

# An Artful Recovery

Are there entrepreneurs in the arts?  
M.Z. Hemingway investigates.





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## M.Z. Hemingway



AS AN ASPIRING writer, Joshua Clark came to New Orleans ten years ago to bartend and collect stories. He fell in love with the romance of the city, the sensual way people live and communicate, the unique cuisine, the architecture, the fascinating stories of the residents—the very air of the place.

So he never left, even when Hurricane Katrina bore down, the levees broke, and chaos descended on the town.

From his perch in one of the block-long, red brick Pontalba Buildings in the heart of the French Quarter—built in the 1840s and rented as apartments ever since—Clark was one of the few, hardy inhabitants who stayed through the storm and avoided the mandatory evacuation of the city in its deadly aftermath. The morning after Katrina hit the city, he looked out on historic Jackson Square to find 75 percent of the trees gone. Yet, he thought the city had dodged a bullet. Then, as the levees failed and waters from Lake Pontchartrain flooded the city, he realized it was only the beginning.





In the days that followed, he worked as a correspondent for National Public Radio using his phone line that never went out. He also filed a diary with *Salon* and teamed up with fellow holdouts in the Quarter. They pooled their resources to save their neighborhood, cleaning up the litter-strewn streets, sharing valuable information, and lifting the morale of its citizens. As police began forcefully kicking inhabitants out of their homes, Clark and other holdouts managed to stay by passing themselves off as an official cleaning crew. They all wore red t-shirts turned inside out and used his old reporter lanyards to fashion official-looking IDs.

For the ten weeks of Katrina's aftermath, Clark chronicled the impressions of other victims in the Gulf region in hundreds of hours of tape-recorded interviews. History had

never hit him in the face like that, and he knew he had to do something with the experience.

He turned their stories and his own tales of chaos, kindness, anguish, and mercy into *Heart Like Water: Surviving Katrina and Life in its Disaster Zone*, published in 2007 by Simon & Schuster's Free Press. "I had to do the book because I was the only writer here the whole time," Clark said.

The memoir, which combines gritty reportage of the devastation with a novelistic narrative, was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle award. "Clark's narrative rises to the level of being a crucial witness to the city itself—an indictment, indeed, but also a reveling, an elegy, a light forward to survival," said Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and former New Orleans resident Richard Ford.



Ford's praise only serves to highlight how Clark embodies the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit of New Orleans's artistic community. It is this commitment to the arts that has helped the city rebuild and fight back against unthinkable devastation.

"Every artist is an entrepreneur," says Dr. Elliot McGucken who founded and taught the Arts Entrepreneurship class at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Clark is no exception. Not just a writer, the Yale graduate is also a successful independent publisher and editor. As soon as the power returned to the city, he started a fund to help area writers negatively affected by the storm and reprinted *French Quarter Fiction*, the anthology he published through his Light of New Orleans press. He lost an entire printing of

the book in the storm. A portion of the proceeds from this book, as well as from *Heart Like Water*, went to the writers' fund, which has provided grants to dozens of writers.

**T**HE CITY OF New Orleans has long fostered a thriving culture known for its literature, music, and cuisine. The southern gothic master William Faulkner wrote his first novel there, jazz was birthed there, and it's the only place in the country to get authentic beignets, muffalettas, and po' boys.

But what happens when computers, instruments, and restaurants are under water or blown away in the wind? Not only is daily life rent asunder, but the creative process also.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina led to the forced exile of



almost every artist from New Orleans. Three years later, the city's artist community is vibrant and creating art that responds to and helps the city process their experience of Hurricane Katrina.

**F**ROM VIBRANT ZYDECO, Cajun, and jazz, to smoky blues bars and the brass bands that march in jazz funerals, New Orleans is steeped in music. In fact, when Katrina hit, the stories of displaced musicians gripped the nation as much as anything else.

Rock and Roll legend Fats Domino was reported missing when floodwaters deluged his Ninth Ward neighborhood. Fans and family feared that the “Blueberry Hill” and “Ain’t That A Shame” singer had perished, but he was rescued and transported to dry land. The next year he released *Alive and Kicking*, his first album in nearly two decades.

Producer, arranger, songwriter, and musician Allen Toussaint was also missing during the Katrina aftermath. Best known for his hit “Working in the Coalmine,” Toussaint wrote “Right Place, Wrong Time” for Dr. John and other hits for the Meters and Patti LaBelle. Toussaint survived the storm and has spent the years since playing and recording music to help his city heal and rebuild. After making his way to New York City, he staged benefits and worked on a collaboration with Elvis Costello called *The River in Reverse* that was issued in May 2006.

Whether they're visiting during Jazz Fest or Mardi Gras, people come from all over the world to hear New Orleans' talented musicians. New Orleans is a top cultural destination for tourists, and the cultural economy generates jobs and revenue for the city. Before Katrina, the cultural economy accounted for more than 100,000 jobs in Louisiana. But after Katrina, the cultural economy lost more than 75 percent of its business and 66 percent of its workforce, according to the Bring New Orleans Back Commission.

The cultural industry has long been underappreciated, ignored, and not viewed as a business, said *offBeat* Magazine publisher Jan Ramsey. Thus, she found it particularly ironic that much of the attention paid to New Orleans in Katrina's aftermath was because of its rich musical heritage.

Twenty years ago, Ramsey was working for a small consulting firm when it struck her that she was well-positioned to tap into the huge but underdeveloped music industry in her hometown.

“I felt I was an entrepreneur but I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do,” she said. A music junky, she hung out with a lot of creative people and used her business skills to

help them out. Because of her consulting background, she could see that the music scene in New Orleans wasn't just culturally rich but also a significant industry.

“Nobody ever paid attention to musicians as part of a culture or business,” she said.

For the next twenty years, she built up an international subscriber base for her print magazine and, later, daily Web site featuring the best in local jazz, blues, r&b, funk, gospel, rock, alternative rock, and jazz. As the floodwaters came in, subscribers from around the country rushed to the *offBeat* Web site to get information. Ramsey and her partner had fled the city for what they thought would be a couple of days. They ended up living with her sister for two months. One of their most surreal moments in exile came when they were

“Katrina will provide fodder for creative output for many years.”

Jan Ramsey

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watching television at a restaurant as CNN showed looters running wild on a city block. She and her husband realized that they were watching their own block.

At first Ramsey thought she might have to give up the magazine. The latest issue had gone to press but there was no way it would be delivered. And advertisers wouldn't pay for ads that no one saw. The situation looked bleak. As Ramsey realized she couldn't leave New Orleans, she asked subscribers and supporters for help. Money flowed in.

“The fact that people gave us money and wanted to keep the magazine going—it wasn't just financial—it was moral support,” she said.

The full effect on musicians remains to be seen, Ramsey said. Everyone has a story to write, to sing, to perform. But it's unclear how many musicians were displaced from their neighborhoods or the city.

A significant number of musicians lived in New Orleans East, Gentilly, and the Lower Ninth Ward—areas Katrina devastated. The temporary and permanent closings of music venues decreased the number of available gigs.

“What concerned me was the street culture that produces the unique New Orleans sounds—the second lines, Mardi Gras Indians, and brass bands. I worried about losing them,” said Ramsey.

But within a few months of Katrina's devastation, it was clear that the musicians should not be counted out. New Orleans hosted a raucous Mardi Gras celebration in 2006 that attracted 700,000 revelers. The event served as a family reunion for the town and also provided a national image as a city that was rebuilding.

Since then, Ramsey has been doing what she has been doing for years—supporting New Orleans' music industry and promoting it through festivals that bring together musicians, chefs, and other artisans to bring people back to the city.

And it's been working. Musicians have been returning to the city, playing in the bars and festivals, and releasing new music.

"Katrina will provide fodder for creative output for many years," she said.

**N**EW ORLEANS IS well-known as the birthplace of jazz, but it's also the birthplace of the only indigenous urban cuisine in the country. While other American cities have culinary specialties, New Orleans cuisine is distinctive. The Louisiana flavor and style are formed from melding Creole, French, Spanish, Italian, African, Native American, Cajun, and Cuban traditions.

World-renowned, New Orleans-based chefs, such as Paul Prudhomme and John Besh, reopened their kitchens as quickly as possible after Katrina. Many have even added new restaurants.

Besh bought out his investor in his flagship Restaurant August just prior to Katrina. When the storm hit, he wasn't sure how he'd cover his expenses. The James Beard award winner decided to aggressively expand, doubling the number of restaurants he had to four including Lüke, a brasserie with its own line of beer, and La Provence, a rustic French restaurant on the North Shore. Besh is writing a book and working with a local dairy to design a line of flavored butters for Whole Foods.

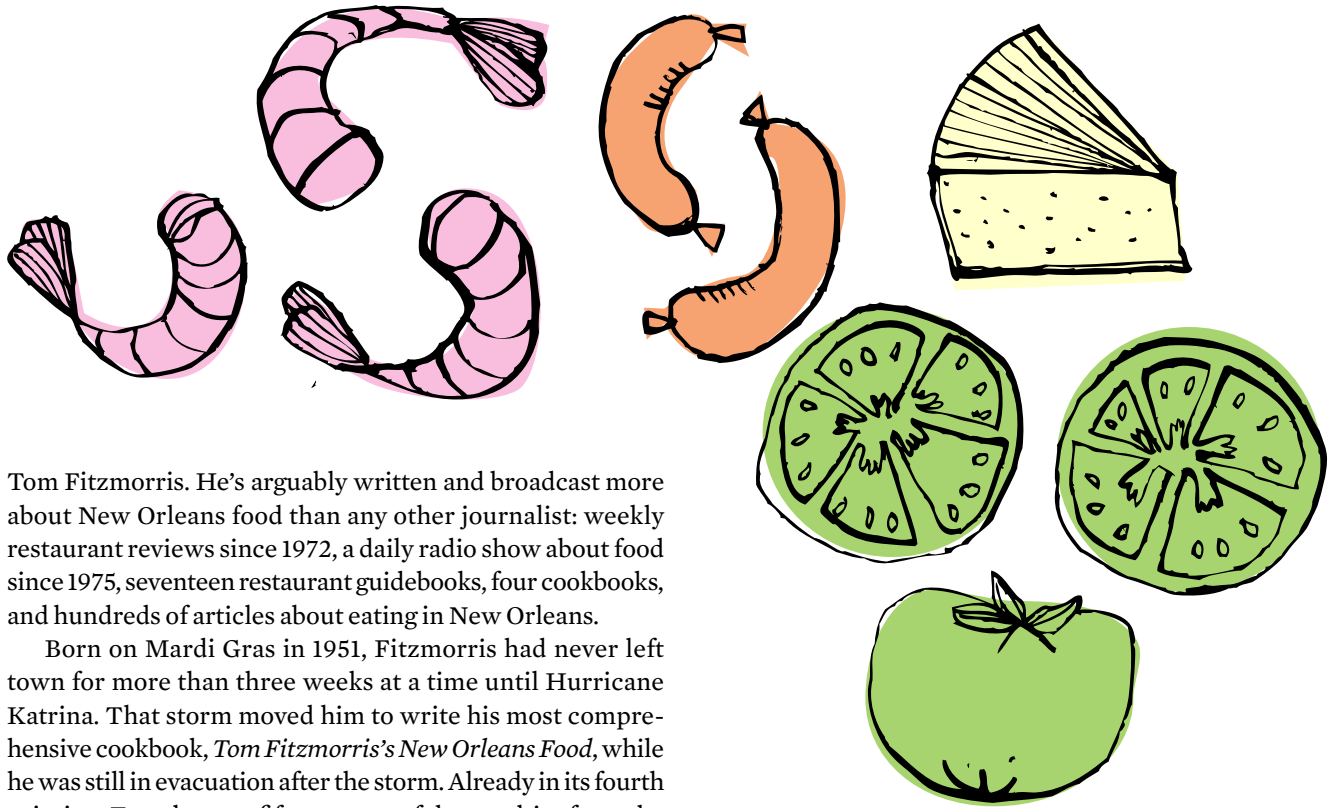
As one of the celebrated guardians of New Orleans's cuisine, Besh feels an obligation to preserve the city's culinary traditions. "Our culture is so very unique in that all of the people that settled here assimilated into one, rich culture, which happens to be one of the most unique and recognizable cultures in the country," Besh told the Louisiana Office of Tourism.

Before the hurricane, New Orleans had 809 restaurants. Every single one of them closed for at least a week when Katrina struck. By April 2008, 809 restaurants had opened again. And as of press time, 938 restaurants had opened for business—without government assistance.

Keeping the tally on the restaurants and covering the resurgence is foodie

Photo: RickLordPhotography/istockphoto





Tom Fitzmorris. He's arguably written and broadcast more about New Orleans food than any other journalist: weekly restaurant reviews since 1972, a daily radio show about food since 1975, seventeen restaurant guidebooks, four cookbooks, and hundreds of articles about eating in New Orleans.

Born on Mardi Gras in 1951, Fitzmorris had never left town for more than three weeks at a time until Hurricane Katrina. That storm moved him to write his most comprehensive cookbook, *Tom Fitzmorris's New Orleans Food*, while he was still in evacuation after the storm. Already in its fourth printing, Tom donates fifty percent of the royalties from the book to the recovery efforts of Habitat for Humanity.

"The power of the local culinary culture is as strong as anything in this town. Even though many public goals that are far more important than where we will dine tonight remain to be solved, we need what we get from our unique food in order to soldier on," said Fitzsimmons.

While a few iconic restaurants such as Bella Luna, Cha-teaubriand, and Christian's have yet to return, new restaurants open at a record pace. One of those new restaurants, *Mélange*, demonstrates the way in which New Orleans restaurants are adapting after Katrina and Rita.

Located in the luxurious Ritz-Carlton, *Mélange* has its own interpretations of New Orleans classics like blackened redfish. But the menu also lists a substantial number of dishes apparently cribbed from popular New Orleans restaurants. In one meal at *Mélange*, diners could try Upperline's Fried Green Tomatoes, Jacques-Imo's Alligator Sausage and Shrimp Cheesecake, and the Palace Café's Pepper Crusted Duck confit.

However, *Mélange's* Executive Chef Matt Murphy is not the Jean Lafitte of the culinary Gulf Coast. What seems like piracy is actually an experiment in post-Katrina camaraderie. *Mélange* reproduces the signature recipes with the bles-

sing and instruction of the named chefs. Those chefs also occasionally appear in the kitchen at *Mélange* as the Chef de Cuisine du Jour. In addition, the Ritz-Carlton scatters books filled with the bios of the participating chefs and the complete menus of their restaurants throughout the hotel.

The Ritz-Carlton says it has created this restaurant as "a celebration of New Orleans and of its reputation as one of the best destinations for food in the world." But the Ritz-Carlton also knows the habits and practices of its guests. A guest in New Orleans for only two days might well find the ability to eat at three or more restaurants in one meal enticingly efficient. So might the participating restaurateurs, who are banking on the genius of their recipes. If a guest loved the Alligator Sausage and Shrimp Cheesecake she had on her first night, she might well venture out to Jacques-Imo's Café for a Blackened Sirloin of Lamb on her second.

Lorin Gaudin, who hosts a radio program about the local culinary scene, said that entrepreneurial experimentation like *Mélange* is vital not just for recovery, but also more broadly for the future of food in New Orleans. And the result is that the culinary scene is much more dynamic and interesting than it was before the storm, she said.

“There’s this intense desire now to be urban pioneers. People who long wanted to be involved in the culinary realm have found new opportunities and taken advantage of them,” she said, citing more restaurants focused on casual dining and the fresh, seasonal, local foods movement.

Take Allison and Slade Rushing, married chefs who met in New Orleans, went to New York, and returned after the storm. After a failed restaurant in the country, they gave it another shot in downtown New Orleans with MiLa, which focuses on rustic food prepared with the highest-quality ingredients. One favorite dish is lemonfish, a Gulf species, served with baby artichokes and other savory vegetables with a pureed parsley sauce.

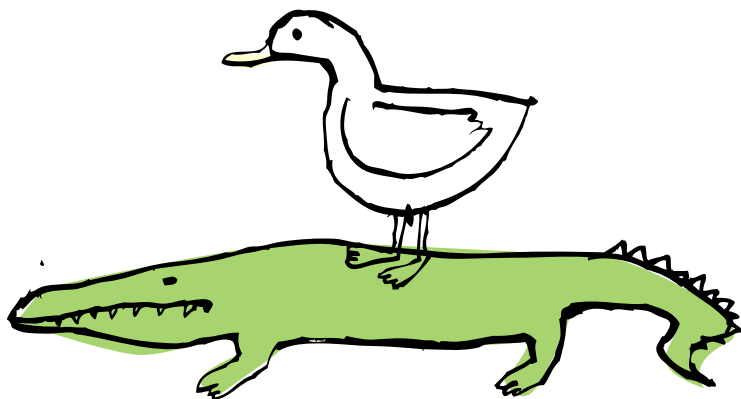
“We’re seeing this interesting twist toward fresher and lighter fare without losing our grip—by which I mean our vice grip of death—on gumbos and po’boys,” said Gaudin.

As the members of the New Orleans arts community channel abundant creative energy into running their businesses and practicing their crafts, they provide some of the best examples of how entrepreneurship strengthens culture and how culture can help a society recover from a disaster even as large as Katrina.

“We had nothing but our culture. And our culture has always put a smile on death,” said Clark.

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M.Z. Hemingway is a journalist and writer in Washington, DC. For more information about New Orleans’ cultural entrepreneurs, please visit:  
[www.frenchquarterfiction.com/LONO.html](http://www.frenchquarterfiction.com/LONO.html)  
[www.offbeat.com/](http://www.offbeat.com/)  
[www.restaurantaugust.com/restaurants.html](http://www.restaurantaugust.com/restaurants.html)  
[www.nomenu.com/](http://www.nomenu.com/)



## Upperline's Fried Green Tomatoes with Shrimp Remoulade

Makes 4 servings (as appetizer)

1 cup buttermilk  
 1 egg  
 4 to 6 tablespoons vegetable oil  
 8 slices green tomato (completely green if possible), approximately 1/2-inch thick  
 1 cup corn flour, lightly seasoned with salt, and black or white pepper  
 24 medium shrimp, poached, peeled and chilled  
 1 cup (approximately) chilled remoulade sauce (recipe follows)  
 Mixed greens

In a medium bowl, whisk together buttermilk and egg.

Heat oil in a large saute pan over moderate heat. Meanwhile, dip tomato slices in egg mixture, then coat with corn flour. Place tomato slices in pan in a single layer. Do not crowd. Cook over moderate heat until golden brown on bottom. Turn and brown on other side. (Total cooking time is 3 to 4 minutes.) Tomato should be cooked all the way through but not mushy. Exterior should be golden brown.

On individual serving plates, place 2 slices of tomato next to each other and top each slice with 3 chilled shrimp. Spoon 1 1/2 tablespoons remoulade sauce over the shrimp on each slice and garnish plate with a few mixed greens. The tomatoes are served warm or hot. The shrimp and remoulade sauce should be cold.

Variations: Eliminate the shrimp and put the remoulade sauce directly on the tomato slice. Crawfish, scallops or lobster may be substituted for the shrimp.

### REMOULADE SAUCE

#### Group A Ingredients

1/2 cup Creole mustard or other spicy mustard  
 2 tablespoons ketchup  
 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce  
 2 teaspoons prepared horseradish  
 1 teaspoon finely chopped garlic  
 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice  
 1 1/2 teaspoons paprika  
 1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper  
 1/8 teaspoon finely ground black pepper  
 1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste  
 Salt, to taste

#### Group B Ingredients

1/2 cup olive oil  
 1/4 cup finely chopped heart of celery  
 1 1/2 teaspoons finely chopped parsley  
 1 tablespoon grated white or yellow onion  
 1 tablespoon finely chopped green onion, white only  
 Hot sauce, optional

Combine ingredients in Group A except salt and mix well. Add salt to taste.

Add olive oil in slow stream while whisking mixture. Add rest of Group B and mix well. Add a few drops of hot sauce if a spicier flavor is desired. Sauce should be spicy and tangy. Cover and chill before use. Covered and refrigerated, the sauce should keep about 3 weeks.

[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5692200](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5692200)