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Dining out: Mert's Heart and Soul

By Catherine Muccigrosso · The Herald
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This column offers a sampling of dining experiences in the area. It is not intended as a review of the restaurant other than to provide the reader with one diner's experience.



By Mac Banks

Shrimp and grits at Mert's came with toasted focaccia bread.

Mert's Heart and Soul

Location: 214 N. College St., Charlotte.

Hours: Lunch served from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily; dinner served from 3 to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 3 to 11:30 p.m. Friday through Sunday; brunch starts at 9 a.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Phone: (704) 342-4222.

Ambiance: Southern country meals in cafe-kitchen setting.

In almost 10 years of living in the Carolinas, I admit I've never tried "soul" food. Okra, yams, collard greens, black-eyed peas and, yes, even grits have never tempted my taste buds. So heading to Mert's in uptown Charlotte, I wasn't sure what to expect.

Mert's is a hot little place with lots of diners. Ask around and you'll find it's popular with York County folks heading to Charlotte Bobcats Arena or to the N.C. Blumenthal Performing Arts Center for a night out.

You can grab a table on the sidewalk or go inside, where the brick-red walls are lined with photos of African-Americans and interesting memorabilia, along with plaques of the restaurant's accolades and community involvement. It's a casual, hometown feel in a smoke-free environment with Motown-style music in the background. Please, wait to be seated.

The menu covers everything from appetizers like salmon cakes and



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cornbread, which is delicious, to Low Country soups, salads and favorites like red beans and rice with smoked turkey sausage. There are combos featuring chicken, catfish and barbecue beef ribs, sandwiches and several sides. Note: Stick to the menu, our waitress said, not the chalkboard over the kitchen. No fried-green tomatoes today. There's also a children's \$4.75 menu, and a short wine and beer list.

I tried the shrimp Creole with rice — popcorn shrimp in a spicy Creole sauce served over rice — for \$10.95. My companion had shrimp and grits, for the same price. Our a la carte sides for \$2 each were macaroni and cheese and sautéed squash, both highly recommended.

I've eaten jambalaya on the streets of New Orleans, and admit I cower to hot, spicy dishes. But the shrimp Creole tasted great with just the right amount of heat. I'd have enjoyed the dish a little more if I weren't fishing for the shrimp, however. I sampled the shrimp and grits, which was not hot at all, but brown-sugary tasty. The squash, soaked in butter sauce, was wonderful and the homemade mac and cheese is, as the wait staff will tell you, a must to order.

Don't pass up dessert, either. The sweet potato cake is out of this world — moist with cream cheese frosting, similar to carrot cake. Note: This slice was enough for two. Other desserts include banana pudding, red velvet cake, pound cake and cobblers.

Mert's menu adds up to being stuffed. For this diner, I learned that Low Country dishes will whet your appetite.

— Catherine Muccigrosso, *Lake Wylie Pilot* editor

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