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Where: LL Dent

LL Dent

February 16, 2010 By Joan Reminick joan.reminick@newsday.com

QUICK SUMMARY The mother-daughter team of Lillian and Leisa Dent put a stylish spin on such Southern soul-food specialties as pulled pork and Southern fried chicken. Banana pudding is its own reward.



Photo credit: Newsday photo / Bill Davis | LL Dent serves American Cuisine with a Southern Flair. Lillian Dent, proprietor, and daughter, Leisa Dent, chef, and closeups of classic Southern dishes.

It was late one evening when Lillian Dent, co-owner and manager of LL Dent in Carle Place, stopped at our table to chat. In a short while, she had us so engaged that we invited her to pull up a chair. Minutes later, Dent's daughter and business partner, Leisa, emerged from the kitchen, resplendent in chef's whites and toque, and filled us in on the origins of some of the Southern family recipes that comprised her menu. Years ago, Leisa Dent had cooked for actor-comedian Eddie Murphy. His loss turned out to be to Long Island's gain.

Which is not to say that the three-month-old enterprise is just yet all it could be. As is common at new restaurants, food and service can vary from one visit to another. Still, I've always left feeling glad I'd come. Even on a night when the brisket -- thinly sliced and succulent on a previous occasion -- amounted to bland pot roast with thick gravy, the pulled pork with candied yams were sublime.

At both lunch and dinner, little loaves of piping hot corn bread materialize almost immediately. Our waiter confessed, under interrogation, that a mix had been used in the making, but it was, at least, an excellent mix. I ate entirely too much of the end result.

Soups are a forte. My favorite was Toby's Georgia hash, a spicy ground pork-laced gumbo Leisa Dent's late father used to prepare by the bucketful and freeze for the winter. The LL spicy chicken soup, studded with bits of okra, tomatoes, rice, tomatoes and rice, came in a close second. Vegetable soup, while lively, was overwhelmed by salt, at least on that day.

I liked the crispy deep fried chicken livers served on Texas toast; so, too, did a confessed liver-phobe in our party. The generic Buffalo chicken wings, however, said nothing about the chef who had prepared them.

What spoke volumes about Leisa Dent's culinary talent was barbecued spare ribs, a special that should be a menu staple. They were smoky, meaty and extremely tender. Another non-menu item, salmon with sausage, peppers and onions over creamy cheese grits, was so compelling, I couldn't keep my fork out of a friend's plate. While the Southern fried chicken was crisp and juicy, I wish I'd known beforehand that the portion was just a quarter of a bird, since I would have requested dark meat. The heady pulled pork, whether served on a sandwich or as platter, proved irresistible every time, as did the crunchy cornmeal-crust fried catfish, a sandwich at lunch. Turkey meat loaf, on one occasion, was a dry affair with congealed gravy; it was lots better the next time, although the gravy still could have been thinner and hotter.

I'm partial to creamy macaroni and cheese, so I thought the eggy Georgia style souffle a bit dry, but that's a matter of personal preference. Collard greens were tangy, candied yams sweet and cinnamon.

After one forkful of Leisa Dent's classic chocolate layer cake -- moist, tall, and spread with an opulent bittersweet icing -- I was willing to foresake all the flourless slabs of fudge served at every trendy restaurant these days. Dent's warm, lush banana pudding had been made the old fashioned way, with vanilla custard, vanilla wafers and a topping of meringue.

Once, at the outset of our dinner, Leisa Dent offered everybody in the restaurant a piece of lemon cake, fresh from the oven. "It's a little overbaked, so I couldn't serve it for dessert," she said.

Actually, the cake was perfect.

With a little fine-tuning, hopefully, all else at LL Dent will be, too.

Soup to try: The Georgia hash soup is among the best soups served on Long Island.

LL Dent is located at 221 Old Country Rd., Carle Place, 516-742-0940.

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