



#42

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**A FOOD
LETTER**

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JC'S KITCHEN
*Where the Food is Anointed
and you Won't be Disappointed
oh Taste and See!!*

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PANCAKES EGGS, BACON, SAUSAGE
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DELIVERY LUNCH 
STEAK RICE GRAVY COLLARS
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HOT-DOGS CHEESE BURGER
FRIED CHICKEN OX-TAILS



JC'S KITCHEN, A MEAT-AND-THREE WITH A MISSION

by Emily Wallace

JC DOESN'T COOK. Regulars know better at JC's Kitchen, a meat-and-three housed in a squat, buttery-yellow building that sticks out amid the townhouses near the corner of Main and Fayetteville streets in Durham, North Carolina.

"It's a form of witnessing to say they stand for Jesus Christ," says Phyllis Terry, a petite woman with wide eyes and a constant grin, of the restaurant's initials. The definition can be inferred from the interior of the building, where inspirational plaques adorn the walls, gospel music pipes from a CD player, and a Bible rests open by the cash register.

Crisp, hand-painted lettering on the side of the building makes the mission explicit: WHERE THE FOOD IS ANOINTED AND YOU WON'T BE DISAPPOINTED.

I had no doubt about the anointing. The restaurant is a spiritual place. But on my first visit, I wondered if the food would let me down—especially when Terry confessed that the vegetables are cooked with smoked turkey in place of a more traditional slab of pork.

Hesitation was unwarranted. The greens—a mix of chopped collards and cabbage—were bitter, sweet, and beautifully smoky. And the fried okra was just as it should be: slightly crisp and lightly breaded. I also enjoyed a hindquarter of fried chicken, drenched in a sweet batch of barbecue sauce.

But the standout dish was oxtails, marinated for hours before they were stewed. Served over rice, the meat pulled away from the bones in tender shreds that tasted like a gamier version of pot roast.

Many of the recipes at JC's come from Terry's mother, who cooked for her church and her family of nine children. She was "the number one cook in Durham," Terry says. As a result, all of the Lee siblings learned her recipes. "We grew up knowing what it was to cook," she says. "That was inherited."

Terry never intended to own a restaurant. She spent nearly twenty years living and working in Africa, India, and, most recently, Japan. Instead, two of Terry's siblings, Charles Lee and Sheilah Lee, coveted careers in cooking.

Around 1997, Charles turned an existing meat-and-three into his own place, which he dubbed Lee's. One year later, he gave it over to Sheilah, who refashioned it as JC's and devised the restaurant's slogan.

Under Sheilah's watch, the place became much more than a restaurant. "It was an outreach center to help the destitute and down and out," says Terry. "It was her passion. She clothed people and fed them."

In 2008, Sheilah became ill with cancer. Upon her death that year, Durham's *Herald-Sun* wrote, "If you were down on your luck, you didn't so much need to have a grip on your bootstraps if the late Sheilah Lee had any say in the matter—she was the type who'd pull you up herself."

Terry didn't want her sister's mission to fade, so she returned from Japan to take over the restaurant. "We're living out of seeds she planted in the community," she says of the current business.

To honor her sister's work, Terry recently remodeled the interior of the building, removing a long lunch counter to make room for new booths and tables, and painting the walls bright brick-orange, teal, and yellow.

Her plan is to draw more customers to the restaurant—and draw more people to J.C. 🍷

Emily Wallace of Durham, North Carolina, writes and draws for the Independent Weekly, where she contributes a regular column on meat-and-threes and where a version of this article originally appeared.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Photograph by Emily Wallace.



A DIFFERENT KIND OF **PLANE FOOD** HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO FOR K&W?

by Kat Kinsman

SEVERAL STORIES ABOVE MANHATTAN'S CENTRAL PARK, there hangs a three-Michelin-starred, monstrously expensive restaurant that an awful lot of people think is perfect. I may have thought that, too, at one point, but I know it's not, because I've been to the K&W Cafeteria.

Actually, I'm going to back that up and admit out loud in public that I have in fact boarded a plane, rented a hotel room, and stayed overnight in a city several states away for the express purpose of sitting down with a groaning tray of K&W chicken livers, fried okra, collard greens, and vegetable congeal and eating my greedy head off.