

Supper with a little soul

Dialo's Café brings Southern-style cooking to M-139 business corridor

By JANE AMMESON
HP Correspondent

"Mothers never get the appreciation they deserve," says LaShun Harper, chef and owner of Dialo's Café on M-139 in Benton Township. "I look at what my mom has done for me, and I say to myself, 'If the shoe was on the other foot, I could never fill hers.' A mom needs to be appreciated."

This Mother's Day, Harper intends to do just that, not only for his mother but for all the mothers who enjoy a good soul food meal.

"I'm going to be making all the foods that my mother likes," Harper says, listing such dishes as herbed baked chicken, fried chicken, baby back ribs, prime rib, macaroni and cheese, turnips and mustard greens, candied yams, potato salad, cornbread dressing and turkey ribs that he smokes using apple wood in the restaurant's smoker.

"People nowadays microwave everything because they want it fast," Harper says. "But good soul food can never be rushed. Some soul foods take days to prepare like mustard and turnip greens and meats that need to be marinated. A good soul food meal can change your whole mood, lift your spirits and make you happy, even when you're not. When you cook with love and let it cook slow, it will be more enjoyable, and you'll appreciate it more."

Harper says he learned to cook as a boy growing up in Buchanan and when spending time at his grandparents home in Benton Harbor.

"We always had a garden growing up, and I always liked hunting and fishing," he says. "We always made do with what we had and didn't go out to eat much. Everyone had a job in the kitchen, and as soon as you were old enough to get up on a stool to butter toast or make eggs, you started cooking."

Cooking for customers also was part of the family. His parents, Samella Jones and Kenneth Harper, owned Bud City Grill. LaShun Harper uses that food truck as part of his catering business.

Every week, his mother helps by making 40 gallons of the family's favorite barbecue sauce, which they use at the restaurant.

"My grandparents, Pearlie May and Augustus Harper, did a lot of cooking, too," he says.

After working with his father at Bud City, LaShun Harper also owned and ran Dialo's, first near the Cornerstone Alliance offices in Benton Harbor and then at the Benton Harbor Holiday Inn, before he took a job as a sous chef at Point O'Woods Golf & Country Club.

Assisting him in his latest endeavor is his cousin, Sean Grev,



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff / See more photos at heraldpalladium.mycapture.com
"Boss Hog" fries, featuring hand-cut fries, topped with pulled pork, barbecue sauce, cheddar cheese, bacon and jalapeno peppers are a popular dish at Dialo's Cafe in Benton Township.



Mac and cheese, at right, and cornbread dressing are among the sides offered at Dialo's Cafe.

who graduated from the culinary program at Lake Michigan College and is now working at Dialo's as the sous chef.

Harper says the restaurant focuses on fresh and local when possible and also works to keep prices low. For example,

dinners with one meat and two sides are \$9.99; add another meat and side and the price is \$13.99.

Desserts, all made on site, such as peach cobbler, sweet potato pie, strawberry cheesecake, banana pudding and carrot

cake, cost \$2.50.

Harper says he features daily specials such as liver and onions, grilled or fried pork chop dinner, oxtails, beef brisket, red beans and rice and pulled pork tacos.

"They come with two sides and cost \$5.99," Harper says.

See DIALO'S, page B5



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

Dialo's Cafe, located at 1924 M-139, offers customers a wide variety of Southern-style dishes, from pulled pork tacos to slow-roasted barbecue chicken and ribs.

DIALO'S

From page B4

Though soul food has a reputation for being caloric, Harper says his recipes often offer a modern, healthy twist with offerings such as Veggie Medley – julienned slices of sautéed red onions, bell peppers and squash – coleslaw, okra succotash, sautéed cauliflower and pinto beans.

Harper likes to fry up cabbage with carrots, bacon and bell peppers for a menu item.

“But you can substitute a good andouille or smoked sausage or ham, sliced or chopped, for the bacon,” he says. “You can also add in chopped fresh tomatoes or one can of stewed tomatoes, cut up, to the cabbage.”

One dish that was off the menu but is being reintroduced because of its popularity is chitterlings – the classic soul dish that is made from the small intestines of a pig.

“I stopped making them because they're so time consuming,” Harper says, “but people kept asking when I was going to start serving them again. You have to start a week ahead of time. To clean one 2-pound bucket takes almost two hours and you need at least 20 buckets before you have enough to put on the menu. So what we do is clean and wash a bucket full and then freeze them and start on the next bucket. After you take them out of the freezer, you have to slow simmer them for a minimum of three hours. It's a lot of preparation.”

Noting that some people might shy away from trying chitterlings, Harper encourages patrons to try them.

“They're really good,” he says. “Specially the way we make them.”



Smoked chicken tacos covered with black bean pico de gallo, lettuce, cheese, sour cream, cilantro and a lime wedge – served on a soft shell taco with salsa verde or barbecue sauce – is among the popular items at Dialo's Cafe.

Fried Cabbage

Yield: About 4 to 6 servings (family size).

- 3 slices bacon
- 4 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1/2 cup bell pepper, sliced
- 2 medium to large heads of green cabbage, chopped (about 10 to 12 cups)
- 1/2 cup carrots, shredded
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt (or sea salt)
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper, freshly cracked
- Dash dried red pepper flakes, optional

Chop the bacon and cook in the bottom of a shallow pot until the fat is rendered. Add a splash of water to the bottom of the pot to deglaze the browned bits in the bottom.

Add half the cabbage, salt, pepper and stir. Add the remaining cabbage and ingredients, stir, reduce to a low simmer, cover and cook for about 30 minutes, or until cabbage reaches the desired consistency, stirring several times.

Stir in the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter.

Taste and adjust with salt and pepper, and sprinkle with red pepper flakes, if desired.

Serve as a side dish along with some skillet cornbread.

– Dialo's Café

Add bell pepper, zucchini and squash, and sauté for 3-4 minutes until tender. Add salt and pepper to taste.

– Dialo's Café

Veggie Medley

Yield: About 4 to 6 servings (family size).

- 2 yellow squash
- 2 zucchini
- 1 yellow bell pepper
- 1 red onion
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 dash of thyme
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic

Wash zucchini, squash and bell pepper.

Slice zucchini and squash down the middle and then slice into thin strips diagonally. Cut bell pepper and onion into julienne strips.

Heat skillet, then add olive oil and garlic on medium heat.

Cook garlic until it's a nutty brown color, then add onions. Let cook for 1 minute.

