

Shugga's Soul Cafe

By Danny Fairchild

Columns like this tend to have a “check out what absolute gem I’ve discovered” tone. But here’s the thing: Shugga’s Soul Cafe doesn’t need me to discover them. Shugga’s is already a known and loved and respected business to many in the community. It would be ridiculous for a white atheist man like me to think he’s introducing an already established business owned by a Black Christian woman. Not that that’s stopped white men before me, of course. “Discovering” things that have already been discovered is pretty much what we white men do. So please don’t take anything I have to say as a revelation. Instead, take it as information you should already friggin’ know. Because Shugga’s Soul Cafe should be a city-wide institution. It should be a culinary church. A soul food temple.

We can discuss all day what defines “soul food,” touching on its Black Southern roots as well as the ingredients you’d expect to find, and all that stuff

is important, but if you want a frame of reference, just think of every single food that makes you happy. Not just food you enjoy, but food that elicits joy itself. Almost any food where you can say, “the secret ingredient is love,” is soul food. Almost any dish that is commonly considered “comfort food.” Food that makes you happy. And I have to say that after filling up at Shugga’s, I was uncomfortably full, but I haven’t had a meal that made me happy in that way since my dad died. Yeah. Let the gravity of that wash over you. Shugga’s Soul Cafe just replaced my dead dad. Maybe I’m exaggerating. If I am, I’m not exaggerating by much, hehe.

I had the honor of meeting Sno, co-owner and head chef, with the rest of the hungry *365ink* crew. Like I said before, I’m a white atheist man, and she’s a Black Christian woman (a big sign on the front of the cash register counter says “I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST EXCEPT CHANGE MY PRICE.”) As different as our backgrounds are, I think Sno and I share a love language: food. She started talking about her biscuits, and I also make pretty damn good biscuits. I enjoy making good food for my friends. It makes me happy. Sno, however, seems to have a whole lot more love to give than I do. Because she extends that love to the whole community.



CATFISH

You can see it in the people who gather there, some to work, others to hang-out. You can hear it in the way Sno talks passionately about feeding people. And holy crap, you can taste it in the food.

I want to start with the catfish because even this heathen knows that Lent is big around Dubuque. Lent comes later than usual this year, so you have to promise me you won’t forget about the fried catfish at Shugga’s Soul Cafe. Imagine every fish fry you’ve ever been to. Got them in your head? Good. Enjoy these memories one last time and then forget all about them. You don’t need them. Shugga’s is going to provide your fried fish from now on, and you’re better for it. You’re welcome. We’re talking about that good cornmeal bread-ing, seasoned and spiced just enough and to absolute perfection. And it stays firmly together without flaking until it gets to your mouth. No tartar sauce or cocktail sauce needed. At all. Moist and flavorful throughout. You can get a few filets for yourself or orders of 10 for the whole family. The wings work that way, too.

Oh, ho-ho-ho, the wings. Some of the best fried chicken I’ve had in a long time, my friends. And in case you forgot, I’m not talking about the drumstick or thigh here. I’m talking about the wing. The part of the chicken we usually have to toss liberally in sauce and dip in salad dressing before we can enjoy them. Those fried wings were some of the best fried chicken I’ve had, period. Afraid of fried chicken? I get it. I’m trying to eat healthier myself. Baked wings are available, too.

Oh! Sauce! Everybody’s heard about hot sauce, but have you heard of mild sauce? It’s a Chicago thing. Think tangy BBQ sauce with a personality of its own. Shugga’s has a

squeeze bottle of mild sauce right alongside the hot sauce. It’s good on chicken, fish, fries, and boot leather (probably). Hell, it’s even good on the mac and cheese.

Oh, my, the mac and cheese. I know. I’m all over the place here. I feel like I’m six years old talking about all the stuff Santa brought me. But oh my, the mac and cheese. Like many, when I think of mac and cheese, I think of what the Canadians call “Kraft Dinner.” It’s one of the first things I learned how to make myself, and everybody has a way to doctor it. I like a healthy squirt of yellow mustard in my Kraft Mac n’ Cheese. Anyway, when I think of mac and cheese, I don’t think of the baked casserole form of mac and cheese. I love a baked mac and cheese, but it just never scratches the itch like the creamy stuff from a saucepan. Or at least it never did until now. Because Shugga’s mac and cheese—which Sno calls “cheese and macaroni”—is baked, but it beats the hell out of almost any creamy stovetop mac I’ve experienced.

While I’m at it, I’d like to talk about another side Shugga’s offers: The yams. I’m so glad I opened my mouth to order these for the table. When they came out, Sno described it as “sweet potato pie in a bowl.” Yuuuuuup. To me, though, it’s a bowl of Thanksgiving, as yams are one of my favorite holiday sides.

Back to the entrées. I’m going to say three words here that will change your life. Jerk chicken Alfredo. You’re listening now, aren’t you? Oh, goodness. The smokiness and the spiciness of jerk chicken, right? But then that spicy heat is kind of alleviated to make way for the underlying flavors by the creaminess of the Alfredo sauce. All served on a bed of pasta. I’m about to welcome my second

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child into the world. Don't tell Annie, but I'm considering sneaking the name Jerk Chicken Alfredo Fairchild past her.

The sandwiches. Look, there's some stuff happening with Shugga's sandwiches that you're just going to have to experience for yourself. There's some amazing Italian beef (more of that Chicago influence), and a sandwich called (I kid you not) Jimmy Jordan Gym Shoe with all kinds of meat on it, including gyro meat. I mean it's just not fair.

Desserts! Desserts are homemade and awesome. I didn't get to try Sno's mother's banana pudding, but I'm definitely getting it next time I'm there and it's available. I did get to try the butter rum pound cake. And now I know how I'm going to die: From eating too much butter rum pound cake. Butter rum is one of my favorite flavors anyway. Throw that flavor in a pound cake? Yup, it's going to kill me.

Every bite was incredible and has given me some serious cravings ever since. Get your silly little butt to Shugga's Soul Cafe if you haven't already. And if you have, it's probably about time you went back, isn't it? ■



Shugga's Soul Cafe
1220 IOWA ST, DUBUQUE, IA
563-845-0018

Hours: Mon-Fri: 11 AM-11 PM;
Sat-Sun: 11 AM-1 AM (Closed early if slow)

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