

Café Reconcile

CHANNING JOSEPH

Tucked away on what used to be Dryades Street, in a run-down oyster shell of a New Orleans neighborhood, is Café Reconcile, a tiny pearl of a restaurant fighting to bring the community back to life one young person at a time.

Four years ago, Harry Tompson, a Jesuit priest battling cancer, decided to leave one last legacy behind, a neighborhood restaurant with a goal unlike any other business: to transform the lives of troubled kids by giving them jobs, meals, and the hospitality skills necessary to start a real restaurant career and to succeed in a business of their own.

I walk in from the street, and I'm surprised that its nondescript façade hides a virtual mini-museum of vibrant paintings. Created by local kids, the paintings depict scenes of peace and social harmony — scenes with brightly colored people of different backgrounds holding hands in a chain across a flower-covered Earth where the season is eternally spring. It's a sweet and innocent sentiment, but the people here take it very seriously. Indeed, inside these walls, it's the world they are trying very hard to create.

Café Reconcile's employees are St. Regis Hospitality School students and neighborhood residents (aged 16 to 25) who might otherwise end up on the streets, in the jails, or worse. For the six to eight weeks it takes to complete the program, their job is not only to serve great food (and it is great), but also to serve as good examples to other at-risk youth—and to do so while working at a business with the further goal of attracting new economic activity to a money-starved part of the city.

Craig Cuccia, the executive director, tells me how he helped start the café with Father Tompson as an outreach

program of a local Catholic church. "It's such a blessing," he says, pleased to be getting so much publicity lately, before he surprises me with his blunt honesty. "This work, it's really difficult," he says. "It could be disheartening, but it's a spiritual call, and that allows for you to find the hope."

He tells me that he's been given some of that hope through the support of other local businesses, like WDSU Channel 6 and Leidenheimer Bakery, and of course, from the support of restaurant patrons and neighborhood residents.

I can see the compassion and commitment in his eyes as he discusses how he has always wanted Café Reconcile to be "a business that is an opportunity for kids to get a chance, where nobody else would give them a chance." Some of the "kids" in the program have been in prison for four or five years already, even though they've barely made it into their twenties. And just a few months ago, Grover Arbuthnot, one of the café's favorite employees, was tragically gunned down. I can see that it hurts him to talk about it, but Cuccia tells me he's not going to let tragedy interfere with his calling to save other troubled youth.

"I have kids that come in here and they can't look you in the eye on the first day, and within three, four, five days, a couple weeks, they're out there dancing, or washing the windows, or making a salad...They've found some real self-esteem through a positive experience of 'Hey, I can be somebody, I can do something, I'm not what I've been told.'"

"It takes a long time to change, but we're willing to work with kids. That's our mission. Everybody here buys into the idea of us mentoring children or kids to be productive citizens...and



Director Craig Cuccia and assistant director, Pam Broom



Executive chef, Don Boyd

that's a big shift from the culture that they live in today."

Don Boyd, the executive chef, is also "on a mission." An LSU psychology graduate who's worked in several other fields, Boyd tells me, "This is the most fulfilling job I've ever had. I'm passionate about what I do."

Boyd takes pride in his work and in his students, who have gone on to land staff positions at restaurants all

across the city, including Acme Oyster House, The Palace Café, Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse, and the New Orleans Hilton. Thus far, no graduate has returned to a life of crime or drug addiction, which might show better than anything the depth of the impact that this special program has on the lives of its students, even as it runs on a \$4,000-a-month deficit.

Finances are the biggest problem for the café, which relies on donations and government grants to stay afloat, but a new building expansion is in the works for late next year, and the staff hopes the rents generated will finally bring in a steady flow of funds. Although Boyd tells me that he earns only half the salary he was used to, he discovered after a few months on the job that the money didn't seem to matter so much. "I was almost repaid because I got a chance to turn a lot of kids' lives around," he says. "We've taken kids from four years incarceration at 21 years old to Delgado Community College."

Boyd also introduces me to one of the program's successes. His name is Manzel "Manny" Gould, also known here as "The Chosen One." He is a charming, soft-spoken 24-year-old who grew up in the St. Thomas Housing Project and spent the last few years of his life in and out of jail. Now, with the help of Café Reconcile, he is a budding chef whom Don is training as his replacement.

Although the program is only supposed to last two months, "The Chosen One" has already been working here for three. "It's nice here," he tells me. "They don't want to let me go."

This is Gould's first job in his life, and in the very beginning, he wasn't sure

that working was cut out for him.

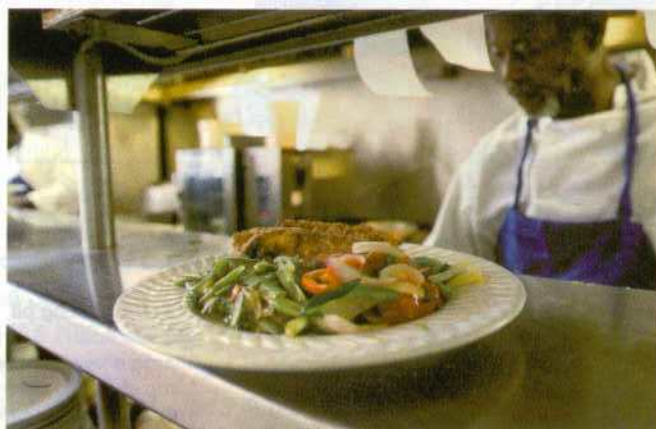
"To be honest with you, I was about to give up on them at one point in time," he confides. But he encouraged himself to stay with it because "it really does keep me off the streets." One thing "The Chosen One" knows for sure is that he doesn't want to go back to prison, though just a little while ago, he remembers feeling like maybe he was just meant to be behind bars for the rest of his life. But he's not hanging around his old neighborhood buddies anymore, and now he has big ambitions in the outside world. Eventually, Gould plans to start a restaurant of his own called Manny's Place.

"Me, I got gifts," he proudly proclaims. "Everything I do is like a big old step [toward my goals]."

I leave the restaurant impressed. I am floored by the commitment and the heart I see in all the people working here. I am touched by the personal stories of tragedy and triumph. But best of all, I'm no longer hungry, and you won't be either.

Stop by sometime. You can fill your belly with inexpensive but quality food, and you can know your dollar is going to a good cause. The Café Reconcile is open every weekday for lunch and breakfast from 8 a.m. until 2 p.m. For breakfast, make sure to try the deliciously gourmet Eggs Louisiana, and get there early for lunch. (It's always packed.)

Channing Joseph is a Slidell-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in various publications, including *Publishers Weekly*, *Glamour*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, among others.





Tarragon Chicken Salad with Toasted Almonds

MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS.

- 2 whole chickens, roasted and deboned
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 1/4 cup lemon juice
- 1 cup chopped red onion
- 4 celery stalks, chopped
- 4 green onions, chopped
- 2 teaspoons fresh tarragon
- 1 dash white pepper
- Salt and black pepper, to taste
- Mixed greens
- 1 cup toasted almonds

Remove skin from chicken. Dice meat. Set aside. In a large bowl, mix mayonnaise, lemon juice, red onion, celery, green onions, tarragon, white pepper, salt and black pepper. Add chicken, and stir well.

Serve chicken salad over bed of mixed greens. Top with toasted almonds.

Smothered Pork Chops

MAKES 4 HEARTY SERVINGS OR 8 SMALL SERVINGS.

- 3 cups oil
- 1 1/2 cups flour
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 8 bone-in pork chops
- 2 cups onion, chopped
- 1 cup celery, chopped
- 1/4 cup garlic, minced
- 1 red or green bell pepper, chopped
- 1 cup mushrooms (optional), sliced
- 1/2 teaspoon basil
- 1/2 teaspoon thyme
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- Onion powder, to taste
- 2 to 4 quarts beef stock

Heat oil in a large, high-walled saucepan to

around 350°F. Season flour with salt and pepper. Dredge pork chops in flour; save remaining flour. Brown pork chops in oil, then remove chops from pan. Do not fully cook chops. Let brown bits in the oil settle for a few minutes. Reduce the amount of oil to about 1 cup. Brown onions and celery. Add the remaining flour to make a roux. Stir until roux is light brown. Add garlic, bell pepper, mushrooms, basil, thyme, bay leaves, garlic powder and onion powder. Stir well. Cook until garlic is fragrant.

Add stock slowly, mixing until sauce becomes slightly watery. Return pork chops to saucepan.

Simmer until chops are tender, about 25 minutes. Adjust thickness with remaining stock.

Redfish Courtboullion

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS.

- 1/2 cup cooking oil
- 1/2 cup flour
- 3 large onions, chopped
- 1 cup chopped celery
- 1/4 cup minced garlic
- 20 Creole tomatoes, peeled and diced
- 1 can tomato paste (4 ounces)
- 2 1/2 quarts seafood stock
- Dash cayenne pepper
- Dash white pepper
- Red pepper flakes
- 1/4 cup sweet white wine
- 4 pounds redfish
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons parsley, chopped
- 1 cup chopped green onion tops
- Cooked rice

Make brown roux with oil and flour. Add onions, celery, and garlic. Let cook until soft. Add tomatoes and tomato paste. Cook slowly, stirring for 5 minutes. Add stock and simmer 1 hour. Add cayenne, white pepper, red pepper flakes and wine. Submerge fish into sauce, and simmer for about 15 minutes. Salt and pepper to taste. Add parsley and onion tops about 5 minutes before serving. Serve over rice in soup plates.

Shrimp and Blue Cheese Grits with Seasonal Vegetables

MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS.

Brie cheese can also be substituted for blue cheese.

- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 1/4 cup white wine

- 2 teaspoons Cajun seasoning or seasoning salt
- 5 pounds shrimp, peeled and deveined with tail-on
- 4 cups stone ground grits
- 1 cup blue cheese, crumbled

Combine olive oil, soy sauce, white wine and Cajun seasoning. Add shrimp. Marinate 1 hour, refrigerated. While shrimp marinate, julienne the vegetables (recipe follows).

Preheat grill. Cook grits following package directions. Add blue cheese and simmer until thick. Cover to keep warm. Grill shrimp over an open flame until fully cooked, about 12 minutes. While shrimp grill, prepare vegetables.

To serve, place grits on center of plate. Top with vegetables. Surround with shrimp.

Seasonal Vegetables:

- 5 pounds seasonal vegetables (peppers, squash, mushrooms, etc.)
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1/4 cup fresh basil, sliced
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Julienne vegetables. Heat a pan over high heat. Add oil. Sauté vegetables, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add basil, remove from heat. Season with salt and pepper.

Bananas Foster Bread Pudding

MAKES 12 SERVINGS.

- 6 eggs, beaten
- 1 cup cream
- 3 cups sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup rum extract
- 1/4 cup banana extract
- 8 cups whole milk
- 1/2 cup butter
- 2 loaves stale French bread

In a large mixing bowl, combine eggs, cream, white sugar, brown sugar, rum extract and banana extract.

Warm the milk and butter until butter melts. Add to egg and sugar mixture.

Preheat oven to 300°F. Crumble stale French bread into a 12x12x4-inch baking pan. The pan should be heaping, as the wet ingredients will push the bread down. Add wet mixture to bread. Push bread down to saturate.

Wrap top of pan with plastic wrap, then wrap with aluminum foil. Place bread pudding in a water bath (place pudding in a larger baking dish and fill larger pan with water until the water line is halfway up the sides of the bread pudding pan). Bake at 300°F for 1 1/2 hours, then uncover and cook at 325°F until brown and firm, about 30 minutes.