



SOUL FOOD "SO GOOD IT'LL MAKE YOU WANNA SLAP YO MAMA"

— STORY BY STEVEN SAWADA • PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

have obsessed over Papa's Soul Food for nearly three years now. One day, when he ran his firecracker red BBQ cart on 7th Avenue and Polk Street, I ate three meals there.

These were big, heaping plates stacked with hearty servings of (forgive the cliché) "stick to your ribs" soul food. At lunch, I coaxed my coworker into grabbing me a stack of gooey BBQ ribs, a side of the BEST macaroni and cheese you'll ever eat (one of Papa's best selling items), and a large dollop of potato salad.

At that point I was relatively new to the cuisine. I had never seen, smelled, let alone tasted black eyed peas or collard greens. I didn't know what a black eyed pea was! But I got a quick education at dinner. Tender, runny, smoke-infused (we're talking real smoke, none of that liquid junk) pulled pork, tangy collard greens and peppery black eyed peas and rice gushed down my pipes as if I were a frat boy executing my best beer bong. But it didn't stop there. I made sure to grab a Jamaican jerk chicken sandwich for later. It was seasoned so perfectly it was as if all the greatest spices from the East were rubbed on that chicken thigh.

***'I just like the idea of having that little neighborhood joint that I used to go to when I was living down South... without waiting in the long lines, without feeling like you didn't dress up good enough to go in there.'* — Papa**

And that was how my obsession with Papa's soul food started. On a different yet equally gluttonous day, I didn't even wait to get home. I pulled over on the side of the road to start eating. "Oh yeah, the smell gets to you," Papa says as he sits back in his green plastic chair after graciously handing me two slices of Wonder Bread to go with my meal. "I still have problems when I eat it. Sometimes I forget to breathe."

Inside the new Soul Food Kitchen, the perfume of clothes-staining BBQ sauce, smoked pork and fried catfish fills the air. This new, permanent location sits unassuming on 11th Avenue, camouflaged from the street behind a few trees, book-ended by a laundromat and corner market.

The 600-square-foot space looks more like a waiting room in a doctor's office than a restaurant. Best suited for take-out, the only place to sit or eat inside is a long, vinyl-covered bench. A refrigerated display case full of desserts such as

sweet potato pie and peach cobbler sits next to a Formica counter, separating the kitchen from the small waiting area. Outside, plastic chairs and tables offer a quaint seating area that should prove popular in summer.

After working for nine years in other Eugene restaurants including Café Zenon, Adam's Place, The Oregon Electric Station, and (believe it or not) West Brothers BBQ, the lunch cart was Papa's first step to realizing his dream of owning a restaurant where he could create and serve his own unique dishes. "I remember my first day in the cart," he said. "It was one of my happiest days, and I made a whopping \$36. And I was out there all day long! If it wasn't for my family I probably wouldn't have made that."

After spending a brief period cooking in the Southern U.S. and Jamaica, Papa started his career in Eugene as a line cook. "I worked my way up into the ranks until I could get as far as they'll let me get," he said. "You put out good food, but you get left in the mix."

Staring out at the passing cars, he paused for a bit to reflect and explain his statement. "I've suffered racism in the ranks of cooking here in town. One of the chefs that I worked for was taking his dad in for a tour around the place, and he actually looked at me and



Papa & his son D'angelo

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