COOKING UP THE COAST:  
HOW CHEFS CAN HELP RESTORATION EFFORTS

LOUISIANA'S LAND LOSS CRISIS

Over the last few hundred years, human alterations to the Mississippi River Delta, such as levees and dredging navigation and oil exploration canals, have caused the delta to collapse. Since the 1930s Louisiana has lost 1,300 square miles of land—an area roughly the size of Delaware. This crisis has already contributed to the loss of communities, loss of industry, loss of wildlife habitats and loss of protection from storms and sea level rise. Restoration of a healthy, productive Mississippi River Delta requires a variety of restoration solutions, including reconnecting the river to its delta through land-building sediment diversions.

FOOD CULTURE IN LOUISIANA

New Orleans and coastal Louisiana are unique (largely) because of the residents whose lives are intrinsically tied to the Mississippi River Delta. This complex blending of cultures over the last 300 years has produced many distinctive food traditions, all of which still depend on the diverse flora and fauna of the Mississippi River Delta. Many of the species central to Louisiana’s culinary heritage—redfish, shrimp, blue crabs, oysters, and alligators—depend on the state’s estuaries and wetlands.

WHY CHEFS

New Orleans chefs are a particularly high-profile group of stakeholders who act as spokespeople to the public and liaisons to the seafood industry. Their local celebrity status makes them trusted and influential to residents, fishermen, tourists, and local decision-makers. As business owners they have a stake in the local economy, particularly in the longevity of the tourism and seafood. Their ties to the food, people, and economies that make up the culture of Louisiana place them in an ideal position to support the long-term sustainability of the surrounding environment, which provides the culinary resources they showcase on a daily basis. Strategic collaboration with local chefs can also help develop support for critical sediment diversion projects, particularly with fishermen and oystermen.

SUCCESSES

Through field trips, presentations, one-on-one meetings, and events, over 30 New Orleans top culinary leaders actively support coastal restoration. These relationships have led to direct advocacy and creative engagement opportunities that have elevated restoration issues in the public sphere.

New Orleans restaurants signed-on to two successful letters that went to both the current and past federal Administrations urging the protection of restoration funding by preserving the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act. One such letter included 13 high-profile New Orleans restaurants. New Orleans restaurants also publicly supported the 2017 Louisiana State Coastal Master Plan, helping its unanimous passage in the state legislature.

VANISHING PARADISE SUPPER

Who: Executive Chef Nathan Richard
Where: Restaurant Cavan in New Orleans
What: Marsh-to-table supper highlighting freshwater fish and wildlife species
Connecting menu items to coastal restoration and personal stories
Results: Sold out dinner, attracting 75 attendees including reporters, restoration supporters and newcomers

COOK-OFF FOR THE COAST

Who: Celebrity chefs and amateur cook teams (including the Chalmette High School Owls)
Where: Decouville Farm in Violet, Louisiana
What: Tailgate-style wild hog cook-off highlighting the impact of hog on coastal wetlands and other restoration issues
Attendees learned about (and sampled) other important seafood species highlighted by local celebrity chefs at the cooking demo stage.
Results: More than 400 attendees raised more than $4,400 for the St. Bernard Wetlands Foundation to support a volunteer swamp tree planting. Media coverage from local food writers.

OYSTER SHELL RECYCLING FIELD TRIP

Who: Seaworthy Oyster Bar at the Ace Hotel
Where: Oyster reefs constructed from recycled oyster from New Orleans restaurants
What: History of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet channel
The importance of oyster reefs to restoration
Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana’s (CRCL) Oyster Shell Recycling Programs
Results: Seaworthy’s participation in the Oyster Shell Recycling Program

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New Orleans food is as delicious as the least criminal forms of sin—Mark Twain

Chef, restoration advocates and National Wildlife Federation staff about sediment diversions at some fishing ton