

New Orleans' Most Beloved Hostess Shares the Holiday Tradition That Binds Her to the City

JoAnn Clevenger's Upperline.

By [Hannah Hayes](#)



CEDRIC ANGELES

JoAnn Clevenger walks between the two dining rooms of her restaurant, broom in hand like a spear. She spots a painting of the pianist James Booker that's tilting askew and nudges it straight. Heading back to her podium near the front door, she stops at a table to move a few pieces of silverware a couple of millimeters this way or that until the setting feels just right. The phone rings for reservations: "Hello, Upperline Restaurant! How may I help you? A table for six? What time?" Her circular tortoiseshell glasses and soft-serve swirl of silver hair peek above the computer screen.

At 5:30 p.m., she adjusts her oversize cockatiel brooch and turns the open sign around. Back in the kitchen, pots and pans land on stove burners. The first guests arrive, Clevenger leads them to their tables, where she hands them the Upperline réveillon menu: "12 Hour" Roast Duck, Crispy Oysters St. Claude, Sautéed Baby Drum Fish Meunière, and the dish she's famous for creating, Fried Green Tomato with Shrimp Rémoulade. Clevenger has filled the list with her favorites. They're the kind of meals the city is known for, but they're so hard to find now.

Back in the 1800s, Catholics in New Orleans celebrated réveillon (which comes from the French word for "awakening") as a breakfast-for-dinner spread after midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Ravenous from fasting for the day, families enjoyed gumbo, veal grillades, game pies, turtle soup, and oysters and drank libations—sometimes until sunup. By the 1940s, presents had taken precedence, and hardly anyone observed réveillon anymore.

Now a celebration of place instead of piety, it has been reinvented as a month-long affair with restaurants serving prix fixe menus—a campaign started by the nonprofit French Quarter Festivals to drum up business in the slower months.

Clevenger joined in from the start in 1993, and now réveillon has become her most anticipated time of the year. "It has always appealed to me greatly because it gives people a reason to arrange time with those they value," she says. "Sometimes, guests

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come in with friends they haven't seen since last year or ones they went to high school with. Connections are what we human beings are. Réveillon does that for people."



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Upperline, originally a house built in 1877, was supposed to be a second location for Clevenger's vintage-clothing business. But when she found out the building was for sale instead of for rent, she knew she had to open a restaurant. Clevenger and her husband got a second mortgage on their house, and her son took the helm as the first chef.

Eventually, Upperline went from having 40 chairs to 74 with the purchase of an adjoining building that once housed a hair salon. Connected by a sunporch, the dining rooms feel closer to their original purpose, like a home rather than a restaurant, and Clevenger intentionally sustains that dynamic. A couple informs her this is their first

visit to New Orleans, and she writes her favorite bookstores and shops on the back of the menu with a pencil. At another table, she offers a demitasse of turtle soup to a curious diner. Back at her podium, she catches up with regulars who have been coming to dinner here since the very beginning. Hardly anyone looks at their phone.

Lucky guests might hear a story about how Clevenger made sequined turbans for Allen Toussaint when she was a costume designer. Or that time Paul McCartney shopped at her vintage store. Or how she became the first bar owner in the Southeast to have Guinness on tap—at The Abbey on Decatur Street. (She bought the lease from a Filipino former yo-yo champion.) Then there was her run-in with the law for operating a fresh-cut flower cart in the French Quarter, which inspired her work toward changing the Mafia-esque floral laws in Louisiana. Joni Mitchell played at the folk music bar Clevenger started on Bourbon Street.

"To me, the most important thing about New Orleans is that people who are different from each other rub shoulders," Clevenger says in a cadence borrowed from another time, almost like a 1940s movie actress. "The neighborhoods are mixed up with a big house here and a little house next to it there. On the streetcar, you see a banker beside a carpenter. Traditions like *réveillon* unify us; they bind us together. And that's something that can nourish us just like a good meal."

Clevenger curates Upperline's art collection in a similarly egalitarian way. Hundreds of paintings cover the walls, line the bar, and perch over tables: canvases with close-up tomato slices, an oil portrait of Buddy Bolden's jazz band, folk art made with markers. They all hang together the same way Clevenger and her circle of professors, artists, porters, and poets did in the French Quarter during the sixties and seventies. In the corner of the front dining room, there's a rendering of New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees as the Krewe of Bacchus Mardi Gras king. Clevenger made sure the artist came back to add the Super Bowl ring.

When she was a senior in high school, she hung a print of Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* next to the hot plate in her mother's hospital room. Her family was living in Superior, Arizona, when her mother contracted a rare fungal disease through a cut on her forehead. They sent her back home to Louisiana—Charity Hospital in New Orleans, specifically—and Clevenger accompanied her.

Nuns with winged origami-like habits walked the halls of the Contagion Unit where Clevenger remembers her mother was the ward's only patient with the disease and often the only one there. The hospital's food was miserable, so she would walk across the street to the A&G Cafeteria to get her mom lunch.

It was behind the glass display case in the cafeteria that she saw shrimp rémoulade for the first time. "It was always on a tiny oval platter," she recalls. "I had never even seen a baby oval platter before. I didn't know people ate shrimp cold. It had iceberg lettuce all cut up, the shrimp laid side by side in a curved row, and the rémoulade went down the center. It was actually very beautiful—pretty pink and orangey red against the green and white of the plate."

When she was 53, she paired this city dish with the fried green tomatoes of her country childhood in Louisiana, creating a classic in a place with a 300-year-old culinary canon.

The pecans scattered on the watercress salad and the bread pudding with toffee sauce on Upperline's réveillon menu remind Clevenger of her grandparents, who were sharecroppers in Alexandria, Louisiana. "My first little job ever was when I was only about 5 years old, picking up pecans for my grandpa," she remembers. Carrying a dried bamboo pole around the grove, she would nudge the branches to shake the shells loose. "Not too hard though—I didn't want the green ones to fall."

When her grandmother would pack pears into jars, she used food coloring to tint them pink, green, and yellow. Clevenger beheld them stacked on the shelves, looking like a

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stained glass window. At the country store in town, her grandmother would trade her hand-churned butter for chicken feed. Clevenger's treat was picking out the sack, which was printed with a pattern—sometimes little rocket ships or flowers. The cloth bag was eventually turned into a dress. "I liked the one with the stars best," she adds with a giggle.



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Clevenger turned 80 this past May, but she still holds tight to what she calls "that puritanical work ethic" and has no plans to retire. She wears the same Parisian crimson-and-black color-blocked tunic every day with the practicality of farmers' overalls or the feed-sack dresses of her childhood. (There are eight replicas of that tunic hanging in her closet.) Affixed to the collar of her "uniform" is her gold Girl Scout pin, which she says is a reminder to "be strong and stand up straight, to be brave and patient and kind."

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It glints in the dim light as the last lingering diners say goodbye two or three times and amble out. Last year, Clevenger estimated that she has talked to over a million guests at their tables.

"When you go into a CVS or a Walmart, no one looks at you. You're alone," Clevenger says. "But here, the server looks at you. The people at your table look at you. You see the expressions on their faces if you tell a joke. And if someone at the table next to you is looking at your plate to see what you had, you might smile and say, 'It was a rack of lamb.' It's a very intimate thing. You're not anonymous."

Around 11 p.m., after her last guest departs, Clevenger snuffs out the votive candles and then prepares to drive home, down the cratered streets of the Garden District. She'll return tomorrow afternoon and do it all over again—her own ritual that binds her to New Orleans.