

The art of Southern cuisine

by Gary Powell

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Maddi's Southern Bistro

16925 Birkdale Commons Parkway, Huntersville

Phone: 704-987-7762

Hours: Sunday 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Monday-Thursday 11a.m.-9 p.m.

Friday-Saturday 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

Prices: \$12-\$22

Details: Lunch, dinner and bar service every day

For more information, visit www.maddissouthernbistro.com.

I grew up a Yankee, as they say down here, but I also grew up eating Southern cooking. Although we lived “up North,” my parents and grandparents hailed from Arkansas, Tennessee and Missouri. Some of my most memorable childhood moments came at my Granny’s table or standing next to her on a footstool in her kitchen.

Even given this early exposure to down-home cuisine, I’ve always been amazed at the variety of what passes for Southern cooking. Along the Carolinas and Georgia coast, you have Low Country cuisine. Rich in seafood, rice and local vegetables including black-eyed peas, it’s no doubt Southern. Further west in New Orleans, where many years ago I tweaked my cooking skills in restaurants of the French Quarter, you’ll find gumbos, jambalaya and the influence of African, Caribbean and classical French cuisines. It’s similar to Low Country but definitely not the same. You won’t find King Cake served in Charleston or Andouille sausage in your Brunswick stew. But does anyone doubt that Louisiana is in the South?

Then, there’s “soul food” – cracklins, chittlins and catfish – served up with beans and greens, turnips and sweet potato pie. How about fried chicken and waffles and banana cream pie? Anyone doubt that’s southern? With so much variety, it makes you wonder, what exactly is Southern cuisine? I’ve concluded it’s all of the above. That’s the beauty of it. And at a restaurant like Maddi’s Southern Bistro, it’s all of the above with a touch of creativity. In fact, Maddi’s, located a half-block from the Birkdale theater, just might have earned the honor of my current favorite restaurant. Here’s what I like about it:

The Place

Normally, a restaurant located in a shopping mall that mimics Main Street at Disney World would have two strikes before even serving a salad. But Maddi’s beats the rap by snuggling up next to owners Diane and Madis Sulg’s other passion – the award-winning Maddi’s Gallery, featuring fine American craft, artist-made jewelry and southern folk art. Take a moment to peruse the artwork before being seated. The restaurant, which you enter through the gallery, also has an artistic feel, from the lighting, furniture and bar, to the dishes, glassware, placemats and salt and pepper shakers. The walls are covered with art from many of the region’s finest folk artists. Even the check is presented with a final artistic flair on a hand-painted, small, wooden tray. Seating is available inside and out.

The Service

We were seated immediately on a weekday evening. The crowd was modest

but lively. The waitress was knowledgeable about the menu and attentive to our needs. In fact, the entire wait staff shared a sense of professionalism that is common in well-run restaurants.

The Food Menu

Maddi's also gets high marks for its food menu and the creativity that went into the formulating its dishes, which are the brainchild of Chef Jon Dubay of Johnson & Wales University. This is not ordinary fare, and although Maddi's characterizes itself as a southern bistro, the menu raises traditional Southern cooking to a higher level. For you foodies out there, think Paula Dean meets Alice Waters.

For example, among the appetizers you won't find the tried-and-true spinach-artichoke dip. Instead, you'll get a riff on that dish as the chef substitutes collard greens for spinach. And there's no ordinary chickpea hummus here. Nope, it's black-eyed pea hummus in a nod to a Low Country favorite Hoppin' John, made from rice and black-eyed peas. Of course, you'll also find Southern staples like fried green tomatoes and hush puppies offered up for appetizers as well.

The entrees also take a risk. No ordinary veal osso buco at Maddi's. Instead, the dish is made "Southern" by swapping out the veal for pork and floating it not in a reduction of the braising liquid, but in a rich hominy sauce. There's a wink at the islands and Jimmy Buffet with the cinnamon-seared scallops in banana rum sauce. Shrimp and grits, steak du jour and fried chicken are available for the not-so-adventurous diners in your party. The side dishes also have a flair. Instead of run of the mill fries, try asiago French fries with a cucumber raita dipping sauce. Or treat your palate to braised collards and country ham, or my favorite: cheddar and smoked gouda macaroni and cheese.

The Drink Menu

Although not large, the wine list is eclectic and affordable. For whites, you can enjoy a Schug Sonoma Chardonnay with your flounder and crab or the Caymus Conundrum with your chicken and dumplings. Outstanding reds include the Elk Cove Pinot noir and the Stag's Leap Cabernet. If you're watching your pocket book – and who isn't these days – Maddi's offers wines from all over the world for less than \$25 and a nice selection of several Southern microbreweries.

The Food

The real star at Maddi's is the food. What I like the most is the emphasis on fresh, organic ingredients. The pork comes from Grateful Growers across the lake in Denver. The chicken comes from Springer Mountain Farms, which raises poultry on an all-vegetable diet without antibiotics or chemical medicines. On our most recent visit, we started with an appetizer of the blue cheese and buffalo chicken egg rolls. Spicy and reminiscent of that Southern roadhouse staple, buffalo wings, I didn't share much with the rest of my party. On other occasions, I've also enjoyed the black-eyed pea hummus and fried green tomatoes. That buttermilk batter is just what those green tomatoes needed. I always order the Southern salad for the spiced pecans and cracklins, but I've tasted and loved the watermelon salad with citrus vinaigrette. The sweet onions and goat cheese make this rock. Everything about the osso buco pork is excellent, from the composition of the dish – herbed risotto and an organic vegetable of the day – to its execution. The pork, by the way, is a braised ham hock. If you're a Yankee, don't be put off by this. Other than pork jowls, properly prepared, this is one of the most tender, flavorful parts of the pig.

Fried chicken is something I won't order in most places, but the underlying flavor of that Springer Mountain chicken makes it worth it. I'd also recommend the crab-stuffed flounder, which was as good as any I've eaten over on Pauley's Island. Desserts at Maddi's are also treat. Included are several of the usual suspects, including bourbon pecan pie, sweet potato cheesecake and vanilla bourbon sugar beignets. I never turn down a chance at beignets.

Lunch, Brunch and Special Events

Maddi's also offers lunch with an assortment of sandwiches and a Sunday brunch where you can get fried green tomatoes eggs Benedict or pancakes with bananas foster sauce, among other choices. A recent special event was Maddi's Grateful Grower's Farm to Table Dinner on May 27. For \$35, diners enjoyed the chef's take on pork from Grateful Grower's Farms. Pork loin stuffed with ground pork and roasted red peppers, braised pork belly and smoked pork jowl headlined the cast. The three courses were paired with microbrews. That's a stimulus package you can't beat. See, you don't need to go to Charleston or Savannah for Low Country delicacies, New Orleans for beignets or Berkeley for Chez Panisse. We've got our own right down the street at Maddi's Southern Bistro in Birkdale Village.