

Zydeco Downtown BY CRASH GREGG AND LINDSAY SAUNDERS

Our food editor Chef Brian Adornetto is taking a much-deserved vacation this month with his family, so our publisher Crash Gregg is apprehensively stepping in to write the food column. He's not a chef, but he admits he definitely likes to eat.

Surprisingly, a lot of people in downtown Raleigh haven't heard of or been to Zydeco. But if you're looking for somewhere to enjoy jazz and blues along with good affordable food, you might want to make a point of finding them the next time you get a chance.

Lindsay Saunders, one of our writers, and I recently visited Zydeco for dinner. It's tucked away in a corner of City Market's cobblestone streets across from Woody's. Upon entering we were warmly greeted by the hostess, who offered us a quick tour when she found out it was our first visit, showing us the live music side, restaurant and bar areas. Bold vibrant hues of blue, yellow and reds tint the walls, which are decorated with equally bold paintings of famous blues and jazz singers. The restaurant has the simple, casual feel of a real "Nawlin's" French Quarter bistro, which is exactly the theme co-owner Antwan Harris was aiming for.

I've had the pleasure of meeting Antwan a few times over the years during community events they sponsor, but I've never had a chance to actually sit down for a chat. Our recent visit for this month's Triangle Dining article gave me just the opportunity to do so.



Antwan was born and raised in Raleigh, attending Ravenscroft High School before going on to play college football at the University of Virginia. His football career continued into the NFL where he was a defensive back for the New England Patriots for five seasons, culminating in two Super Bowl Championships before finishing up with a season in Cleveland.

Antwan was raised by his grandmother and great-grandmother, often helping them in the kitchen, and he credits them for his interest in cooking. He continued perfecting his culinary skills through college and began experimenting on his roommates with new recipes. The more he cooked, the more they ate. After he was in the pros, he cooked a lot in the off-season, and in fact it was one summer on the 4th of July at teammate Otis Smith's home in New Orleans that he fell in love with Cajun cooking.

After retiring from football, Antwan wanted to

return to Raleigh. He says, "I traveled everywhere when I was in the League. I've been in ridiculous lines, huge crowds, crazy traffic, and I hated 'em all. I wanted to come back to Raleigh where I don't have to worry about any of that, plus the people here are friendly and it's family-oriented. My love for cooking and being around people were what convinced me to buy this place." Antwan chose a Cajun-based Southern cuisine for the menu at Zydeco and still enjoys cooking a few days each week.

The first three dishes Antwan had Chef Charles Davis send out to us definitely fall under Cajun style: Alma's Famous Gumbo (\$6) with chunky chicken, smoked turkey sausage in a thick and spicy sauce, the ubiquitous Red Beans and Rice (\$3 side) with firm red beans and a sauce that was just spicy enough to warm you up. The Cajun Jambalaya (\$12) begins with the same meat base as the gumbo but adds in a hearty helping of fresh vegetables including red peppers, onions and tomatoes. It brought more heat than the first two dishes and carried a bit of residual kick after a few bites. Just what you'd expect at a corner café in the heart of Louisiana.

Next came the Vegetable Stir Fry (\$11), a dish with red and green peppers, onions, zucchini, mushrooms, yellow squash, and the just the right amount of rice.



Owner Antwan Harris and Chef Charles Davis



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Even though the dish was amazingly light, I would have (incorrectly) guessed that it had some kind of meat in it because of its robust flavor. Lyonnais Potatoes and Collard Greens were next (sides, \$3 each). Lindsay and I both raved about the French potato dish and agreed they were sautéed perfectly with buttery onions and were some of the best we'd had anywhere. The collards were firm and flavorful, not overcooked, and reminded me of good old-fashioned home cooking.

Antwan was apparently saving the best for last, as our next two dishes were simply delicious. First to the table was Grandma's Ribs (\$16 half rack/\$29 full, comes with two sides). The pork baby back ribs were so big, I actually had to ask if our serving was a half or full, assuming it was the latter. It was a half rack. Man, I can only imagine how big the full rack is (and I intend to go back soon to find out). The menu says the ribs are made with "grandma's famous sauce." In my opinion, if grandma isn't famous from this sauce, she



sure needs to be. It was a perfect marriage of sweet, tangy and barbeque flavors. I'm trying to convince Antwan into selling grandma's sauce by the pint. Trust me, you'll want some.

Our last entrée was the Baked Catfish (\$17). Lindsay informed me that she has never liked the taste of catfish, as I know many people don't. She tried it reluctantly and had to admit she was pretty amazed at the remarkable flavor; not fishy, not muddy ... not catfish-y. The dish was lathered in a creamy sauce teeming with sautéed shrimp, crawtail and crabmeat served over rice and complemented by fresh mixed vegetables. Antwan told us this was one of the most popular dishes on the menu, and for good reason. For dessert, we had the Zydeco Bread Pudding (\$4), which was light and not too sweet. It was a perfect ending to our dinner.

Zydeco offers a popular buffet-style lunch each weekday from 11am to 2pm for just \$8, or \$10 with a drink. Antwan serves up different entrées every day with regular dishes like baked and fried chicken, BBQ ribs, ham, turkey, vegetable stir fry, baked and fried fish and a wide variety of vegetables as well as a salad bar. On Sundays, diners can enjoy the "grand-daddy of all brunches" for \$16.95. It includes all the items on the lunch buffet plus even more entrées, an omelet station, waffles, fresh fruit station, and more.

Stop in for a visit at Zydeco for lunch, dinner, brunch or just to hear some great jazz and blues on Saturday night. To learn more about their events on other nights, visit their website or give them a call. ☎



Note: In our recent profile on Herons at the Umstead, we referred to Sean Michael Pera as the Pastry Chef. His correct title is Pastry Cook. Herons' Pastry Chef Daniel Benjamin was on vacation during our review. Big kudos to both for their amazing work.

In a past profile at Vin Rouge in Durham, we were misinformed about Chef Todd Whitley's previous position at J. Betski's. His title there was Executive Chef not of Sous Chef. Todd, thanks for the clarification and the great dinner.



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