

Dinner, bar service provide a change of pace for The Mecca

By GREG COX

Photos by JULI LEONARD

Over the decades, The Mecca’s dark wood paneling has attained a time worn patina, and its walls have accumulated dozens of framed news paper articles and signed photographs of politicians and judges. For the most part, though, the narrow dining room looks much the same as you imagine it did when Greek immigrant Nicholas Dombalis opened the restaurant in 1930.

The menu evolved with the times. An early menu devoted entire sections to oysters, cold meats, and “ice cream and fancy sundaes.” But by and large, three successive generations of the Dombalis family kept the offering true to the original diner spirit.

So when local developer and restaurateur Greg Hatem bought Raleigh’s oldest restaurant last year, he knew better than to mess with success. Hatem also owns The Pit, Sitti, Gravy and Raleigh Times. In other words, not only does he know a little something about restaurants, but he also happens to be one of The Mecca’s biggest fans. He has been a regular since the ‘80s and has been known to eat all three meals there in the same day.

Other than updating the bathrooms and giving the upstairs dining room a makeover, Hatem left the look of the place pretty much unchanged.



OK, regulars will notice one other significant change: a well-stocked bar that now serves beer, wine and cocktails, including a selection of mostly Prohibition-era classics (presumably selected with The Mecca’s history in mind). With options such as Sidecar, Scofflaw and Southside Fizz, the drinks are surprisingly wellmade for the price (\$7 to \$8), and a delightful prelude to an evening meal — which Hatem revived after several years’ absence.

The dinner menu borrows a handful of favorites from the lunch menu, including the perennially popular BLT and the Double Glo burger, an



old school diner-style burger that, according to our friendly server one night, is made with beef from the

cheese topped with bits of pork crackling are all worthy options.

For the most part, the entrée offering doesn’t stray far off the path of traditional diner fare.

The glaring exception is a Southern-accented take on shepherd’s pie that sneaks collards and black-eyed peas into the ground beef filling. A vegetarian version of the shepherd’s pie is a welcome adaptation for modern times.



apple pie, pecan pie and a homemade cobbler (recently blackberry). You’ll want to splurge on a scoop of ice cream for the cobbler.

The Mecca is as bustling as ever during the daytime hours, with the corned beef hash and homemade biscuit crowd frequently overlapping lunchtime lawyers getting their clam chowder and double decker sandwich fix. In stark contrast, the dining room was nearly empty both times I dined there in the evening.

I can only guess that word hasn’t yet gotten around about The Mecca’s new bar and dinner service. Otherwise, it’s hard to imagine why more people aren’t filling those vintage booths and counter stools and sipping an Old Fashioned as they peruse the menu and take in a setting that none of the trendy spots in downtown Raleigh can come close to matching.



“The Mecca’s fried chicken—a lunchtime best-seller, and *arguably the best fried chicken in town*—is fried chicken like your granny used to make, if you were lucky.”

Angus Barn. Fried catfish, topped with chow chow and Old Bay mayonnaise and served on a toasted brioche bun, is a worthy addition to the sandwich selection.

Naturally, it would be insane not to include fried chicken — a lunchtime

At the opposite end of the spectrum, The Mecca’s meatloaf — fine-textured and meaty beneath a blanket of rich gravy — is the platonic ideal of diner fare. So is the classic Greek diner take on spaghetti with meat sauce, a sauce much beefier than you’d ever find in an Italian restaurant.

Steak, often seen paired with eggs on a diner’s breakfast menu (including The Mecca’s), gets upsized and promoted to the dinner menu here. The New York strip for \$15 — weighing in at 10 ounces and grilled to order — is surprisingly tender. Like most entrées, it includes two sides.

Don’t overlook the supplemental list of nightly specials, where you’ll find the likes of Monday’s San Francisco chicken and Thursday’s chopped sirloin steak with gravy. Wednesday serves up a trio of tempting options: chicken stew with dumplings, BBQ pork chop and sweet potato pudding.



The dessert selection is short, sweet, and just what you’d expect in a diner:

bestseller, and arguably the best fried chicken in town — in the dinner entrée list. We’re talking fried chicken like your granny used to make, if you were lucky: no crunchy batter, just a dusting of seasoned flour, yielding juicy meat and exquisitely crisp, golden skin.

You get half a chicken for a diner-like price of \$13 — and that includes your choice of two sides. Butter beans, collard greens seasoned with smoked turkey, and a rich, gooey mac and

If you’ve never been to The Mecca (and if you don’t live or work in downtown Raleigh, there’s a good chance you haven’t), I urge you to check it out. Order a cocktail. And let me propose a toast to the idea that sometimes, something very old can in fact be a refreshing change of pace.