



# James Clesi

Clesi's Crawfish and Catering, New Orleans

By Sarah Ravits

**JAMES CLESI WAS RAISED** by a family who loved to cook “too much food” and share with others, so it’s unsurprising that he began his career in the culinary business at age 16, studied at Nicholls State and then worked for several years in disaster relief catering, a job that took him across the country to share traditional New Orleans food with people who often had never tried it before. “Some of them had never heard of etouffee before, and

once they tried it, they’d be coming back for second and third helpings,” he explains.

Last year he began to operate what he calls a “renegade guerilla” catering operation: He would drive over to busy bars and establishments that didn’t serve food, unload supplies from his SUV and set up a pop-up crawfish boil; finally, in January, he was able to rent a spot on Banks Street in New Orleans, which is now fully operating six days a week. He also goes on-site for catering gigs.

At the new spot, Clesi serves seafood dishes and other signature comfort food items that are products of both his own creativity and his family’s secret recipes – think jambalaya cheese fries, fried cheese ravioli, catfish and fries, fried boudin and shrimp and tasso pasta. The down-to-earth atmosphere matches Clesi’s warm, sociable personality, as the restaurant is attached to Banks Street Bar, which hosts live music nightly and has plentiful outdoor seating for a lively, hungry crowd. ■

**INFORMATION:**  
4413 Banks St., New Orleans,  
(504) 909-0108

**CRAWFISH BOIL:**  
1 sack (35 pounds  
of crawfish)  
5 pounds of seasoning,  
reader’s choice  
8-10 lemons, sliced in half

Bring water to a boil; drop crawfish in. When water returns to a boil, turn heat off and cool down until crawfish sink below water line. Squeeze lemons in and let soak for about 15-20 minutes; remove from water and serve.

*Serves about 7-10.*

**Note:** Clesi prefers to cook vegetables that traditionally accompany a crawfish boil in a separate pot.