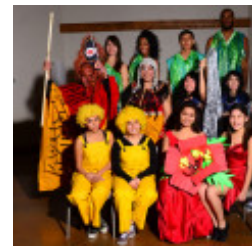


Local black-owned eateries host Sunday Dinner

Elaine Tassy / Journal Staff
Writer



When Daniel “Pepper” Morgan first opened Pepper’s Ole Fashion BBQ and Soul Food six years ago, it was because the woman who’d run a small soul food hole-in-the-wall there had fallen behind on her rent.

Morgan, who’d studied and worked as an engineer, asked the building owner of A Touch of Gourmet if he could pick up her \$200-a-month payments and use the small space near San Pedro and Copper not to sell food, but as a place he and his friends could hang out, shoot pool and smoke cigars. The building owner agreed.

One day, Morgan decided to barbecue food for some buddies outside in the parking lot.

“I barbecued on a Saturday for my company,” Morgan recalled in a recent interview. “Then I had people knocking on my door saying, ‘When can I get some of that barbecue?’ ”

Sunday Dinner

WHEN: 4 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Navajo Elks Lounge, 1521 Broadway Blvd. SE

HOW MUCH: \$15 to sample foods from participating restaurants, with \$5 going to the Prince Hall Scholarship Fund.

For information, and to purchase tickets online, go to nblackhistorymonth.com/february-festival/rhythms-cuisine/sunday-dinner/

That sparked the idea to open his own restaurant, something with which he had no prior experience. “I said, ‘Maybe I should do this ...’ ” he mused, calling it a “bucket-list thing to do.”

Without a business plan or any capital, he gave it a whirl, using recipes from his mother from Denton, Texas, and his grandmother from Stamps, Ark.

He borrowed money from the deacon at his church, found a used commercial stove and looked around for discarded furniture. He painted the place himself, had the fire department inspect it and before he knew it, Pepper’s was in business.

It has a quaint, homey charm: it’s a place with no menus; its walls are decorated with sketches of Beyoncé and a printed copy of the Albuquerque Journal from the day Barack Obama was elected president for the first time, and the nine tables use rolls of paper towels as vases for plastic flowers.

He moved from cash-only to accepting credit cards in January and anticipates a beer and wine license in the spring.

A Sunday Dinner

Pepper's has found itself among an array of black-owned eateries around town, and on Sunday, he says he'll join some of them to participate in an event called Sunday Dinner, one component of the Third Annual New Mexico Black History Festival, which began Feb. 5 and runs until the 23rd.

Sunday Dinner is a tasting event held at the Navajo Elks Lounge, where about 10 black-owned restaurants, including Pepper's, are expected to bring samples of their menu items – their choice of appetizers, entrées and desserts.

Donating food to the event, participating restaurants will have an opportunity to promote their restaurants while getting to know their competitors' twists on similar soul food platters.

Staples are expected to range from fried chicken and barbecued ribs to dirty rice, collard greens and a range of beans and dessert choices.

Those who pay \$15 to get in – there's space for 200 – will have a chance to sample food from places including:

- Nexus Brewery and Restaurant, a modern-looking, dark and swanky spot visible on the east side of Interstate 25 just north of Montgomery that calls itself "Albuquerque's Craft Beer and Soul Food Connection";
- The Cube Restaurant, a barbecue café which, like Nexus Brewery, was featured on the Food Network show "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives," and is located on the south side of Central Avenue near Maple;
- Mr. Powdrell's Barbeque House, which has two locations, one at Central NE near Dorothy, and the other on Fourth NW near Delmar, and is a family-owned place with country-style décor that has been around since 1969; and
- Tango Café, which is the only eatery in a food court-like space in the University of New Mexico Science and Technology Park, where sandwiches, a 40-item salad bar and other lunch items are available.

Getting ready

Several owners don't yet know what they'll bring to Sunday Dinner. "Pepper" Morgan said he is considering filling two-ounce ramekins with collard greens, or cutting ribs into three pieces and allowing people to taste them. He may offer his own take on macaroni and cheese, which he makes with pasta shells. "I make my own garlic cream cheese sauce as a roux."

Or, it could be red beans and rice, maybe a sweet potato pie. Perhaps some catfish nuggets with a toothpick in each one. Cobbler is a no – too messy for a finger food.

Ken Carson, who owns Nexus, sounded equally undecided. "What we're going to do, I'm pretty sure we're going to do fried chicken – drumsticks or wings – then we'll also probably bring in our collard greens and red beans and rice," he said. "You know what?" he said a few minutes later. "Now that I think of it, I might do gumbo. Yes, gumbo. I'm going to the most popular thing on our menu."

He was also considering chicken and waffles, another combination that would fall in the category of soul food, but keeping the waffles hot and fresh would be tricky at the Lodge.

"I don't have a way of maintaining them (on site)," he said, let alone preparing them, because the brewery will be open and using the waffle irons while he is at the tasting event, which he sees as a way to get to know other restaurant owners he hasn't met yet.

"I'm probably going to bring enough for 50 sample servings for each dish," he said, "and have a good time with everybody. I'm looking forward to visiting with some of the restaurant owners – there's a lot on the list (of participants) that I don't know."