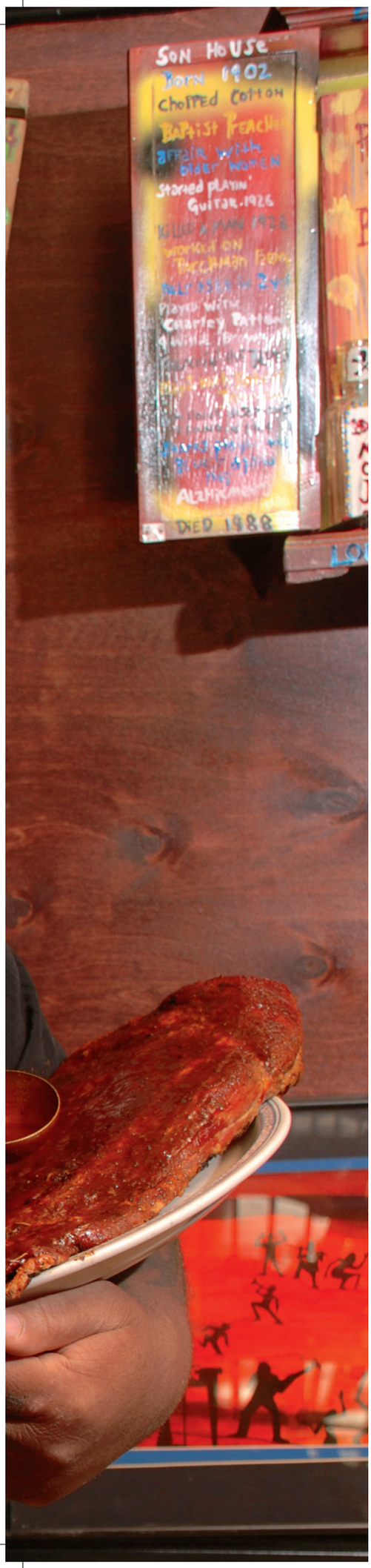
Lightnin'
Hopkins
BLUES
WASHBOARD
SAM
1910-1966
R.I.P
DALTON ART
PAPA'S
SOUL FOOD
KITCHEN



MEET THE CHEF

Deep-Fried Soul

The Southern favorites keep on cookin' at Papa's Soul Food Kitchen

BY AARON RAGAN-FORE
PHOTOS BY ERIC NASLUND

PAPA SOUL DOESN'T LIKE TO GIVE HIS REAL NAME. "You wouldn't walk up to Prince and ask his real name," the barbecue baron answers gravely. He is equally reluctant to divulge his age. "I stopped aging at 35. I'm like Dick Clark."

But hey . . . who cares about labels, anyway? The self-chosen identity "Papa Soul" conjures a perfect image for the operator of a homey little kitchen that specializes in fried okra, pulled pork and black-eyed peas, nestled unassumingly in a craftsman-style bungalow in historic Whiteaker.

Papa's palate fuses the traditions of a mother from Memphis and a father from North Carolina. The couple, both Black Panthers, operated a restaurant in Long Beach, Calif., where they went to escape the racism of the Deep South.

Papa landed in Eugene in 1987, an inner-city teenager with $68 in his pocket and a desire to attend the University of Oregon. But a burgeoning drug habit kept him out of school, and when he met the woman who would later become his wife, he decided to clean up his act and follow his dream of reconnecting with his Southern culinary roots.

Gustatory pilgrimages to North Carolina, Louisiana and Jamaica fired Papa's brain and stovetop. He soon birthed the first iteration of the Soul Kitchen, a roadside barbecue cart at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Polk Street. Papa remembers he made "a whopping $24" on his first day, but he kept at it until the cart built a fan base and turned a profit.

Multiple versions of the restaurant ensued. Papa parlayed the lessons of each location into something grander. He even experimented with cross-promotion in the form of a satellite funk band eponymously named Soul Kitchen. Each move was shadowed by a growing gang of regulars—fans of the alien cooking style of the Southeast amid the sea of granola and greens that is Northwest cuisine.

In the summer of 2006, with the twin successes of business and band serving as stepping stones, Papa purchased the Whiteaker bungalow. It was a dilapidated, compact building that once had Eugene's third-ever beer license but during Prohibition served as a ladies' tea room.

Papa says he wants his place to stand as "a heritage hall" to black America, "a history lesson." Somehow, the man's assorted archives of folk art, blues posters and sports-star action figures all hang together as a sort of shrine to the African-American experience.

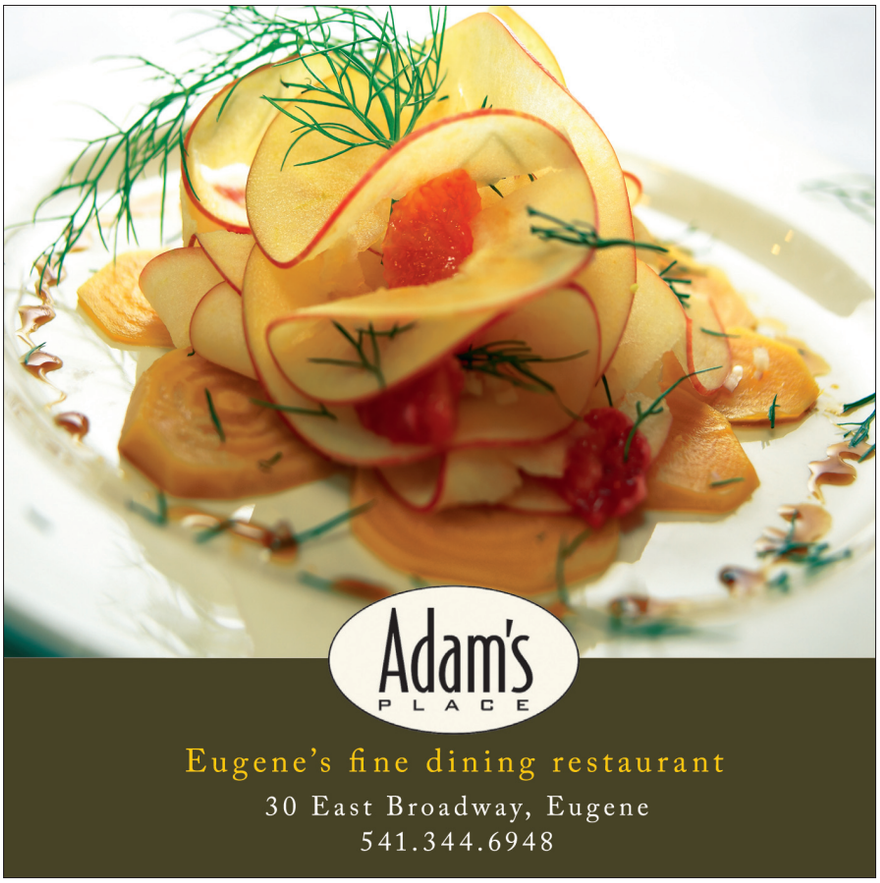
It took the charismatic cook and a few friends nearly three months to reinvent the bungalow, from the foundation up, as a worthy venue for Papa's memorabilia and catfish.

The front counter was constructed of wood piled beneath the house and corrugated sheet metal discovered along nearby railroad tracks. This is no trendy theme bistro with a chic "distressed" look—it's a genuine old-fashioned eatery and juke joint, with atmosphere instead of "theme" and honest-to-God distress.

Papa and his gang of deep-fat-frying carnivores have been embraced by Whiteaker despite the neighborhood's reputation as an enclave of vegetarians, hippies and vegetarian hippies. Whiteaker's sense of inclusiveness is embraced by the restaurant, which offers a place where old folks and young bob their heads to the same tunes, where black and white diners mingle, where college students rub elbows with kids who are enrolled only in the school of hard knocks.

It's a rare evening when Papa Soul can walk across his dining-room floor without stopping to shake at least a few hands. He never seems to mind, though.

When You Go

PAPA'S SOUL FOOD KITCHEN

400 Blair Blvd., Eugene
541/342-7500
Lunch noon to 2 p.m. Tuesday to Friday; dinner 5 to 10 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, 5 to 11 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 to 11 p.m. Saturday.