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## Adventures In Dining

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James Bazzelle moved from Athens, Georgia, to find his fortune in the big City of Charlotte back in 1999. He secured a position at the uptown Holiday Inn, where he was promoted to executive chef only to see hotel management change. In other words, he was fired. Feeling the need to spread his wings, not to mention earn a living, Bazzelle opened a restaurant of his own in uptown Charlotte, "Ga on Tryon."

The restaurant was a hit even if, by Bazzelle's own admission, the name was a little confusing. He moved the restaurant to College Street and decided to change its moniker, choosing the name - Mert - of one of his favorite customers from his original location. And so, for 10 years this June, we have been enjoying the great cooking talents of James Bazzelle and his crew at Mert's Heart and Soul.

When you step into Mert's you step back in time. Actually, you're stepping back "on time." For proof, just look down at the original linoleum floor with alternating squares of red, green, purple, blue and yellow. The restaurant's look is the epitome of eclectic, with huge colorful works of art throughout the dining room, all made by local artists. The many photographs on the walls, some dating years back, are all pictures of Charlotteans. Even if you sit outside on the patio, which is great on a warm day, be sure to walk inside and look around.

As fun and funky as the atmosphere at Mert's is, the food is the real attraction, offering Southern cooking at its finest with authentic Low Country and Gullah favorites, along with knock out Daily Fixins. Thankfully, all of the meals come with cornbread; and this isn't just any cornbread - it's soft and buttery and creamy moist - served strictly fresh. So if it isn't on your table for a couple of minutes, be patient: It's just about to pop out of the oven, and taste so good!

Mert's Southern Fried Chicken is one of my favorites - you can have it as a leg quarter or a breast quarter. I always get the leg quarter, as there's more flavor in the leg and thigh. Speaking of flavor, it's hard to beat Mert's Blackened Pork Chops.

Then there's Mert's Famous Salmon Cakes Dinner - fresh salmon blended with Cajun Trinity served on house made Remoulade (a popular New Orleans sauce that's creamy and spicy). Also in the seafood department, try the deep-fried whole Catfish or fried Whiting - 8-ounce White fish filets, crisp and served with Remoulade.

There are the ever so tender Barbecue Beef Ribs, smoked and slathered with Mert's homemade barbecue sauce; and, of course, a Carolina Chopped BBQ plate - slow roasted and jerk-seasoned pork butts, chopped and served with their secret sauce (can't tell ya - that's why it's secret).

All of the selections are offered with your choice of two sides: yams, red beans, mashed potatoes, sautéed squash, home fries, macaroni and cheese, collard greens and Charleston red rice, to name a few. I'm extremely partial to the yams and mac & cheese.

Other Mert's favorites, specifically Low Country and Gullah, are the Shrimp Creole with Rice; the Shrimp and Grits with Toasted Focaccia Bread Dinner; and the Red Beans and Smoked Turkey Sausage Dinner - a hearty bowl of seasoned rice topped with slow-simmered red beans, shredded white cheddar and a sprinkling of green onion. All of Mert's seasoning blends and sauces are made in house from scratch, fresh each day.

In addition to the daily specials, you'll find staples on the lunch menu like the luscious Meatloaf. And then there are Mert's take-you-back-to-way-back-when sandwiches like Bacon, Lettuce and Tomato served on Focaccia with White Cheddar Cheese (don't forget the mayo) and Mert's Old Time Pimento Cheese Sandwich served on Texas Toast.

It's difficult to do with such scrumptious menu offerings, but make sure to save room for the homemade banana pudding or homemade fruit cobbler - two fresh-made delights that always satisfy.

A word about the wait staff at Mert's: Sweet! These are some of the nicest people you could ever hope to

meet, and they truly live up to the notion of Southern Hospitality. Many have been working at Mert's since it opened. And James Bazzelle is pretty endearing in his own right.

Mert's Heart and Soul is located on College Street in the heart of uptown Charlotte. They're open Monday through Fridays from 11 a.m., and Saturdays and Sundays from 9 a.m. for weekend Brunch. For a large gathering, there's down home family-style dining. And Mert's has catering down to a science. Lunches average \$7 and dinners run from \$8 to \$14. It's all at [www.mertsuptown.com](http://www.mertsuptown.com).