

# FOUR SCORE YEARS OF FRYING IT UP



Floye Dombalis folds T-shirts after the lunch rush at The Mecca Restaurant. The shirts were ordered for the restaurant's 80th anniversary on Friday, which will also include free breakfast and 5-cent Cokes.

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## The Mecca, Raleigh's oldest restaurant, is turning 80 on Friday

BY JOSH SHAFFER  
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**I**n a few blocks of downtown Raleigh, you can munch on baba ghanouj, ahi tuna tacos or a white-peppered prawn – signs of worldliness and change. But after eight decades, one restaurant can still line a lunch counter with three-piece suits and hard hats, all of them paying cash for fried trout and turnip greens, sprinkled with Texas Pete.

When The Mecca Restaurant turns 80 on Friday, the 150-odd regulars will likely rise at dawn for first dibs at the free birthday breakfast. They'll crowd inside the high-backed wooden booths for a drink of the 5-cent

Cokes. And over hot biscuits, they'll celebrate a place that survives by stubbornly resisting change, serving hush puppies in the age of iPad.

"We added the tablecloths. That's about it," said Floye Dombalis, ma-

RALEIGH



### SCENES AT MECCA

**Gallery:** For more photos of the restaurant, go to [newsobserver.com](http://newsobserver.com).

tron of The Mecca and only slightly older than the restaurant, impaling a hand-written ticket on a check spindle. "We don't try to be like anybody else. We just do our own thing."

It's often said that politicians haven't conquered Raleigh until they're on a first-name basis at The Mecca, and nobody has to ask whether they

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Paul Dombalis fills lunch orders in the Mecca Restaurant kitchen. He said consistency is one of the secrets of the place's longevity. The menu always has fried chicken, always fried fish, always a choice of two vegetables. In the age of the iPad, the Mecca still serves hush puppies.

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## MECCA

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take their tea sweetened. The walls behind the counter show a gallery of North Carolina politicians who have long favored the Martin Street diner: Gov. Jim Hunt, former Agriculture Commissioner Jim Graham, former Secretary of State and Attorney General Rufus Edmisten, the entire N.C. Supreme Court, Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker.

"I must be at least 10 percent Mecca," said Meeker, who has eaten there three times a week since the 1970s. "I usually have the double-decker club sandwich, or the lemon-herb chicken."

### Mecca for politicians

For a politician in a government town, The Mecca serves a double role as the perfect place to press flesh with a wide swath of voters, and as a flea market full of useful tidbits. This is no recent trend. Governors dating back to Clyde R. Hoey (1937-1941) used The Mecca to gauge the state's pulse.

"You pick up little nuggets of information," said Hunt, a more frequent patron now that he's a Raleigh attorney



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and not governor. "That helps you have a clear picture of what's happening, what kind of connections you need to pursue. You shake hands with people in the booths, keep your bipartisan relationships good and, by the way, have a great meal."

### A risky business

To endure for a Mecca-like span of years is next to unthinkable today. The most-recent statistics from the Small Business Administration show two-thirds of all new companies survive just two years; 44 percent last for four. Restaurants rank among the riskiest of new ventures: An



The Mecca is framed by the windows in the RBC Plaza Building lobby across Martin Street.

often-quoted Ohio State University study from 2003 puts the failure rate around 60 percent in the first three years.

Along with economics, a budding restaurateur com-

bats a battery of personal challenges brought on by long hours: divorces, poor health and the longing to retire. It's not easy to coax new family members into the busi-

ness. Even John Dombalis, who presided at Mecca for 52 years, was reluctant about it at first.

"It's incredibly remarkable," said chef Ashley Christensen, who opened a revamped Poole's Downtown Diner in Raleigh in late 2007. "It's one thing to survive, and it's another to keep that passion alive. Passion and interest in the craft is pretty tough to maintain. I love that place and so many people do. There's a lot of pride, and it's nice to see it tied to a family."

### Consistency the key

Much of Mecca's food is still prepared by Paul Dombalis, the third generation in Raleigh's oldest restaurant. He learned that the Mecca's longevity grows out of 60-hour work weeks — a lesson from his grandfather Nick, who opened The Mecca in 1930 and worked there into his 80s, and his father John, known as "Mr. D" to practically everyone in Raleigh.

"Just being real consistent," he said, explaining The Mecca's run. "You've always got family in here. You can't run it from home. You've got to be here."

Its simplicity in menu style — always fried chicken, always fried fish, always a choice of two vegetables — consistently draws photographers and painters hoping to capture the contentment on film or canvas.

"Somebody did an oil painting and I was in it, but I never got to see it," said waitress Kathy Gower. "It was sold before they even put it on exhibit. My boyfriend said, 'You inspired an artist.' I said, 'No, that's what happens when you work in a landmark.'"

For the birthday, Dombalis even plans to drag out The Mecca's 70-year-old cured ham, a 40-pound curio purchased in 1937, which normally rests in a freezer, making appearances only on special occasions. You'll likely see it in the window, extending a meaty greeting from bygone times.

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A portrait of Franklin D. Roosevelt hangs in the restaurant, which opened in 1930. Roosevelt began his first time as president in 1933. Statues of W.C. Fields, the Three Stooges, Elvis Presley and Ronald Reagan are also a permanent part of the décor.

