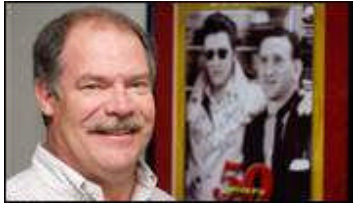


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Downtown Charlotte has some down-home heart and soul



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As one reviewer put it, "For those of us that grew up on McDonald's hash browns rather than corned beef hash ... or curly fries instead of collard greens ... welcome to everything you missed out on!"

That's what I would call a remarkably sound synopsis of what you get if you dine at Mert's Heart and Soul restaurant in beautiful, lively, downtown Charlotte. I knew I was in for something special when I walked in and the first three framed pictures I saw up on the memorabilia wall were of Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke and the original soulmen, Sam and Dave. Merciful sakes, dear reader, I know Charlotte is an awfully big town now, but you've just got to go to Mert's, especially if you grew up eating your grandma's fried chicken instead of what passes as chicken on most of the menus in Anytown, U.S.A.

In town this past Saturday night with friends to see the Charlotte Bobcats take on the Detroit Pistons in the wonderfully designed Bobcats Arena, I opted to check with a young bud who works in downtown Charlotte every day. Since this was the son of the renowned historian and skilled connoisseur Colonel C.C. Ripple, I knew the restaurant would be a worthy one, and with confidence I could tread boldly with no fear of disappointment. And Charlie was right.

Mert's describes itself this way on its Web page: "From the award-winning macaroni and cheese, to the sweet, buttery cornbread, to the shrimp and grits - Mert's Southern, Low Country and Gullah-inspired favorites leave guests with an unforgettable 'home-cooked' experience." I can't say it any better than that, but I will go on about our experience, otherwise I wouldn't have a column.

After our waitress took our order she came out with a tray of hot steaming hunks of cornbread, the kind that crumbles all over the plate and just begs for a glass of whole milk to dip it in, even though that wasn't going to happen since I opted for a different beverage.

When she brought the cornbread, the waitress laughed and said, "Honey, if you don't like

this cornbread, I'll be surprised because most folks say it's the best they ever had. I guarantee you if you like the cornbread, you're going to love the rest of your meal." Again, a soothsayer with a crystal ball couldn't have made it any clearer. I almost asked for another piece of cornbread, but sanity got the best of me, and I remembered that I would have to include everything I ate on my "food diary."

When the waitress brought our orders, the dishes covered the table and, honestly, looked like the Sunday lunch table at my wife's Granny Byrd's down east, who never met a ham, chicken or gravy bowl she didn't like. I nearly swooned when my order arrived.

I opted for Mert's Famous Salmon Cakes, and after the first bite, I didn't doubt the "famous" adjective. It was dead on the money. These cakes were chock-full of salmon filet, not too much breading, and lightly seasoned and accompanied with a perfect sauce that accented flavor instead of hiding it. My wife had to go with the fried chicken, and together we shared the okra/tomato stew, red beans, collard greens and a dish of sautéed squash.

Our companions raved about the Shrimp and Grits and a steak that nearly covered the plate, along with other tempting side dishes that accompanied the delicious entrees.

Mert's Heart and Soul restaurant serves lunch every day from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., dinner beginning at 3 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays and brunch beginning at 9 a.m. Saturdays and Sundays. It's located in the heart of downtown Charlotte at 214 N. College St., between the Trade Center and the Holiday Inn. It was no more than a five-minute walk from the Charlotte Bobcats Arena.

I can tell you this: Whether I'm in town to see a basketball game or not, I'll definitely return to Mert's. And I'll think of Sunday dinner at Granny Byrd's house every time I walk through the door.

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