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## Crawfish Étouffée Goes Into Exile

By [KIM SEVERSON](#) and [JULIA MOSKIN](#)

Hurricane Katrina has devastated one of the nation's most distinctive culinary cultures.

As restaurateurs and diners around the country worked to organize fund-raisers and find jobs for industry refugees, the people who ran many of the best-known restaurants in the United States struggled to find out what, if anything, was left of the vibrant New Orleans restaurant scene.

Nearly 10 percent of the New Orleans labor force, about 55,000 people, worked in the city's estimated 3,400 restaurants.

Most of the city's best-known restaurants are in the French Quarter, Uptown and in the Garden District, which remained relatively dry. But there were still reports of fires, looting and other damage. Restaurants in the Central Business District and in the Bucktown section were flooded and more seriously damaged.

But whether or not restaurants were damaged, reopening them will be difficult. "We're kind of assuming that even in places like the French Quarter, even if they don't have water damage, they're not going to have customers for a long time," said Don Luria, president of the Council of Independent Restaurants of America, which is helping to find jobs for thousands of workers. "I think a lot of these people are not going to be returning to New Orleans for a long time, if ever."

Some restaurateurs are vowing to continue. "We have been instructed by the matriarchs that we will rebuild," Brad Brennan, of the family that owns the famed Commander's Palace and eight other restaurants, said from his office at Commander's Palace Las Vegas. "There was no hesitation."

The matriarchs are Mr. Brennan's aunt, Ella Brennan, and his mother, Dottie Brennan, who was evacuated to Houston, where the family also has a restaurant.

Mr. Brennan said it was too soon to know the extent of the damage, but all of the 800 employees of the Brennan restaurants were accounted for.

Chuck Subra Jr., executive chef and co-owner of La Côte Brasserie in the Warehouse District, stayed at the restaurant and the adjoining Renaissance Hotel until Wednesday afternoon, before leaving for New Iberia, about 110 miles to the west.

"We're picking up the pieces and moving on," he said, "but I definitely think New Orleans will be back. I'll be back with it."

John Besh, co-owner of Restaurant August and the Besh Steakhouse at Harrah's casino, both in the Central Business District, drove evacuees to his family home in North Carolina last week then returned last weekend with supplies, said Simone Rathle, his publicist.

The chef of the steakhouse, Alon Shaya, said that on television on Sunday he and Mr. Besh had seen the Subway sandwich shop next to August burning, but they could not see if the restaurant was damaged. Mr. Besh, he said, could not get into New Orleans, so yesterday he served red beans and rice to evacuees and emergency workers in Slidell.

Other chefs abandoned their homes and restaurants entirely. Frank Brigtsen of Brigtsen's Restaurant has lived his entire life in New Orleans, but has decided to settle in Shreveport, La, almost 300 miles to the northwest. "We won't have a livelihood, because the city won't be able to support it," Mr. Brigtsen said. "There's a chance it might resurrect itself, but there's not going to be tourism for many years."

Over the weekend, many of the top restaurant owners and chefs had been accounted for through friends, publicists and other chefs. Many logged on to the Southern Foodways Alliance Web site, where the Southern food historian and writer John T. Edge spent Sunday compiling a list of chefs and other members of the alliance who had been accounted for.

But many chefs and restaurant owners were still seeking word on Sunday on the whereabouts of their waiters, line cooks and dishwashers - people who lived paycheck to paycheck and were less likely to have cars or money to evacuate. "They are going to desperately need to find other employment pretty quick," Tom Weatherly of the Louisiana Restaurant Association said.

The restaurant association, along with the James Beard Foundation and the Southern Foodways Alliance, which are culinary associations, and [OpenTable.com](#), an online restaurant service, are contacting restaurateurs around the country to set up a job bank they hope will provide jobs in as many as 3,000 restaurants. Information about the job bank can be found at [jamesbeard.org](#) and [www.southernfoodways.com](#). The rest of Louisiana's restaurant industry, which generates \$5.2 billion in sales a year and is the largest private employer in the state, was also trying to absorb the hurricane's blow.

Restaurants in nearby cities were overloaded with evacuees and short on food. Warehouses of major food suppliers like Sysco were damaged, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency was buying up huge parts of the remaining food supply, Mr. Weatherly said. For food lovers, the loss of a city that produced chefs like Paul Prudhomme and Emeril Lagasse and taught a nation how to eat gumbo, po' boys and étouffée, is incalculable.

New Orleans "is our spiritual and cultural culinary home," the Southern author and cook Nathalie Dupree said in an e-mail message.

"We don't know if the descendants of the great African-American and Creole cooks will return," Ms. Dupree said. "We don't know where those dishwashers and waiters and sauce chefs will go while the great chefs rebuild their restaurants, or if they will ever be back."

Pableaux Johnson contributed reporting for this article.

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