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TAR HEEL TASTES

Golden Era

A meal at Hayes Barton Cafe and Dessertery will take you back to a simpler time — the 1940s, to be exact.

BY DIANE SILCOX-JARRETT

The dinner menu at Hayes Barton Cafe and Dessertery, located in the heart of Raleigh's Five Points, features catchy names with nostalgic references like "Dial 'M' for Meatloaf," "A Chicken in Every Pot Pie," and "Jane Russell Pear Salad." Look beyond the humorous names and any preconceived notions you might have about meatloaf and pot pie, and you'll find this is one swell place to eat. The slice of meatloaf is more than generous, deliciously seasoned, and accompanied by a huge helping of mashed potatoes.

It's hard to decide if the best part of the pot pie is the creamy mixture of chicken and vegetables inside or the wonderful, mouthwatering crust — the flaky kind that's hard to find these days.

The entree names, as creative as the dishes themselves, come from the imaginative mind of co-owner Frank Ballard. "I thought of most of them myself," he says proudly. Frank and his wife, Marget, have a soft spot in their hearts for the 1940s, when life seemed simpler and Mom always cooked meatloaf on Wednesday. "It was fun

to be creative with the food using pop culture from the era. I combined names from the war and Hollywood." The cafe itself is decorated in a '40s and old Hollywood motif. The Ballards' customers have come to expect nothing but the best in "upscale Americana" food when served at the chrome semi-circular bar or the black, red, and chrome tables.

Framed photos of Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, and other stars and starlets decorate the red walls. But Frank is quick to point out the photos of men and women you might not recognize. "Those photos," says Frank, pointing, "are from my customers. Either they are my current customers as they were, or one of my customers brought them in and they are of a family member or friend." Young World War II soldiers and their girlfriends and wives smile from the black-and-white photographs. One collection of smaller photos is a composite of young men from nearby Broughton High School who lost their lives in the war. "It took about 10 years for one of my customers, Bill Teague, to put it together," explains Frank.

What may have been the main inspiration of the cafe's atmosphere sits proudly on top of the counter. It's a photo of Frank's dad looking smart in his Navy uniform beside his mom, who has a carefree look in her eyes. "When I was growing up, my parents told me lots of stories of the '40s, and it has captivated me since. I fell in love with the romance and simplicity of the time; it was America's decade," he says.

With a full wine list and a quiet atmosphere, Frank and Marget Ballard's restaurant is one of the most romantic in Raleigh.



Decade of desserts

In December, the Ballards celebrated 10 years of operating the cafe, which sits on a corner on Glenwood and Fairview roads, connected to Hayes-Barton Pharmacy. During the past decade, a lot of fabulous food has been served from the small kitchen, and thousands have enjoyed what Marget has decided to cook up for the daily specials and her work-of-art desserts.

Frank's parents may have been the inspiration for the cafe, but Marget's desserts may be the cornerstone. When you walk

in, you can't miss seeing them in the glass display case: Bailey's Irish Cream tiramisu, chocolate peanut butter mousse pie, and apple and key lime pies. Marget's first lessons in how to make the perfect dessert came from the best, her mother. "When I was a little girl, I would watch my mother bake," she says. "She was from Germany, and the cheesecake recipe I use was originally hers. I just had to add a little more sugar for our taste here in the United States. And I also add flavors, like at Christmas I make one flavored with eggnog."

Anne Haxton, Artist



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Marget decided to try her hand at desserts while working at a local restaurant. The owner tasted a few, and, like they say, the rest is history. Customers couldn't get enough of her confections, and, as word spread, it wasn't long until Marget was filling orders for businesses across Raleigh.

One thing led to another, and when Marget and Frank were first married, they were supplying cakes to 20 wholesale customers. "We did this for three-and-a-half years," she says. "We would deliver 80 or 90 cakes a week. They were stacked all over the house." The Ballards had a system to meet these demands, with Frank baking during the day while Marget worked at Carolina Power and Light. When she got



Marget works her magic in the kitchen, while her husband is the self-described "front man."

home at night, she would decorate cakes while he went to work. "Cakes were everywhere. I wanted my house back," says Marget, laughing.

About this time, Frank found out the restaurant that was then located in the cafe was closing. "I had been to the Hayes Barton Grill as a kid, and I knew this was the place for me," he says. "We wanted something small and intimate where Marget could sell her desserts and we could have breakfast and lunch." Breakfast had always been a part of the grill, but Frank and Marget soon stopped serving it, deciding instead to put their focus on dinner. "At first the people in the neighborhood were not too happy with me," says Frank. That had to be

FRANK'S PARENTS MAY HAVE BEEN
THE INSPIRATION FOR THE CAFE,
BUT MARGET'S DESSERTS MAY BE
THE CORNERSTONE.



before they tasted Marget's hot, made-from-scratch cornbread. The delectable food at the new Hayes Barton Cafe and Dessertery became well known, and now not a lunch or a dinner goes by that it isn't full. Frank and Marget do not take these full houses for granted. "We have been very fortunate with our loyal customers. Without them, we wouldn't be here," says Frank.

Soda shop memories

Lunch takes on the old soda shop atmosphere. The original 50-year-old milkshake machine still churns out really thick chocolate shakes, the kind you need a spoon for. "It still works just fine," says Frank. "That has to be one of the reasons they taste so good." You can eat an old-time soda shop lunch of a cheesburger or hot dog with crisp, thick French fries — that have to be "hot and crunchy or they won't make it out of the kitchen," says Frank. Or you can enjoy the soup of the day, which may be a lemon chicken and rice or a sausage, bean, and cabbage (both go great with the grilled cheese sandwich or chicken salad). Lunchtime is filled with moms and their preschoolers, businesspeople, and retired folks whose pictures just may be up on the walls. Add "Old Blue Eyes" singing "Mack the Knife," and you have a lunch that's more of an experience than just a meal.

At dinnertime, things change around the bustling lunch counter. A black curtain is drawn to hide the closed pharmacy, the lights are dimmed, and small white ones twinkle from the top of the room. If you're looking for romance, there are candles on the tables, and who couldn't feel romantic with Dean Martin singing "That's Amore." "We have one of the most romantic restaurants in Raleigh," explains Frank, who greets



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each person who comes in. "I'm the front man," he says. "Marget works her magic in the kitchen and makes me look good." Both are quick to point out they have been blessed with a wonderful staff. "Everyone knows just what to do, and we all work great together. It's like family," says Marget.


'As perfect as you can get'

The 60-seat cafe is small and intimate at night. "We've had quite a few engagements here," Frank says. "The guy

will come in and tell us [about it], and we set everything up with some champagne and roses." Romance is truly alive at night with a full wine list and nightly specials. Their filets are famously tender, Marget says, due to the cut of beef she uses. "It's all about quality. I see every dish before it goes out to the customer," she explains. There's usually a fish entree among the nightly specials. "Whatever she does with fish is fantastic," says Prentiss Prevette, who's been enjoying the menu once a week for six years. Nine-year-old Sarah Sanchez

agrees, as she dives into her trout with almond crust. "The fish is what I always want to get," she says. If you can please a 9-year-old with fish, you must be doing something right.

Prentiss and Sanchez are among the Wednesday crowd at Hayes Barton, which has become unofficially the "regulars night." "Some of these folks come in here two or three nights a week," says Frank. "But Wednesday most people here know each other."

Chris Cook and his wife, Jennifer, enjoy Wednesday nights and are twice-a-week customers. "There are no better filets," says Chris. But he says the atmosphere and the patrons are a big part of why they keep coming back. "It feels like we're here with family." The Cooks find the atmosphere so appealing that when their niece moved to Raleigh, the cafe was where they wanted her to work. "It's just about as perfect as you can get," says Chris. "Once the chemistry is in place, it is a true recipe for success. That's something not on the menu or back in the kitchen." As tall pieces of Marget's signature coconut cake are carried to a lucky table, Chris smiles toward the tray. "There is one thing for sure," he says. "You will never get tired of eating here." 

Diane Silcox-Jarrett, who admits to gaining two pounds while writing this story, is a freelance writer living in Raleigh.

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