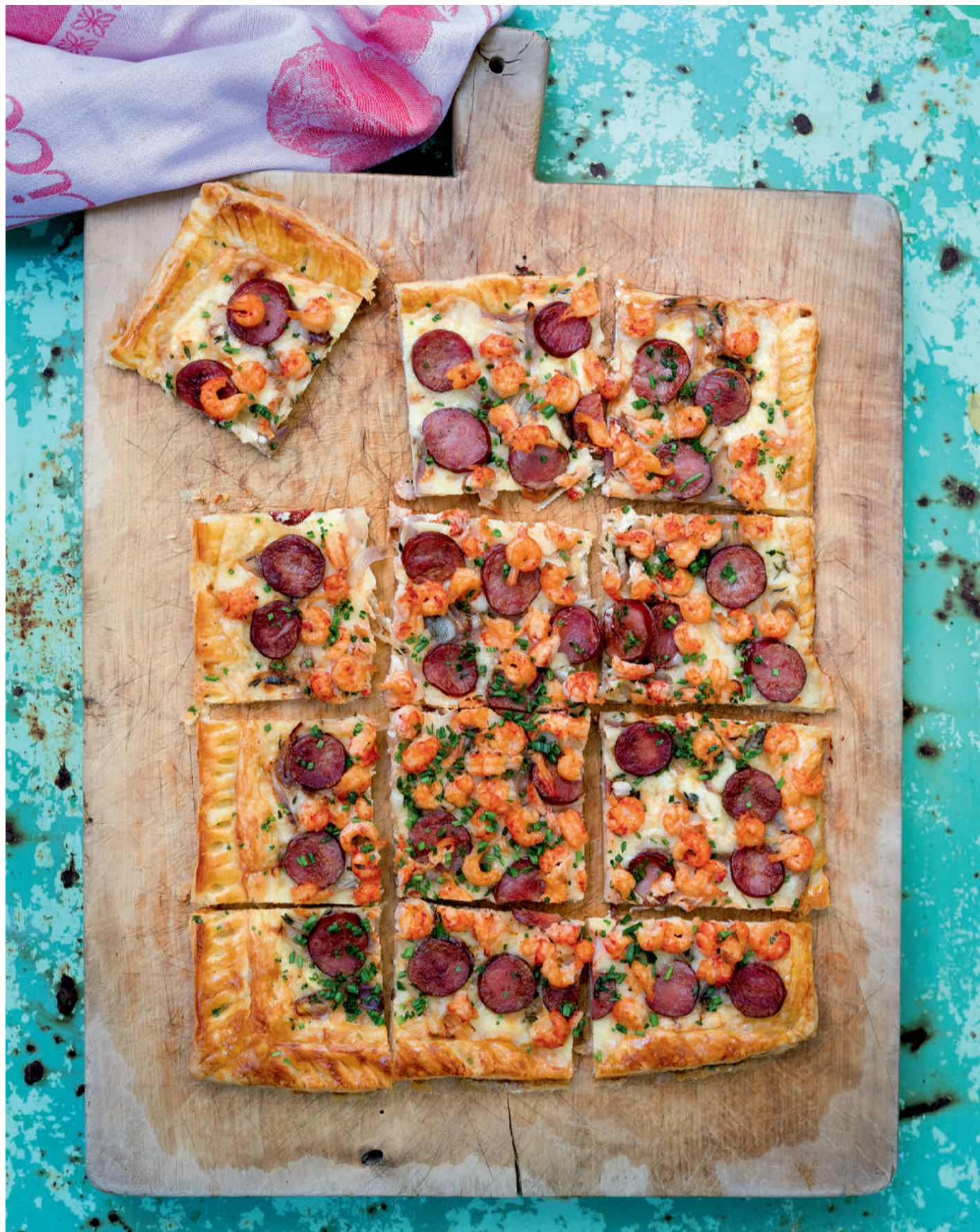
Roughly chop 1 cup of strawberries and set aside.

Place the remaining ingredients in the bowl of a food processor and process until mostly smooth—you want a little texture. Stir in the chopped strawberries and serve with tortilla chips.

NOTE: The salsa is best after it sits for at least an hour. You can also make it up to a day ahead of time and keep it refrigerated overnight.







Crawfish & Andouille Tart

Serves 12 as an appetizer

*1 sheet frozen all-butter
puff pastry*
2 extra-large egg yolks
1 pound andouille sausage
*2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive
oil, plus more for drizzling*
2 tablespoons butter
1 pound shelled crawfish tails
½ cup fresh goat cheese
¼ cup crème fraîche
2 teaspoons dried thyme
Kosher salt to taste
Cayenne pepper to taste
1 tablespoon snipped chives

*NOTE: When cut into six bigger
pieces, this makes a nice main
dish. I accompany it with a green
salad with lots of fresh soft herbs.*



Crawfish, andouille sausage, and goat cheese turn out to have a marvelous affinity for one another. I first encountered them together in a dip my friend the fabulous Angèle Parlange used to bring to almost every party I threw, so this tart is dedicated to her.

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Defrost the puff pastry slightly and unroll it onto a parchment-lined baking sheet. Use a short knife to score a ¼-inch border around the edge of the pastry.

In a small bowl, whisk one of the egg yolks with ¼ teaspoon of water and brush along the pastry border. Place the pastry on the baking sheet in the freezer until you are ready to use it.

Slice the andouille into thin disks (if the sausage is especially wide in diameter, cut the disks in half). In a large skillet, sauté the sausage in 1 tablespoon oil over medium heat until pleasantly browned and slightly caramelized at the edges, 3 to 4 minutes. Remove from heat, put the sausage in a medium bowl, and set aside.

Add the butter to the same skillet (don't wipe it out) over medium-low heat. Add the crawfish tails and stir to make sure all of them are well coated, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat and set aside.

Place the goat cheese, the remaining egg yolk, and the remaining tablespoon of oil in the bowl of a food processor. Puree until smooth and remove to a mixing bowl. Fold in the crème fraîche and season with 1 teaspoon of the thyme, a healthy pinch of salt, and a pinch of cayenne.

Remove the pastry from the freezer and spread the goat cheese mixture within the scored border. Arrange the andouille and the crawfish on top. You may refrigerate the tart, covered in plastic wrap, for a few hours if you're not ready to bake it.

Bake the tart for 20 to 25 minutes, rotating the baking sheet after 10 minutes, until the crust is golden brown. Sprinkle the cooked tart with the remaining teaspoon of thyme and the snipped chives. Let the tart cool for a few minutes, then transfer to a cutting board, and cut into squares. Serve on the board.



The Best Berry Cobbler

Serves 8

This cobbler is loosely adapted from *Chez Panisse Desserts*, an indispensable tome by the brilliant Lindsay Shere, and is as easy as it is delicious. I usually make it with a combo of blackberries and blueberries, but in honor of the season (and our menu), this one includes strawberries mixed with raspberries (plus a little orange juice and zest) for flavor and texture. In New Orleans, I accompany it with Creole cream cheese ice cream, which is made by both the New Orleans Ice Cream Co. and Blue Bell Creameries, but vanilla ice cream or whipped cream would be almost as good.

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

In a large bowl, toss the berries with the orange juice, $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of the sugar, and 2 tablespoons of the flour and set aside.

In a large bowl, mix together the remaining $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour, the salt, the remaining $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons of sugar, the baking powder, and the orange zest. Cut in the butter with two forks or a pastry blender until the mixture looks like coarse cornmeal. (I usually end up using my hands but you can also use a food processor.) Add the cream and mix until the mixture is just moistened and comes together. Shape the dough into patties, about 2 inches in diameter and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick.

Put the berry mixture in a $1\frac{1}{2}$ - or 2-quart gratin or baking dish. Arrange the dough patties on top of the berries. Bake for 45 minutes until the patties are brown and the berry juice bubbles around them.

Let cool slightly and serve straight from the dish accompanied by ice cream or whipped cream.

4 cups strawberries, halved
2 cups raspberries
1 tablespoon freshly squeezed orange juice
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup plus $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons sugar
2 tablespoons plus $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups all-purpose flour
Scant $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
 $2\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoons baking powder
2 teaspoons grated orange zest
6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 12 pieces
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup heavy cream
Ice cream or whipped cream

