

Go Wish New Orleans a Happy 300th Birthday

You (and your stomach) don't want to be left out of this party.

By [Margaret Seiler](#) 3/27/2018 at 4:20pm Published in the [April 2018](#) issue of *Portland Monthly*



Carriage tours depart from the French Quarter's historic Jackson Square.

IMAGE: [COURTESY SEAN PAVONE/SHUTTERSTOCK](#)

In 1718, tobacco agent Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville sited the capital of New France's vast Louisiana territory on a mosquito-ridden riverbank. The area's Natchez, Houma, and Choctaw probably wondered why the swampland was chosen for a city. Sure enough, the fledgling town flooded a year later. That set the tone for **New Orleans's** first century, which saw devastating hurricanes, yellow fever, two major fires, 40 years under the control of Spain, and a brief return to France to feed Napoleon's thirst for empire (until he sold the whole shebang to the US). Ultimately, the soggy bowl in which Bienville invested France's tobacco dreams proved better for sugarcane and rice (possibly introduced by Senegalese farmers brought as slaves). Home to both a major slave market and an ever-growing number of free people of color, the city and ring of swamps became an easy place to disappear for a few days.

New Orleans's second and third centuries brought new waves of (mostly willing) residents from around the world: especially Germans, Italians, and, later, thousands of Vietnamese refugees settled by the Catholic Church in New Orleans East. (Today the 35-year-old [Dong Phuong](#) bakery makes one of the city's best versions of a king cake—a traditional Mardi Gras treat.)

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the city's pump stations and levees remade the city yet again. Now, as residents reclaim the cityscape, they're adapting, reinventing, and honoring traditions in food, music, dance, and celebration. Few places in America can claim a tricentennial, but then, New Orleans was never, ever like anyplace else to begin with. Go now, and take it easy; you've got 300 years of history to explore.



Hit Bourbon Street's pedestrian zone during the day, before the hordes descend.

IMAGE: [COURTESY SIMPLY PHOTOS](#)

Eat

Start with the sandwiches. You—the smart traveler—head to the French Quarter (or Vieux Carré, the first platted part of the city) not for bar-lined Bourbon Street with its squealing bachelorette parties and college bar crawls. You don't even go for the powdered-sugar beignet factory [Café du Monde](#) or classic restaurants like the jackets-required [Galatoire's 33](#). No—you make a beeline for [Central Grocery's](#) original muffuletta (the recipe dates to 1906), a salty wedge of ciabatta packed with salami, cheese, mortadella, and chunky stuffed green olives. Nighttime munchies? Nearby [Verti Marte](#) slings its All that Jazz sandwich—with turkey, shrimp, 'shrooms, and the mysterious mayo-based "Wow" sauce—24 hours a day.

Look just outside the Quarter for more fist-sized delights. At [Dooky Chase's](#) in Tremé, gawk at both 95-year-old Leah Chase's airy fried chicken and the sweet entryway portraits of her buddy Barack Obama. In the Central Business District, [Drago's](#) at the Hilton fires up oysters slathered in a mix of butter and closely guarded state secrets.

Do

The [city's official tricentennial celebration](#) kicks in big time in April, with the [French Quarter Festival](#) (April 12–15) and the [New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival](#) (April 27–May 6) both bringing the noise. The Jazz Fest isn't just jazz: there's also Aerosmith, David Byrne, and bounce artist (and NOLA native) Big Freedia. Or you can work up an appetite for that next great meal on the [Lafitte Greenway](#), a 2.6-mile post-Katrina linear park whose mod rainbow playgrounds and canal and pump system peekaboos stretch from Tremé to Mid-City. Fuel up first at comfy [Backatown Coffee](#); end with a po'boy feast at the century-old [Parkway Bakery and Tavern](#). Ferry across the Mississippi and stroll [Algiers Point's](#) new levee path. Refresh at the [Old Point Bar](#), plastered with photos of celebrities like Ray Liotta, who looks like he'd had a few.



Instruments adorn walls at the Henry Howard Hotel.

IMAGE: [COURTESY KATHLEEN FITZGERALD](#)

Stay

On a budget? Claim a local-artisan-hewn bunk at the year-old [Quisby](#) (beds from \$30), a hip hostel near the National World War II Museum (and to-be-renamed Lee Circle) with a 24-hour lobby bar, en-suite bathrooms, and staff ready to recommend local treats like Colombian fare and sangria at [Maïs Arepas](#). For a grander Garden District feel, the circa-1867 [Henry Howard Hotel](#) (from \$359) is just a few stops on the St. Charles streetcar from downtown. Or, take the Canal streetcar to the newly renovated, marble-lined [Jung Hotel](#) (from \$149), whose 200-plus sleek white rooms opened quietly this past winter.

NoLa, PDX Style

Miss the 503 while you're in the 504? A traveler could just re-create Portland on the Mississippi: The French Quarter's [Spitfire Coffee](#) is a ringer for PDX's own Courier, right down to the canelés. The [St. Roch Market](#) food hall, open since 2015, is a brighter, roomier Pine Street Market in a 143-year-old building. And in 2016, the [Wayward Owl](#) achieved a McMenamins-style repurposing when it set up shop in a 1940s-era Gem cinema to make its dunkels and Cascadian dark ales. Also opened in 2016, the Pearl-esque Warehouse District's [Ace Hotel New Orleans](#) (rooms from \$199) offers all the charms of home (couch-lined lobby, photo booth, and Stumptown Coffee) plus a rooftop pool and bar.



From left: The New Orleans Ace Hotel is also home to Josephine Estelle, an Italian restaurant with Southern touches; the NOLA Ace's rooftop bar and garden

IMAGE: [COURTESY FRAN PARENTE](#)

GET THERE: April one-stop round trips from PDX to Louis Armstrong International start around \$330 on [Southwest](#) and [United](#).

DO: Carry cash. Many NOLA businesses don't take cards. Plus, you'll need small bills to drop in the hats of street buskers—or to give to wagon-pulling drink vendors if you join a second line parade (find info at [wwoz.org](#)).

DON'T: Ask everyone about Katrina. Who wants to relive a harrowing, life-altering event for a tourist's benefit?