

HOW ABOUT SOUTHERN KITCHEN? OR CROWN? LONG-GONE SOUL FOOD

By Donn Johnson

I was planning a trip to Chicago a few weeks ago, when I went online in search of a good soul food restaurant that my family and I might visit while there.

Several names turned up in my Google search, but only one turned up repeatedly – “Army & Lou’s.” This restaurant was named one of the best in Chicago. “Often frequented by local politicians and celebrities, like Jesse Jackson,” read one of the reviewed.

That was enough for me. We put Army & Lou’s on our list of must-eat places.

I’ve been to Chicago many times over the years, but usually, it’s business and I’m on somebody else’s dime. That means I get to eat at some of the Windy City’s trendy upscale dining spots as opposed to the places where natives eat.

This was strictly a pleasure weekend for family, so we were in search of real “soul food,” the kind you used to be able to find in every major city, before integration.

If you are of a certain age, then you will remember St. Louis’ soul food restaurants and carryout joints. How about Southern Kitchen? Or Crown? Southern Kitchen was a sit-down restaurant. Crown was a cafeteria.

Both served delicious food.

I remember my father taking my brothers and me to both places to eat. My father was a simple, southern-bred man. Fancy restaurants, owned and operated by white people, was never his cup of tea. Long after the public accommodations laws allowed blacks and whites to eat together in St. Louis, my father was never really comfortable. He preferred small, black, “mom and pop” operations when it came to spending his money on food, “your Mama didn’t cook,”

I remember a time, long before McDonald’s when it was common to see black people lined up outside black-owned restaurants that specialized in burgers, fries, pig ears, tripe, shrimp and polish sausages.

Hi Will’s, over on Elliot Avenue, was famous for its big burgers and tripe sandwiches. Sara-Lou’s shrimp were second to none. (Originally white-owned, Sara-Lou’s remained at St. Louis Avenue and Sara, years after the neighborhood changed. Later, blacks bought it and kept the name.)

And then there was the incomparable “Billie Burke’s” over on Pendleton, near Sumner High School. I always considered the burgers there St. Louis’ best!

I can still see Mrs. Johnson, taking the balls of hamburger out of her refrigerator and smashing them flat on her grill.

“Regular or Deluxe?” she would yell at any customer ordering.

“Deluxe!” would be the reply, “and fries!”

“No fries!” Mrs. Johnson would say emphatically, sensing a new customer, because regulars knew you couldn’t get fries at Billie Burke’s – only those magnificent burgers!

Pulling up in front of Army & Lou’s; I thought about all those black-owned St. Louis restaurants that served good food and gave good service. Long gone.

Once inside, a young lady ushered us past red tablecloths and pictures of famous black people on the walls to our booth.

Soon, a beautiful, smallish black woman, at least 70 years old, greeted us. “I’m Bessie,” she said, “I’ll be servin’ ya’ll.”

My daughter and her former classmate squealed, “She’s so cute!” My wife and I nodded in agreement. This was special. The place was clean. Workers scurried about, anxious to serve us. For my wife and me, memories flooded back, Reed’s Ice Cream, Fry’s Drugstore, Crown Cafeteria and Southern Kitchen. All the St. Louis black businesses with class that had gone by the wayside seemed to be represented in this one Chicago South Side restaurant.

We ordered.

The food came to the table in waves. Biscuits, fish and eggs, steak and eggs, fried chicken platter, baked chicken platter, grits, cornbread, all cooked to perfection. The service was impeccable.

Man, what a lunch! Prepared by black folks, served to black folks, by black folks – with class.

The experience not only triggered memories, it made me wonder why someone in St. Louis can’t do the same thing.

Army & Lou’s in Chicago has been around more than 60 years. It preserves a proud heritage of black people and soul food. Other groups in the city are comfortable eating there. Like Bryant’s and Gates’ in Kansas City, the place is a landmark.

Efforts are being made by eateries like Marions’ Barbecue on Delmar, Delmonico’s in the Central West End, the Roberts’ Brothers downtown. There are others, but there just aren’t enough.

Historically, the black restaurant provided the only elegance we knew, sustaining us through tough times, when we could eat nowhere else.

There are several generations that never experienced that and can’t appreciate it. That’s such a shame.