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New Orleans Po-Boy Preservation Festival Slated for November Successful Celebration to be Twice the Size of Last Year

Thousands of New Orleanians will celebrate the city's most famous sandwich—on November 23, 2008 as they head for Oak Street for the second annual New Orleans Po-Boy Preservation Festival.

The Festival will be held from noon to 6 P.M. that Sunday in a five-block section of Oak Street between Carrollton Avenue and Leonidas Street. Intersection is accessible by streetcar.

This festival was founded as a celebration of the storied sandwich and the role it has played in New Orleans' culinary culture. The festival also highlights the ongoing revitalization of the Oak Street business corridor, which was designated a National Main Street in 2006 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and a Louisiana Main Street by the Department of Historic Preservation, which authorizes the program.

Proceeds from the festival go toward the Oak Street Association's work to promote, preserve, and revitalize Carrollton's historic Oak Street neighborhood and commercial corridor. A portion of proceeds will go to benefit and further the restoration of Ladder 7 Fire Station at 2430 S. Carrollton Avenue.

The first New Orleans Po-Boy Preservation Festival was held last year and featured po-boy offerings from some of the city's most famous restaurants. Festival judges, including Tom Fitzmorris of "The Food Show," presented the "Golden Loaf Awards" for the best tasting po-boys. This free public street festival had more than 10,000 attendees in 2007 and covered three commercial street blocks of Oak Street. Again this year, the festival will feature two stages with live music, arts and crafts, a silent auction, a children's section with games and prizes, panel discussions covering the history of the po-boy (starting at 10:30 A.M.) and, of course, the best tasting po-boys in New Orleans. For more information, visit www.poboyfest.com.

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History of the Po-boy

Po-boy sandwiches represent bedrock New Orleans. The sandwich is as diverse as the city it symbolizes. The crisp loaves have served as a culinary crossroads, encasing the most pedestrian and exotic of foods: shrimp, oyster, catfish, soft-shell crabs as well as French fries and ham and cheese.

As with many culinary innovations, many legends surround the po-boy and its origins. However, documentary evidence confirms stories about one particular restaurant were right. Bennie and Clovis Martin left their Raceland, LA, home in the mid-1910s for New Orleans. Both worked as streetcar conductors until they opened Martin Brothers' Coffee Stand and Restaurant in the French Market in 1922.

Following increasingly heated contract negotiations, the streetcar motormen and conductors went on strike July 1, 1929. The survival of the carmen's union and 1,100 jobs was in question. When the company attempted to run the cars on July 5 using "strike breakers," more than 10,000 New Orleanians gathered downtown and watched strike supporters disable and then burn the first car operated by a strike breaker.

The many support letters included one from the Martin Brothers promising, "Our meal is free to any members of Division 194." Their letter concluded: "We are with you till hell freezes, and when it does, we will furnish blankets to keep you warm." In order to maintain their promise, the Martins provided large sandwiches to the strikers. Bennie Martin said, "We fed those men free of charge until the strike ended. Whenever we saw one of the striking men coming, one of us would say, 'Here comes another poor boy.'"

In 1931, the Martin's restaurant relocated to the 2000 block of St. Claude Avenue—just two blocks from Gendusa Bakery. As the Depression worsened, many New Orleanians enjoyed the opportunity to feed themselves or their families using the famously oversized poor boy sandwiches—a culinary tradition that has remained today.

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