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Southern Eats makes some seriously good fried chicken in Norfolk — served up after church

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L. Todd Spencer/Staff

Big Al's Southern Fried Wings at Southern Eats, 435 Monticello Ave., in downtown Norfolk. May 14, 2019.

IF YOU GO

THE SPOT

Southern Eats, 435 Monticello Ave., Norfolk

The vibe

Large, spartan space with service glitches, but excellent Southern comforts from pork chops and collards to fried chicken.

Order this

Southern Eats doesn't quite feel like a restaurant when you walk in.

In part, that's because until very recently it wasn't one — not exactly, anyway.

In March, Brian Shonyo and chef Alan Parker's southern food spot arrived in the Percolator space at 435 Monticello Ave. as part of a grand experiment in Norfolk food. The "Ford Campus" began as a culinary incubator. And so it was simultaneously a commissary kitchen for bakers and preparers of home meals, a host to ever-rotating lunchtime pop-ups, and even a sort of hands-on business school for would-be restaurateurs.

Sunday brunchtime fried chicken, biscuits and gravy, biscuits and anything, pork chop with greens and stuffing, Big Al's wings

If you go

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 11 a.m. to midnight Friday-Saturday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sundays (brunch only till 3 p.m.)

Food prices: Entrees, \$12-\$17; sandwiches, \$9-\$13; brunch, \$10-\$16; appetizers, \$7; wings, \$9.

Drinks: Beer, wine and cocktails.

Kid-friendly? Decent-sized kids' menu for \$7 a plate.

Vegan/veg/gluten: Limited. One veggie stack entree, some appetizers like fried green tomatoes. But look out: those collard greens are cooked in meat. Plenty of meat dishes without breading for the gluten-free, but no fried chicken for you.

Disabled-access? Yes.

Reservations? Yes.

Parking: Street or garage only.

Contact: southerneats75.com, 757-937-3957

Now, most of that has ceased. The cavernous space is now home to just two things. One is the veteran-roasted beans and premium smokes of Primo Cigars and Coffee, run by Michael Vecchione. The other is Southern Eats.

But though it's been serving food here for more a month and a half, the restaurant still feels a little like the blank slate the space originally was designed to be.

The grand opening party for Southern Eats was May 9, but still there's no sign out front — a situation Shonyo, the co-owner, says is a side effect of red tape resulting from the building's historic status. Decoration within is also scant, the tablecloths are paper and service is still deep in the process of figuring itself out.

But if you are by nature a forgiving soul, none of that really matters. Parker's homestyle southern cooking is a comforting balm to every bad feeling you've ever had.

In particular, the Sunday fried chicken is a treasure in a city without nearly enough truly good fried chicken. Parker cooks it to his grandma's recipe, a 24-hour overnight brine of herbs and lemon juice and sugar passed down through generations of family and kept as a secret, with a crisp breading Parker also keeps close to the family crest.

But Parker also fine-tuned the recipe over time with the help of aunts, sisters and even local celebrity chef Sydney Meers. It's now some of the best you'll find anywhere near.

That chicken is hard to come by most of the week, however. It's served only as an after-church treat during Sunday brunch, with a 15% discount if you bring in a worship service program. But the chicken could become its own religion if you prefer.

The breast — often the chalky pitfall of a fried chicken plate — comes out tender, moist and bursting with light acidity and round chicken flavor: crisp without being thickly overbreaded, seasoned without the curse of too much salt. Bite into the juicy thigh without a bib, and you run the risk of decorating your shirt.

For \$14 you'll get a generous platter featuring a half-bird, tender biscuits, a scoop of potato salad and some seriously lovely slow-cooked greens that were also culled from Grandma's cookbook. Turns out Parker's grandmother was a genius at eliciting both depth and briny acid balance, because that's a quality these collard greens also share, taking on their richness from smoked turkey in the pot.

Another southern basic done well at Sunday brunch, and only at brunch, is Parker's biscuits and gravy (\$10). Avoiding the salty mess of much meat gravy, Southern Eats' sings a song of whole-hog sausage: It is meat and cream, with a lightly crisped undercarriage of airy buttermilk biscuit. And it is heaven.

If you want Parker's chicken during the rest of the week, you'll have to make do with wings, which will already be familiar to many in Norfolk: As it turns out, Parker is the namesake "Big Al" of Big Al's wings. The wings are available at both lunch and dinner daily: breaded and southern-fried like the Sunday edition, as hot wings and in sweetly sauce-glazed form.

All are served not in wings and drumettes but as jumbos, with two joints — the kind that will always leave sauce on your face and under your fingernails. The bourbon-peach wings, in particular, are a blessedly sweet, sticky, sloppy experience best reserved for the company of people who already love you.

For lunch and dinner, Parker hand-grinds the decadent mix of short rib and 80/20 beef for both his stacked bacon and onion string burger and the mushroom-gravy-smothered meatloaf — this time made according to mom's recipe.

But don't miss the bone-in pork chop plate (\$17): It's like a compendium of the Southern comforts that make the place a welcome addition to the neighborhood, with a pan-seared, oven-finished pork chop served atop decadent cornbread stuffing suffused with the flavor of Edwards Virginia sausage and the sweetness and tartness of Granny Smith apples. Atop the pork are those perfect Granny's greens.

The plate is a mix of sweetness, salt and depth that characterize both the restaurant, and southern cooking in general.

But Southern Eats isn't all sweetness. The food has been uniformly well executed, with the sole exception of some dry, slightly pasty breakfast grits. But at the level of service and kitchen organization, there are serious problems to work out.

The beer and wine and cocktail lists reportedly exist, but aren't brought to the table, which leads to a whole lot of sleuthing and guesswork about what you're drinking if you're not seated at the bar near Primo Cigars' Vecchione — who is an ebullient lover of often obscure spirits, and patient explainer of their merits.

Wait times for both food and service are also less predictable than summer weather. On one visit, we were told a cook simply took a break and forgot to start a pork chop. But servers are also quick to offer comps, or bring out some unexpected pimento cheese and blessedly soft biscuits to make up for a mishap.

When dining at Southern Eats so far, one is always acutely aware that the restaurant is a work in progress.

But as with barbecue, you don't go out to get fried chicken, wings or collards because you expect luxury. You go out expecting to be warmed from within by the deep, soul-nourishing comfort that comes from the food.

And on that front, Southern Eats will offer all the hospitality you need in your life.

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