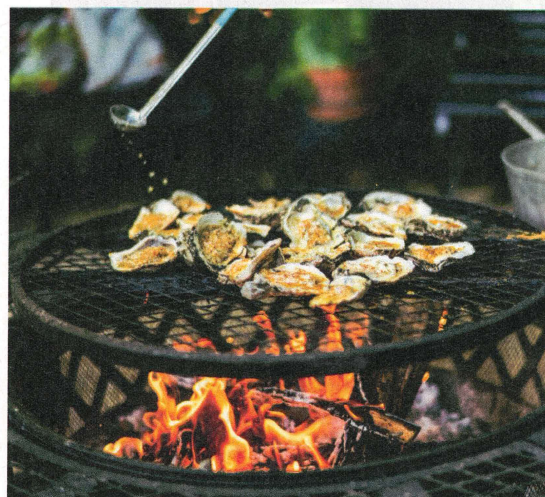




Magic on Lake Martin

THE GUEST LIST IS SMALL, THE CHEFS ARE KEPT UNDER WRAPS, AND THE MEAL IS ONE TO REMEMBER

STORY BY SHARON McDONNELL

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DENNY CULBERT

It's not the easiest place to find, but then, it is a Secret Supper. A long-standing dinner series starring James Beard Award-winning and -nominated chefs from around the country, not just Louisiana, that draws guests from Los Angeles, Miami, New York, even Canada, France, and Brazil, it's tucked away at Maison Madeleine, a bed-and-breakfast on the shore of Lake Martin, a bald cypress swamp that's one of the biggest nesting places for blue herons, roseate spoonbills, and snowy egrets in Louisiana. Guests buy tickets months in advance, sometimes up to a year, for dinners at the B&B, a 15-minute drive from downtown Breau Bridge or a 25-minute drive from Lafayette. About 12 to 14 Secret Suppers are held each year (though not during the summer months), each for about 40 people, in the series, which has earned flattering mentions in the *New York Times* and even *Le Figaro* (France's oldest, largest daily newspaper).



Local Grammy-winning musicians, including the likes of Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys, Kelli Jones of Feufollet, and accordionist Cedric Watson, serenade diners on the lush grounds, shaded by Spanish moss-draped oaks and palmettos dotted with tiny fairy lights that appear as the sun starts to set. Generous hors d'oeuvres and wine are served before dinner, and during the four-course extravaganza, there's also a carefully curated wine pairing put on by Wild Child, a wine bar and shop in Lafayette, whose staff acts as sommeliers during the event.

The bed-and-breakfast features a circa-1840 Creole cottage built with bousillage (clay mixed with Spanish moss) that's on the National Register of Historic Places and a newer similarly styled cottage connected to it. Dinner is served in three rooms, two with long communal tables in the newer cottage. The upstairs single two-bedroom suite where the chef stays during the Secret Supper weekend is furnished in French Provincial antiques from 1835–1850. Another Creole cottage, decked with pale-green shutters, contains a bar adorned with religious imagery, called the Jesus Bar, and the catering kitchen where meals are prepared is 100 yards away.

But you don't need to be here at "magic hour" to fall under its spell and feel a hushed sense of serenity seep into your bones. Any hour will do. Nina Compton, chef/owner of Compère Lapin in New Orleans and recipient of the James Beard Award for Best Chef: South in 2018, cooked Tuna with Coconut & Jerk Peanuts and Brown Stew Snapper here. James Beard Award nominees who have cooked at Secret Suppers range from Michael Stoltzfus of Coquette and Isaac Toups of Toups' Meatery, both in New Orleans; Madonna Broussard of Laura's Cafe Two in Lafayette; and Steve McHugh of Cured (closed in late 2025) in San Antonio, Texas, to Sohail Zandi of Brushland Eating House in Bovina, New York, a Best Chef: New York State nominee for his restaurant in the Catskills.







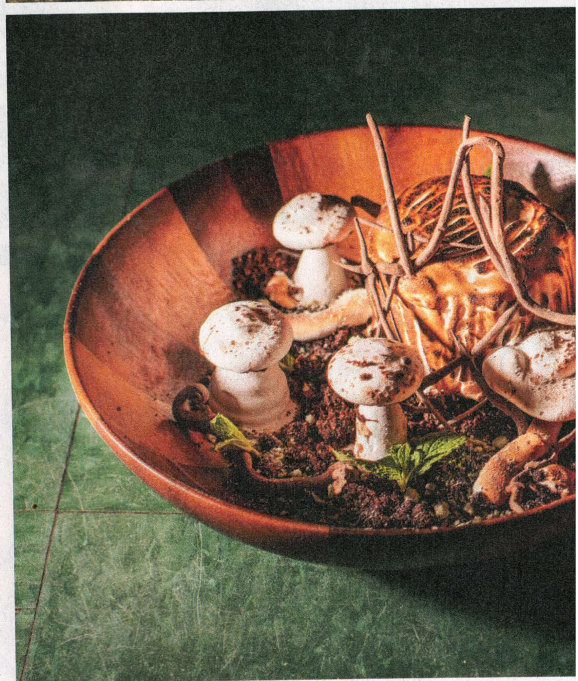
This page (clockwise from top): Guests enjoying the grounds before dinner; guests enjoying one of the dinner courses; Wild Child wine bar bringing out a wine pairing. Opposite page (clockwise from top): Grammy-winning musicians serenading diners; Wild Child staff serving wine to guests.

Interestingly, the chefs for the \$375 dinner (wine included) aren't announced until about a week before the dinner. "People book us based on reputation, not because they know who the chef or musicians are. They come for the experience and know the food is going to be very good and so is the music," explains Walt Adams, who owns the bed-and-breakfast with his wife, Madeleine Cerac, a former interior designer and the B&B's namesake. The decision to delay the announcement is rooted in sheer practicality—notable chefs are offered multiple opportunities, so canceling due to a TV show or book signing is eternally possible—and has ended up being a brilliant (but unintentional) marketing move. "As it turns out, it gets everyone's antennae up. The words 'secret' and 'supper' intrigue epicureans. For many people, it's the centerpiece of their trip to Louisiana," Walt says with a chuckle. Repeat customers for the ultra-refined experience are common. At the Secret Supper this past February, 39 of the 45 guests were repeats. Some seats are set aside for long-time clients.

One such repeat guest is Katharine Carmichael of Beaumont, Texas, who's attended about six times. "You go on blind faith but know it's going to be a great experience," says Katharine, owner of the restaurant Katharine & Company, who is understandably fussy about where she eats. "I like the owners, who are friendly, warm, and inviting—it feels sympatico. Walt greets everyone, introduces the chef, talks to us during dinner, and at the end, we go to the Jesus Bar," she says.

Two-thirds of the chefs are also repeats, Walt shares. "I hook them by offering them a nice three-day weekend to stay here to escape the chaos and go out on the lake in a kayak. Their life is hard on their family and marriage. They don't need to bring anything except their knife roll, and Friday night and Saturday morning, they're hanging with their fam." Word-of-mouth from satisfied chefs that a Secret Supper was a good gig spread, he says.

Chef Nina Compton, restaurateur and author of *Kwéyòl/Creole*, a cookbook of Caribbean-Creole cooking, who stayed on-site with her husband one weekend as the surprise chef, says, "It was really special—a beautiful Creole cottage deep in the countryside, away from the hustle and bustle; you can disconnect. It's a very captivating space that makes you feel super-intimate. Our room





was a princess' room, a very soft bed and frilly curtains. The kitchen, which had copper pots and antique stove, was where breakfast was served." Of its mystique, Nina notes, "People love the element of surprise and the space. There's a lot of things a restaurant cannot provide." The big metal cauldron in front of the house reminded her of St. Lucia, the island where she was born and raised, where they're used to cook sugarcane.

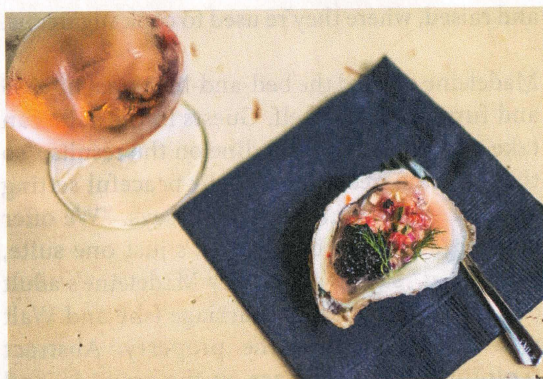
Madeleine opened the bed-and-breakfast in 2005 and furnished it herself. Guests in the suite can take a cooking class and dine on the results, "so they have no need to leave our peaceful setting to drive to a town," Madeleine says. "We offer concierge service, but since it's just one suite, that's easy," says Walt. Art by Madeleine's adult children from her first marriage (she and Walt wed in 2014) adorn the property. Abstract sculptures by her son are on the grounds, and paintings of swans and women by her daughter (a scenic painter for films such as Oscar-winning *Sinners*, who's done live painting during New Orleans' White Linen Night festival) fill the original house, where Madeleine and Walt live.

"[People come to our Secret Suppers] for the experience and know the food is going to be very good and so is the music."

—WALT ADAMS

The idea for The Secret Supper Series was sparked by, of all people, Anthony Bourdain, who invited several chefs and musicians to a crawfish boil at the bed-and-breakfast to film a *No Reservations* episode in 2011. Everyone had such a wonderful time, the TV host tossed out the idea that such meals could be regular off-camera events. The owners agreed, and the wildly successful Secret Suppers were born in 2015. “He was a very affable fellow. If I’m gonna do it, I’ll build a kitchen, I said,” recalls Walt, a construction engineer who owned a management consulting firm in Atlanta, Georgia.

The first few years, Walt had a list of people who might want to attend, but soon, it started getting a lot of followers on social media and people asked to be invited. “Our list grew to about 6,000 from our original 200.” Since then, The Secret Supper Series has been wildly successful, always selling out. “Some places try to copy us, but we’re established,” Walt says with a smile. While others may try to re-create the concept behind it, the setting, guest list, and chefs create a magical, intimate gathering that’s hard to replicate anywhere else but at Maison Madeleine.



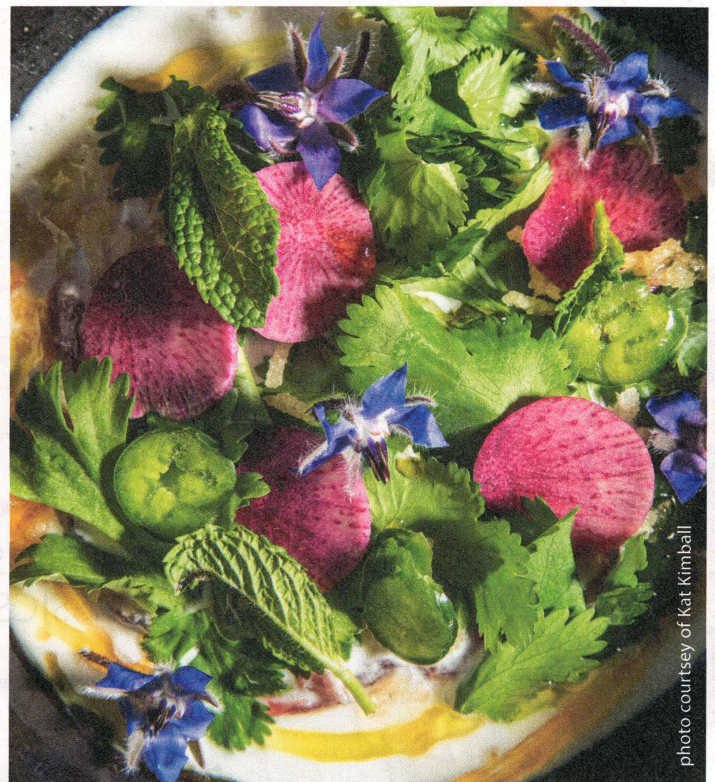


photo courtesy of Kat Kimball

Tuna with Coconut & Jerk Peanuts

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

Recipe courtesy of Chef Nina Compton, Chef/Owner, Compère Lapin, New Orleans

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| 1 cup peanuts | 1 bunch fresh cilantro, picked |
| 6 tablespoons olive oil, divided | 1 jalapeño, thinly sliced |
| 1 tablespoon kosher salt | 2 tablespoons kosher salt |
| 3 tablespoons jerk seasoning* | 1 grapefruit, peeled and cut into supremes |
| 1 (14-ounce) can coconut milk | 1 tablespoon Maldon salt |
| 3 limes, zested and juiced | Garnish: fresh mint, fresh cilantro, sliced jalapeño, sliced watermelon radish, edible flowers, olive oil, and Maldon sea salt |
| ¼ cup fish sauce | |
| ¼ cup tamarind purée | |
| 1 pound sushi-grade tuna, small-diced | |
| 1 bunch fresh mint, picked and torn | |

1. Preheat the oven to 325°.
2. Toss the peanuts in 4 tablespoons of olive oil, kosher salt, and jerk spice, and bake for 15 minutes. Let stand until cool, and roughly chop.
3. In a medium bowl, combine the coconut milk, lime zest and juice, fish sauce, and tamarind. Add the tuna and peanuts, gently stirring to combine. Plate tuna mixture on a serving platter, and top with mint, cilantro, jalapeño, kosher salt, grapefruit, and Maldon salt. Garnish with radish and edible flowers, if desired. ✱

*Nina prefers Spicewalla Jerk Seasoning.