



Delacata owners Stephen & Colleen Sheehan

PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

A Delacata Situation

Cooking up catfish all over Eugene

The first thing you notice approaching the shiny black cart — located like a homing device for Southern food lovers at its standing gig at Ninkasi's tasting room patio, its permanent lunchtime location on 8th and Olive or its late night set up near UO — is the image of a catfish stenciled on the side. The catfish is not only the token of Delacata, but once fried and served up with cheddar jalepeño hushpuppies and a cilantro lime coleslaw, it's one of the best things on the menu. You'll notice immediately the light, fresh flavor of the fish that as a Pacific Northwesterner you may have come to regard as

a stank, fishy meal. "Local catfish tastes like mud," owner and Tupelo native Stephen Sheehan says.

While Delacata otherwise serves local ingredients, its catfish comes in straight from Mississippi, the catfish capital of the world. Like all its fried fare, Delacata fries the fish in peanut oil, which gives it that notable moist, flaky texture with just a hint of a nutty flavor. Not a fan of fried? Worry not. Sheehan also serves it up smoked, mixed in a delectable paté or atop a bed of fresh greens and homemade pickled cucumber.

Those not interested in the catfish have scores of other options, including such Southern staples as cajun fried

shrimp over cheesy garlic grits or a fried chicken kabob, a tight stack of chicken and vegetables speared on a skewer and fried up to golden, tender perfection. Skewers come with rosemary sea salt fries and what may be the best collard greens this side — and perhaps the other — of the Mississipp. Cheesy gravy fries or deep-fried dill pickle chips are just what the doctor ordered after a night of partying.

The hushpuppies alone are a work of art and can be upgraded to stuffed puppies: the old standard with a lil' smokie stuffed right inside. The seasons and the weather dictate daily specials like the fried green tomatoes or the fried shrimp BLT po' boy. When it comes time for dipping, Sheehan's wife and co-owner Colleen makes a selection of sauces fresh daily, including chipotle or dill aioli and the hot sauce of the day.

Delacata won its place on the Ninkasi patio after an unconventional audition: Sheehan cooked catfish on his camping stove with a cast iron skillet at Ninkasi, oil splatting his business suit. "They're all thinking I'm crazy," Sheehan remembers, "and I'm like, 'Just wait for the food!'"

Regular patrons are waiting for the new food Sheehan plans to roll out: deep-fried cheesecake (an amazing hot-cold party for the mouth), more sandwiches and salads, "true" red beans and rice, and mushroom-based dishes in the fall.

As if the Delacata power opening in three strategic locations isn't enough — and it isn't — the explosion will continue when Sheehan and company add a location in the atrium of Broadway Plaza in November which will include coffee and pastries from Eugene City Bakery. Meanwhile, he plans to keep the 8th and Olive location open and continue the campus and Ninkasi vending. On top of the exceptional food filling a neglected niche in the northwest, Delacata is succeeding in large part due to Sheehan's friendly insistence on samples and his crew, who he repeatedly describes as "the best."

A meal eaten at the Delacata food cart feels like a cookout with some of your oldest and dearest friends. You'd be hard-pressed to find nicer people, a more welcoming atmosphere or a better piece of fried catfish in this town. And if it's food and cooking you want to talk about, you might as well plan to spend the whole day. **EW**



Fried Chicken Kabob



Smoked Catfish Salad



Cheesy Gravy Fries

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