

family band

The Jolly Inn in Houma continues the tradition of Cajun dining and dance halls

BY MICHAEL PATRICK WELCH | PHOTO BY ROMERO & ROMERO



THE CAJUN PEOPLE ARE known for their ability to take very little, and make it into something amazing. Take *couche couche*, for example, a depression-era ground corn dish, served with just sugar and milk, maybe some scraps of fried ham hocks or cracklings. Yet, in your mouth, it is *everything*. For the last 17 years, *Couche Couche* has also been the name of the house band at

The Jolly Inn dance hall and restaurant in Houma. A band that, until recently, was fronted by the establishment's primary owner, 80-year-old accordion player Werlien Prosperie.

With just a few rocking chairs and a low table, Prosperie and his family turned one corner of the Jolly Inn into a "lounge." A smattering of plastic lawn furniture covered by green-checked tablecloths

under fluorescent lights became a real "restaurant" (albeit with casual, limited hours). Most importantly, Prosperie turned the Jolly Inn's small stage and basic hardwood floors into one of Louisiana's last remaining Cajun cultural music centers.

Prosperie formed *Couche Couche* in 1995, performing Louisiana zydeco and swamp pop favorites with his eye on the Houma-Terrebonne area's rich

musical heritage and culture, as well as its cultural economy. "We play for the people and for the culture and for our heritage. We're proud of it," Prosperie told *Houma Today* newspaper in 2010.

With Louisiana's most authentic soundtrack, and a menu consisting of gumbos, jambalaya, fresh fried seafood and sides, The Jolly Inn has earned praise from tourists and

travel guides, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, Animal Planet, the Discovery Channel, the Food Network and National Geographic. Pretty impressive for what could pass for a simple bingo hall.

Stacy Scott, a server happily employed there for 14 years, says family has always been the key to the Jolly Inn's authenticity, and thus its appeal.

"There's actually quite a few things to do in Houma, but I think there should be a lot more things for kids to do in this town," says Scott, "That's why we make sure the kids can come here when there's music on Friday and Sunday. Cajun dancing is great for kids, and we have a bunch of washboards here at the Jolly Inn for them to just pick up and play. This is a very different, upbeat type of music, Cajun music, so of course the kids enjoy it; they love making noise with the band."

Family also holds up the business end of the Jolly Inn. Prosperie's daughters, Sonia McNamara (a registered dietician and Cajun cook) and the more business-oriented Denise Fritch, have helped run the family establishment for a number of years, giving their dad more time to front the band.

"He suffered a stroke last year," Scott told *Acadiana Profile*. "Which is why his daughters are too busy to do an interview right now, and you're talking to me instead."

The daughters have taken over full responsibility of the Jolly Inn while the elder Prosperie recovers.

Having tried life as an offshore worker, a salesman, and business manager for a tool rental company, Prosperie bought the warehouse that is now Jolly Inn in 1999, hoping to bring back the spirit of a

Houma dance hall that bore the same name and enjoyed its heyday in the 1930s and '40s. He even asked the old proprietor's permission to call his place The Jolly Inn. From the stage and from behind his bar, Prosperie went on to welcome music lovers, dance enthusiasts, journalists, amateur anthropologists and curiosity seekers from all over the world.

For now though, while recovering, Prosperie doesn't stand upon his regular perch at the bandstand, accordion in his arms.

"The band members who started out playing with him, they took on the playing of Werlien's parts," says Scott. "Sometimes his nephew will play the accordion. And every once in a while they rotate out with another band."

Scott says the Jolly Inn has also been sporadically hosting solo performers such as Keith Pitre or Buddy Dennis on Thursday nights.

Scott stresses that the good times still roll at the Jolly Inn. The food is delicious at lunch Monday through Friday, plus Friday night while the band plays — and as anyone in Houma will brag, the Jolly Inn is still the best place in Louisiana for those who simply need to two-step.

"We have so many tourists from so many different places that it's really fun to watch people catch up on our Cajun dance moves," says Scott. "Cajun dancing is a neat thing for anyone to do if they are open-minded — every Friday night and Sunday afternoon at the Jolly Inn there are definitely people who want to teach you how to dance, if what you want is to learn." ◀

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