

maison madeleine

Maison Madeleine, located on Lake Martin in Breaux Bridge, is French Acadiana at its most enchanting.

ARTICLE BY MARY NAPOLI PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOLI LIVAUDAIS

driving around the rookery on

Lake Martin in Breaux Bridge, it seems that the families of egrets make up most of the population of this area. Other than the crunch of the gravel underneath slow rolling tires, only the sounds

of the swamp can be heard. There are no stoplights here, barely any signs to find your way. However, a few yards away from the edge of the lake, the gravel road opens up to an entirely new world. It is here that Madeleine Cenac has lovingly and meticulously built her nest. Maison Madeleine is more than a charming bed and breakfast. It is a tribute to the fascinating Acadian culture of southwest Louisiana and to the intriguing Cenac family, who came to Terrebonne Parish in the early 1800's through the foresight of patriarch Jean-Pierre Cenac. The maison is something of a love letter to the past, written in fine, artful calligraphy, and whispered in French—its native tongue.

Maison Madeleine offers its guests an opportunity to step in to the traditional French Acadiana of long ago with modern comforts. There are countless ways to become enchanted with the maison—the lush gardens which surround, the authentic architecture, the intriguing sculptures that magically reveal themselves throughout the grounds...and this is before you have the chance to step inside. Walk across the wide porch and find yourself in Cenac's breathtaking home, comprised of the rustic beauty of the French Acadian style, impeccable antiques, creative decor and walls lined with the alluring art of Cenac's three children. After her two sons and one daughter grew into adulthood and left the nest to seek their own adventures, Cenac began to toy with the idea of opening her home to guests as a bed and breakfast. Joining her on this venture is her other half, Walt Adams, who resides with her at the maison. The couple is yet another reason to fall in love with the place. Cenac, a Houma native, is a dark-haired beauty with the kind of gentle demeanor that instantly puts people at ease. She is incredibly intelligent and has the sort of aura about her that makes one imagine that everything she touches might turn to gold. Adams is every bit as lovable, with smiling eyes and a genuine graciousness that is endearing. Like Cenac, he is a wealth of information on Acadian history and culture. Together, they seem fated to live in such a magical place. As with many of the most meaningful things in life, the maison was not easy to come by. It was a labor of love and somewhat of a passionate obsession for the lady who now glides across its ancient wooden floors.

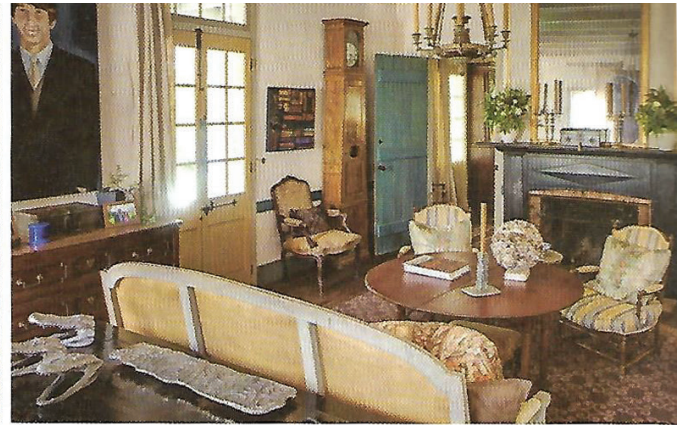
In 1997, Cenac began the relocation and renovation project that would more or less consume her life for the next five years. When the idea of renovating the structure came to her, it found her at a time in her life where she was beginning a new chapter and starting over. She had recently ended the marriage that had brought her three beautiful and talented children—teenaged, at the time—and felt the need to begin a fresh, new life for her family. She instinctually began to reconsider her roots, and felt compelled to reconnect and surround herself with the distinguished family that she called her own—the one she became a part of by birth, not by union. The Cenac family, with its tremendously

brave and dramatic history, had passed along the same sense of driven, courageous ingenuity to her character, and she was ready to embrace it. Fueled by a compelling and unstoppable energy, she located the family home in Franklin, LA and had the structure moved to its current location in Breaux Bridge. Not long after, she located a second structure, which was in such disrepair it was scheduled to be torn down, and purchased it. Unable to be moved in its current state, each board had to be numbered, dismantled, and reconstructed at the new home site. As it was underway, the project seemed to grow exponentially. Cenac, however, stayed steady and relied on the guided energy that her vision provided.

Thoughtfully, she looks out of the corner of her eye, as if her memories are visible somewhere off in the distance. "It was like being so completely in love and not being able to see the red flags," she muses with a gentle laugh. "The goal was to put the house on the National Register, so any addition to the original family home had to be distinguished." The family home, referred to by Cenac and her family as the "white house," houses the living room, bedrooms and bathrooms. The other structure was connected to the white house by a small gallery. Traveling between the houses feels seamless when inside, due to Cenac's thoughtful planning. Both structures have been renovated on the interior to feel as if you are merely walking between rooms, not stepping from one house to another.

The second structure, is quite different from the white house when standing outside. Any wood that is not original to the structure is reclaimed. It is exquisitely rustic and nearly identical to how the home would have looked when it was first constructed in the mid-1800's. The home was raised on piers made from cypress logs, a common technique for the time period. The deep front porch was intended to provide solace from the intense Louisiana sun and continues to be a comfortable gathering place. The exterior cypress siding of the house is striking because the edges of the boards are not squared away, as is most often done. "It was a much more efficient use of the wood, not to trim the edges. We used sinker cypress, which means that the logs had been submerged in water for some time before they were used here," explains Cenac. This method achieves the rustic look of the building. Standing outside, it is nearly unbelievable that this is a reconstruction. Inside, is the dining area and charming kitchen. Once guests have entered, it may take a moment to catch your breath. There is so much to take in, so much to see. An expertly recreated working brick fireplace provides warmth and an alternate oven. A beautiful, rustic table provides the setting for the incredibly delicious breakfast Cenac offers her guests. The walls of the structure are works of art within themselves. Immediately noticeable is the traditional method of construction and insulation called bousillage, where clay, Spanish moss, and





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other fibrous substances are combined and used to fill the spaces between cypress posts to create the exterior walls. The same wooden pegs that predate the use of nails can be found throughout the construction. Even the paint colors of the home are authentic to the time period. The vaulted ceilings, cypress walls and beams reach skyward, and a small loft is noticeable on one side of the room. Accessible by a narrow ladder, this sort of loft was used to provide a warm place to sleep in cold weather, as the heat would rise. Now, Cenac uses the area as a makeshift bandstand for parties and dances that take place here. These sorts of gatherings are known as *bal de maison*, or house dances. Local musicians play spiritedly as friends and family dance the night away below.

Walk through the gallery to enter the “white house,” where Cenac and Adams reside on the first floor. In the sitting room, guests are welcome to take in the intriguing canvases, creative local art and fine furnishings. The master bedroom is airy and whimsical and holds one of Cenac’s most treasured pieces. The stunning canopy bed she now dreams in nightly once belonged to Hollywood screen idol Veronica Lake. The actress’s “son was not interested in antiques and wanted to sell the bed. I had become friends with an antique dealer in the Virgin Islands, and I bought the bed by photograph,” explains Cenac. As an interior designer before becoming a bed and breakfast proprietor, Cenac acquired many treasures to fill her home. The master bath contains a magnificent double slipper copper finished bathtub that sits in the center of the room. “Of all the furnishings in the house, it is what most people exclaim about,” she interjects. “It came from Paris,” she notes with obvious affection for the beloved piece. Two

additional bedrooms, once occupied by the children, are accessible outdoor staircase, which is visible on the porch of the white house. used by guests, this provides a private access, so that guests may go as they will. With each step of the steep, narrow staircase build: ticipation of what might be found behind the door at the top. The floor is comprised of a larger suite, which can be rented singularly. sunny room holds a beautiful queen sized-bed, an antique table an set, and two comfortable lounging chairs. Always keen to each det some of Cenac’s favorite quotations have been thoughtfully embro onto the pillows. Connected to the suite is a space used to house a kitchen, complete with a small refrigerator and other necessities, lil snacks, a coffeemaker and rows of interesting books to peruse. The room, which is to be shared with the second bedroom, is every bit : ling as one might imagine. Paneled in warm colored cypress, each delightful detail is more enthralling than the next—the antique bat lighting fixtures, the bold blue wash basin, the winsome clawfoot b The second bedroom is smaller in size, but no less interesting than larger suite. Eclectic art created by Cenac’s daughter is displayed l on the walls that surround the full sized bed. A grand armoire and adorn the space, but the most charming aspect of the room is not ir ately noticeable. What appears to be an intricately carved wooden holds a secret space loved by the younger guests and the child in a Part the gauzy curtains of the window and discover a full-sized be tled behind. The bunk is accessible by a child-sized opening hidde curtain slightly to the left of the window. “A friend of mine descri

leeping in a gypsy wagon," describes Cenac jovially. As with all the beds at the maison, it is as comfortable and inviting as it is charming.

From the windows of the second floor dwelling are visible the luscious foliage of the gardens that surround around the home. Brick and gravel pathways wind here and there, connecting the beautiful nooks and relaxing seating areas found in various spots on the property. To the right of the main house is a separate property with carved cypress pillars and a metal roof. This structure is known as "T-Boy's Boudoume." A boudoume is an English translation of a West African word pronounced "ba-joom." The meaning is derived from the sound the word makes, which is similar to the sound a person makes when they fall down and hit the ground hard...when they are dead drunk. Boudoumes became popular in the South during Prohibition years, when revelers needed an out of the way place where they could dance, imbibe and not be judged—or caught. Think Mississippi Juke Joints or speakeasies, and you aren't far off. These places were usually detached from a restaurant in a more rural area. Here, people would play music, get loud and literally drink until they would fall down. Cenac and Adam's created their own version and decorated the interior to resemble a classic Louisiana dive bar. The building also houses a spectacular commercial kitchen, which is used by chefs to prepare meals for dining al fresco at the maison. In the coming months, the maison will begin to host "Secret Suppers," where well-known chefs from across the country will come to prepare four-course meals with wine pairings for guests to enjoy in the garden. With local music, incredible food and delectable wine offered in such an elegant historical setting, seats at the Secret Suppers are already being secured. These gatherings will no doubt be spectacular, but Cenac and Adams have previously christened their boudoume with several memorable parties. Their first celebration took place last year on the first Friday after Mardi Gras, a time when most

Catholics are observing the Lenten season and abstaining from indulgent behavior. "We were all having a great time before we realized it was after Ash Wednesday," recalls Adams with a genuine laugh at the memory, "and here we were doing our very best to breach from Lent."

After exploring such an enchanting place, what could be better than a scrumptious meal prepared in Cenac's quaint kitchen? The answer is simple. Nothing is better. The aroma of freshly ground coffee brewed in a French press and the sweet smell of cinnamon ensure the senses that breakfast is an experience not to be disappointed. The maison offers buttermilk biscuits with local honey and preserves, poached and scrambled eggs and colorful fruit, but the most delicious delicacies are the local sausage and pain perdu (literally "lost bread") prepared by Cenac herself. The sausage is handmade in the neighboring town of St. Martinville and is slowly simmered to enhance the sweet and savory flavors. Cenac buys the fresh cinnamon bread from a local bakery, coats it in egg and sautés it in butter for a decadent treat. She refers to the breakfasts she prepares as "low country," but they are more heavenly than any you might imagine. It seems that Cenac puts her whole heart into every single aspect of the maison.

A trip to Maison Madeleine should be slowly savored, just as the delightful breakfast she offers. Stay as long as possible, because that will never be long enough. There is so much to absorb, so much to learn about, so much to take advantage of. The incredible maison in its dreamy setting and the enchanting people who reside in it are easy to fall in love with and impossible to forget. No matter where your roots are, you will leave a piece of your heart in Acadiana. Je t'aime, Maison Madeleine! Mon amour pour toujours!

For reservations at Maison Madeleine or to save your seat at a Secret Supper, visit www.maisonmadeleine.com or call 337.332.4555.