



# The Evolving Frenchmen Street

BY HALEY ADAMS

**O**N AN EVENING IN AUGUST, IT'S EASY TO sense that Frenchmen Street is a mix of locals and visitors. There is a man wearing a Saints hat walking by a couple speaking a different language. There is a brass band playing on a corner, with a mini audience on the other side of the street. The spectators have their phones in the air appearing to be taking pictures, like they've never seen a brass band before.

The mix of locals and visitors is typical for a tourism town like New Orleans, but tourists hanging out on Frenchmen Street is a relatively new thing.

"Pre-Katrina, you would never see any tourists on this side of Esplanade," says Kate Gaar, founder of the Frenchmen Art Market. "It was crazy because I lived on Chartres and Barracks, and from watching every season, it was just crazy how you could tell it was growing."

Often referred to as the "locals' Bourbon Street," Frenchmen Street is clearly no longer a locals' secret. The street's famous jazz clubs paired with its wonderfully weird New Orleans character has made Frenchmen Street a favorite suggestion for savvy tourists looking to explore beyond Bourbon Street. Travel magazines and blogs love to include the location as a must-see for visitors.

The street is thriving and attracting new businesses and entrepreneurs, which has led to many discussions about its future and how to keep it from becoming the next Bourbon Street.

**Fast Success.** It is no surprise many of Frenchmen Street's businesses are enjoying success and recognition.

Frenchmen's uptick in non-locals was what made Gaar think an art market might do well. "The year before, I was down here

and I realized how many locals really don't come down, but it's a No. 1 place for tourists," Gaar says. "It was all these baby boomers. They were there having fun and spending money. I just knew: that's the age group that's coming down to Jazz Fest and spending all their money."

The first pop-up art market was next to the Blue Nile for the 2012 French Quarter Festival and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. The pop-up was a success, so Gaar worked on acquiring a vacant lot at 619 Frenchmen St. What is now the Frenchmen Art Market officially opened the first weekend of August 2012.

Gaar says Frenchmen has become one of the top places to see, so for her, it was an easy decision to bring the artists to the people. She adds, "In a million years I never thought it would be so well-received."

Another relatively new spot that has gained lots of recognition quickly is Three Muses, which opened in 2010; the bar and restaurant has been featured in *Food & Wine Magazine* and *The New York Times*' "Frugal Traveler" blog. Chef Daniel Esses thinks the restaurant's success comes from its combination of music, food and booze on Frenchmen Street. "It was kind of like the perfect storm," Esses says. "It's what everyone thinks New Orleans is all about and it's in one place."

**Updates Coming Soon.** Frenchmen Street will have a few more new residents soon, including the third location of the local favorite Dat Dog to be located at 601 Frenchmen St. Co-owner Constantine Georges says the neighborhood is excited for Dat Dog because the restaurant will offer lunch, a much-needed meal for the residents of the surrounding areas, since Frenchmen is usually known for nightlife. "We like to go where people want us," ☐

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## Frenchmen Hot Spots

### Frenchmen Art Market

619 Frenchmen St., 941-1149, [FrenchmenArtMarket.com](http://FrenchmenArtMarket.com)

### Three Muses

536 Frenchmen St., 252-4801, [TheThreeMuses.com](http://TheThreeMuses.com)

### Blue Nile

532 Frenchmen St., 948-2583, [BlueNileLive.com](http://BlueNileLive.com)

## Tips for a Successful Frenchmen Street Evening

If you haven't been to Frenchmen Street in a while, here are a few tips to remember.

**Bring cash.** Some places on Frenchmen Street are cash only. It's also good to have cash to tip the musicians.

**Park and walk in.** While Frenchmen Street isn't closed off to cars at night, it gets busy, so don't try to park on the street. Instead park away from the area, such as on Elysian Fields, and walk in.

**Check out the "Poets for Hire."** Look for the "Poets for Hire" next time you're on Frenchmen Street. For a donation of your choice, one of the poets will write you a poem on a typewriter about any subject you want. It's a great souvenir for your friends visiting from out of town.

too many clubs on Frenchmen Street, you will start to have the beginning of the 'Bourbonization,'" Vialou says. "What people really want to see on Frenchmen Street is a healthy and vibrant commercial and residential corridor." Vialou adds that the neighborhood wants to have things to do at night, as well as during the day. "To have another club was not something the other businesses have been wanting to see."

Because of the Frenchmen Street Arts and Cultural Overlay, created by the City Council in 2004, zoning guidelines limit how many music locations, or any other type of business, should be on the street. There are only supposed

to be 20 percent live music venues, including restaurants and cocktail lounges, but according to current FMIA numbers, music establishments take up 36 percent of all properties of Frenchmen Street – 50 percent when looking at only commercial properties.

The FMIA submitted a letter to the City Planning Commission to say they did not support the project. A second plan was submitted for Bamboula's, but the City Planning Commission denied the permit, saying the business conflicted with the overlay.

**The Future of Frenchmen Street.** The controversy with Bamboula's is an example of how supporters of Frenchmen Street hope to keep its neighborhood-like feel. Vialou hopes Frenchmen Street remains a place where people can enjoy the nightlife, but also be a place where people can work and live. "It would be sad if Frenchmen was going to become something that is busy at night and there's nothing during the day, and nobody lives there because it's too dirty," Vialou. "So that's why we're looking at that balance."

Frenchmen Street's ability to retain its New Orleans charm is what Esses of Three Muses thinks is why it's become a popular spot for visitors. "With America today, you have strip malls with cookie cutter companies all over the place and people don't want that," Esses says. "They come to New Orleans and they don't want that. They have that where they're from and they don't want that here. Frenchmen Street still has that eclectic feel to it." ❁

Georges says. "The neighborhood association was very happy to see us coming, especially because we'll be serving lunch."

While Georges says Dat Dog is a popular place for everyone, locals or not, he hopes whoever frequents Frenchmen Street will enjoy the new place. "Dat Dog never targeted individuals," Georges says. "We're blessed because every demographic of person enjoys coming to Dat Dog. We just thought we would reach out to another area that might not have easy access to us."

Other updates include a pizza place planned for 520 Frenchmen St. The Blue Nile is also getting a makeover, as it has been closed since July for renovations. The club is slated to re-open in September.

But not every new idea for Frenchmen has been a hit with the street's residents. One of the most talked about proposals for Frenchmen Street has been Bamboula's, which was originally supposed to be a cocktail lounge with live entertainment to go in at 516 Frenchmen St. The neighborhood association and other residents and business owners on Frenchmen Street did not support it, as many thought the street already had enough music clubs.

Alexandre Vialou, the president of the Faubourg Marigny Improvement Association (FMIA), says he didn't hear one business owner or resident who supported the idea for Bamboula's. Vialou says supporters of Frenchmen Street don't want it to become another Bourbon Street, with a long line of clubs.

"There is this belief – and it's written in the law – that if you have