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M&D's Café

★★★★★

2000 E. 28th Ave., 303-296-1760, www.mdbbqfish.com**Recommended Dishes** Catfish, greens, banana pudding

Then

Before 5280 critic Elizabeth Ellis dined at M&D's Café in 2005, she tempered her expectations. The Southern spot promised the edible Americana she loved, but she worried the café wouldn't deliver. Spot-on fried green tomatoes and as-light-as-marshmallow sticky buns quickly offered reassurance, but many entrées—overly fatty ribs, tough catfish, and pasty hot links—left her dissatisfied. Ellis determined that this was a place to snack, brunch, or grab dessert—but not necessarily to indulge in a full meal.

Now

Almost any spot that survives 31-plus years goes through ups and downs. M&D's is no different—and after my meals at the

unpretentious, almost dinerlike eatery, I guessed that Ellis must have visited during a slump.

My first meal of catfish (\$13.99) bore little resemblance to Ellis' tough and tasteless fillet. The cornmeal-crusting was buttery and flavorful and broke tenderly under my fork. My second dinner, the pork spare ribs (\$14.29), again contradicted Ellis' experience. Yes, the barbecue sauce was cloying—M&D's co-owner Deborah Shead confesses that the whole kitchen is sweet on sugar—but the pork was expertly smoked and meaty enough to balance the glaze. My third experience left me with little doubt that the succulent beef brisket (\$14.29) and Sloppy Joe-style chopped-beef-and-pork sandwich (\$5.89, \$7.19) were thoughtfully prepared.

SOUTHERN COMFORT M&D's dishes up soul food that not only sticks to the ribs, but also fosters a sense of community.

These successful meals left me wondering what exactly had happened between my visits and those of Ellis. So I called Shead and put the question to her. She explained that her parents, Mack and Daisy, had opened M&D's as their retirement project in the late 1970s. For years, the duo ran the restaurant, but about six years ago they wanted a change, and passed the primary restaurant responsibilities to their kids, Deborah, Rena, and MJ. At about the same time, M&D's also underwent a large expansion and remodel. Quick math showed that Ellis had caught the restaurant in the transition years.

Today, M&D's is a well-oiled operation, and as Deborah, Rena, and MJ have established their roles in the restaurant, they've maintained the founding principles: home-cooked food and friendly service. Like the ribs, catfish, and barbecue sandwich, M&D's sides and desserts offer rich flavors. The greens (\$2.09) arrive seasoned with smoked turkey, the baked beans (\$2.09) stirred with brown sugar, and the banana pudding (\$3.89) comes layered with vanilla wafers. The servers are big-hearted. Staffers playfully added flavors (peach, pomegranate) to my lemonade, told stories of their childhoods, and held a table for me when I had to dash out momentarily.

And it's not only me who likes M&D's. The Whittier eatery has long been a go-to spot for the African-American community, as well as anyone else in search of comfy Southern eats. Hit up M&D's on a Sunday afternoon for the all-you-can-eat buffet (\$17.95), and you're likely to find women in their church hats, murmuring a prayer before enjoying honeyed cornbread. On weeknights, young professionals flock for salty nibs of fried okra (\$4.74) and gigantic Arnold Palmers (\$2.59). (M&D's currently has no liquor license, but the Sheads are considering reinstating their license.)

M&D's generosity of spirit—both in its service and food—makes it easy to forgive the restaurant's lesser moments, like a picked-over Sunday buffet or the occasional monotone flavors (the macaroni salad doesn't pack much punch). That benevolence, along with the huge serving sizes, helps justify the prices, which, at about \$15 a plate, are more than you might expect of a down-home restaurant. M&D's soulful sensibility is exactly what has formed it into a local institution. —KAZIA JANKOWSKI