

F. Evan Nooe, Ph.D.

Evan.Nooe@uncc.edu
American Studies Program
UNC, Charlotte

Boatwright's Dining Hall: Southern Food and the Authentication of Fantasy

Since 1992, Boatwright's Dining Hall has been serving "Cajun specialties from the rural South." Only open for dinner, patrons can feast on iconic dishes offered on the Lower Louisiana inspired menu in a rustic and spacious dining room not far from a meandering, muddy water river. The restaurant serves Southern appetizers including pimento cheese fritters, a crawfish bisque, and fried green tomatoes. For a main course, you can select from Cajun options such as jambalaya, étouffée, andouille-crusted fried catfish, or a corn risotto. For libations, Louisiana's Abita beers are on tap or you can southern cocktails like a Sazerac or the Ramos Fizz. Cuisine consistent desserts are also available with offerings of pecan pie, banana pudding, or a crème brûlée with seasonal berries. After twenty-five years in operation, the restaurant has stayed true to its culinary foundation showing little sign of deviating from its defining cuisine.

Though entertaining patrons over decades, the restaurant simply would not work anywhere else. The success of Boatwright's Dining Hall hinges not just on its physical location, but how it connects to its location and functions as an authenticating pillar of its locale. Located in Central Florida, Boatwright's operates in a unique kind a physical but also narrated space. Within the confines of the internationally recognized Walt Disney World Resort, Boatwright's contributes to the hyperreality of Disney's Port Orleans Hotel's as a source of storytelling and immersion. With room rates starting around \$180 a night, Disney's Port Orleans Resort is made up of two jointly managed hotel properties, "The French Quarter" and "Riverside" spread over 325 acres representing the "romance and pageantry of New Orleans's historic French Quarter" and "a picturesque setting that evokes. . . rural Louisiana," respectively. In such a setting, Boatwright's serves as a visual and interactive element in the effort to immerse guests and reinforce the narrative of the resort.

The utilization of Southern food at Disney's Port Orleans Resort presents several complicating variables to how we conceptualize regional food and confounds claims to authenticity of dishes regularly identified as Southern. While Boatwright's Dining Hall is physically located in the South serving regionally specific cuisine, the Southern food prepared and then consumed by visitors perpetuates the conceptual construction of the resort's three-dimensional historical fiction. Boatwright's utilizes iconic representations of Southern food to maintain immersive continuity within the resort's broader hyperreality. Whereas Southern food frequently ties patrons and establishments to a regional identity, Boatwright's and the food it serves reinforces the place-based connection by patrons to the resort specifically, not necessarily the South, Lower Louisiana, or the actual city of New Orleans. Though Boatwright's may serve traditional Cajun fare, when reconstituted, prepared, plated, and consumed within Disney's Port Orleans Resort, customers are presented with a connection to both the physical space the resort occupies and the hyperreality constituting the immersive experience visitors navigate as part of their vacation. In effect, traditionally southern food served in the South is no longer regionally southern.