



'Atlanta's Dining Room': Southern specialties shine at Mary Mac's



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The scene: During WWII, a number of women in the South found themselves widowed at a young age. For some who had to suddenly fend for themselves, and knew how to cook well, the dining industry beckoned, but at the time,

it was not widely considered socially acceptable for women to run restaurants. "So they called them tea rooms because it sounded less like a restaurant," said Matt Thompson, general manager and second generation of the family that bought Mary Mac's Tea Room from founder Mary McKenzie. At the height of Atlanta's "tea room" craze there were 16 such eateries, but this one founded in 1945 is the sole survivor. It is so steeped in Southern tradition that in 2011 the Georgia House of Representatives created Resolution 477, which officially declared Mary Mac's "Atlanta's Dining Room."

The low-slung building has a simple brick exterior, and inside the front door is a generous waiting area lined with countless framed articles and accolades, where headset-wearing staffers manage the crowds and dispense takeout orders. Past this is a hallway covered with signed photos of famous visitors of every ilk, from Justin Bieber to Johnnie Cochran, and a few Miss Americas and Miss Georgias. Off this hall are several dining rooms with individual names and the feel of eating in a gracious Southern home. The Skyline room is so named because one wall is an enormous mural of the Atlanta skyline, while genteel accessories like grand pianos are found throughout.

The overall feel is simple elegance with a warm welcome, and tables are covered with easily cleaned "linen" tablecloths of plastic, topped with just salt, pepper, a bottle of the homemade pepper vinegar with hot peppers from the farm of one the owners, and a cup of pencils. That's because tradition at Mary Mac's dictates that customers write up their own orders, a seven-decade rule to ensure staffers could make no mistakes. The final touch is Jo Carter, whose Mary Mac's business card reads simply "Goodwill Ambassador" and has roamed the restaurant greeting guests, chatting, and giving her signature backrubs for well over 20 years. "I tried to retire once, but the boss wouldn't let me go, came to my house and brought me back," says Carter.

Reason to visit: Fried chicken, sweet potato soufflé, fried green tomatoes, desserts

The food: Mary Mac's does traditional Southern cooking in a variant of the "meat and three" format where all entrees are served with a basket of homemade bread (and at dinner, decadent cinnamon buns) and choice of two sides. Servers ask each guest if they've been before, because all "first timers" are given a complimentary cup of "Pot Likker with cracklin' bread." This is broth from cooking turnip greens, with some shredded greens and a cornbread muffin that you crumble into the soup. It's good broth, good cornbread, and unique, but not a must if it's a return trip.

Appetizers include regional standards such as spicy fried crawfish, deviled eggs, homemade pimento cheese, and fried green tomatoes, which are excellent – my Atlanta companion dubbed them the best she'd ever tried. The coating was quite crunchy, but the tomato was both firm and tender inside, without any of the mushiness you sometimes get, served with a ranch dressing-like sauce on the side. Another standout is the Brunswick stew, typically a tomato-based soup-like stew made with various meats and veggies. This one is stuffed full of shredded pork, corn, tomatoes and lima beans, thick with ingredients and flavor but still light in texture and not thickened per se.

This fine line between big portions of hearty Southern fare that manages to be both rich and light in texture resurfaces again and again at Mary Mac's. The bestselling sides are the tomato pie and sweet potato soufflé, both of which pull off the trick. The tomato pie is just a really concentrated puree of tomatoes and tomato chunks mixed with crumble of crunchy dough, and is sort of like eating spoonfuls of a fantastically rich pasta sauce. The soufflé is like mashed sweet potatoes on steroids, denser and richer, but still fluffy, with added sweetness, cinnamon, and topped with Thanksgiving-style mini-marshmallows, as much a dessert as a side. Most sides are solidly good, including the rare collard greens cooked without pork, and super cheesy mac and cheese with even more cheese in a top layer slab.

It's a big menu, and while hard to believe, the No. 1 best seller is the "4 Vegetable Plate," which substitutes a choice of two vegetables for the entrée, with two more as the sides. "Because we use only fresh vegetables, a lot of regulars come for those," said Thompson. But the most popular actual entrée is definitely fried chicken (followed by chicken fried chicken, a breaded fried boneless breast). It is a superlative example of the genre, served piping hot, with a shatteringly crunchy crust and juicy tender meat inside. It's not quite as drop-dead fantastic as national paragons like [Willie Mae's](#) in New Orleans and [Gus' World Famous](#) in Memphis, but it's up there, and far better than most. The secret is 24 hours of brining that keeps it juicy when cooked, and otherwise it uses simply flour, salt and pepper. Another great choice is the surprising chicken and dumplings, almost like a pasta dish, finely shredded chicken tossed with small, ethereal dumplings that pull off the heavy-while-light trick yet again, sort of a Southern take on real quality gnocchi. The menu goes on and on with things like ribs, pork chops, meatloaf and a full range of mostly fried seafood specialties including shrimp, trout, oysters and catfish.

It's very hard to leave room for dessert here, but it is worthwhile. This is Georgia after all, so the Georgia peach cobbler is a top seller, a small bowl of cooked peaches and slabs of (again) thick-but-light dough, not much to look at but super tasty. Georgia (and native son President Jimmy Carter) is also famous for its peanuts, and the peanut butter pie is dreamy. With plenty of peanut taste in a chocolate graham cracker shell, it's the consistency of New York-style cheesecake, rich and creamy but light and delicious – in short, it's Mary Mac's.

What regulars say: "Don't miss the fried chicken or sweet potato soufflé. Those are the two things they're really known for, but you can't go wrong – it's real Southern cooking," said John Stephenson, president and CEO of Atlanta's College Football Hall of Fame.

Pilgrimage-worthy?: Not quite, but a must if you are in Atlanta, with history, tradition and great food in one ultra-friendly place.

Rating: Yum-Plus! (Scale: Blah, OK, Mmmm, Yum!, OMG!)

Price: \$-\$\$ (\$ cheap, \$\$ moderate, \$\$\$ expensive)

Details: 224 Ponce De Leon Avenue NE, Atlanta; 404-876-1800; marymacs.com

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