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feature



CAJUN BIBES



A new restaurant is causing a stir with its alligator appetizers

BY CHRIS WADSWORTH
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Michael Warren lives in Brambleton, more than a thousand miles from many of his kinfolk in southern Louisiana. But it was there that he acquired a taste for – of all things – alligator meat.

“I just remember always eating strange things at family reunions,” Warren said.

“Alligator, frogs, and crawfish were always on the menu. The Cajun cooking I grew up with is still a favorite of mine.”

So, when Bourbon Bayou Kitchen, a new Cajun restaurant, recently opened in Ashburn, Warren and his wife, Tina, made a beeline there and they promptly ordered up the Fried Alligator appetizer – small chunks of flaky, white gator meat bathed in buttermilk, deep fried and served with a side of Cajun remoulade.

“It is very good,” was Warren’s succinct review. “The sauce it was paired with really made it perfect.”

Bourbon Bayou Kitchen executive chef Jazz West and restaurant owner Art Safarian show off their popular alligator appetizers.





Yes, gator meat has made its way to Ashburn. It may not be the first time. Gator sometimes pops up as a unique and special offering on restaurant menus. But alligator is now a daily item at Bourbon Bayou Kitchen. Besides the Fried Alligator, the restaurant also serves Alligator Nachos.

“It’s a ground alligator sausage that we use on the nachos. It has a lot more color and a lot more flavor,” said Jazz West, the executive chef at the restaurant. “It’s already spiced, already seasoned, so it just makes the dish pop.”

The gators served at Bourbon Bayou are raised on commercial alligator farms. From there, they go to a place called Big Pops near Shreveport, La. That’s where the meat is harvested, processed and shipped to Ashburn and other markets across the country.

Alligator is one of the highest protein dishes you can find. A 3.5-ounce piece of gator meat has about 46 grams of protein. Compare that to about 27 grams in a similar sized piece of chicken and 26 grams in beef. Gator meat is also low in fat.

Jazz West, the executive chef at Bourbon Bayou Kitchen, poses with an alligator figurine that is an unofficial mascot at the restaurant.

But the big question – always – is what does it taste like? Some people immediately say it “tastes like chicken.” But maybe not quite.

“The taste profile is very similar to chicken,” said Ashburn-based food blogger Chantal Bannayan. She shares recipes as



MICHAEL AND TINA WARREN

well as featuring local restaurants on her @cookwithchan Instagram page. She dined at Bourbon Bayou recently and also had an alligator app. “It’s not the exact same [as chicken], but it is very tender, juicy and flavorful.”

Warren goes further, comparing the flavor of gator to seafood more than chicken. “I think most people would be surprised to find that it has a very clean, non-gamey, non-fishy taste,” he said. “I think most expect it to be tough or chewy, [but] I find it light and quite capable of adapting to many cooking styles.”

So how do newbies react to seeing alligator on the menu, much less having a waiter place it on the table in front of them?

“Some people are trying it for the first time and [make] very funny facial expressions,” said Art Safarian, the restaurant’s owner. “Most people are eager to try it, but we have had a few that are afraid to try it. We have had a few not wanting to try it. But when we give them [a sample], they love it.”

Exotic meat isn’t new to Ashburn. Burger joint Fuddruckers has an elk burger on its menu. The Wine’ing Butcher offers up quail, rabbit and wild boar. The new Himalayan Wild Yak restaurant has – wait for it – yak meat on the menu. And just down the road, D.C. Prime once served kangaroo at a special dinner.

Nevertheless, alligator seems to be a bit of a novelty, especially for wary diners who steel their nerves and give it a try. And there will probably be more opportunities to taste-test gator because the team at Bourbon Bayou says they are only getting started.


“We do have plans of having alligator sliders for happy hour at the bar,” Safarian said. “We will also have an alligator po’ boy [sandwich] in the future. Once we get to brunch sometime in the summer, we will have fried alligator and waffles.” 



IMAGE COURTESY OF BOURBON BAYOU KITCHEN