

In the Heart of The Queen City

This restaurant nourishes customers and revitalization.



PHOTOGRAPHS: J. SAVAGE GIBSON

Before James Bazzelle opened his now well-known Mert's Heart and Soul in uptown Charlotte, he demonstrated the flair for business that has made him such a success.

He picked up the phone when he read a reporter's complaint about not being able to buy even a candy bar within Charlotte's desolate city streets. He urged the journalist to come to Georgia on Tryon, the restaurant he then owned on the corner of Tryon and Ninth Streets. Then James rushed out to stock up on candy bars, leaving his wife, Renée, in charge of the restaurant's fried chicken, greens, and signature cornbread. The reporter bit, and James won a story about the place that he and Renée started with a \$9,000 loan, elbow grease, and prayers.

Banking on Location

"At the time," James notes, "Bank of America was being built right across



top: Mert's Heart and Soul became one of the first businesses in revitalized uptown Charlotte. above: James and Renée work as a team and regularly donate food to charitable organizations.

from us." So he told the reporter that he hoped the bank's then chairman, Hugh McColl, would not "forget about the little people." After reading the article, the banking mogul dropped by. "From that time on," James says, "Mr. McColl would come in regularly. He still pops in.

Once you meet him, he never forgets your name. And if he can help you, he's going to."


Although the Bazzelles gained customers and made great friends at their first restaurant, the building that housed Georgia on Tryon inspired no loyalty. "The ceiling was about to fall in," James says. About that time, another Bank of America executive asked if they'd be interested in relocating. That's how the couple wound up at 214 North College Street—and as part of Hugh McColl's plan to reinvent uptown Charlotte.

Moving Uptown

"I think it's good for the city for us to be here," says James. "It's important for people to see that there are minorities who own businesses and for minority children to see minorities owning businesses."

With the move, the Bazzelles decided to change the restaurant's name. A

Portraits. one of the necessities of life!



Sam Gray

Portrait of Ivey
Charlotte, NC

919.781.7501
www.samgrayportraits.com

Oil on Linen

friend suggested "Heart and Soul" to describe the Southern and Low-country comfort food that draws construction workers, executives, and performance patrons.

The couple added Mert to the name to honor the memory of a friend. "Myrtle Lockheart was a customer at our other restaurant," explains Renée. "A sweet, funny lady in her seventies, she inspired everyone around her with her giving nature and laughter." James and Renée grow quiet as they remember their friend. "She was a believer, so we know she's in a good place," continues Renée. In some ways, that sentiment perfectly describes this restaurant and the heart and soul of the couple who created it.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

Happening Place

Mert's Heart and Soul offers lunch daily, Sunday brunch, and dinner Wednesday through Sunday (and on other nights, depending on events and activities in uptown Charlotte). Call (704) 342-4222 for hours, or visit www.mertsheartandsoul.com.

Twice a month, Mert's hosts "Uptown Saturday Nite," an open-mike showcase for original music and poetry. See www.motifentertainment.com for a schedule of events.



"Most everyone who leaves here tells us, 'That's the world's best cornbread,'" says James.

44th Annual



March 3-7, 2004
Charlotte Merchandise Mart

DON'T MISS
This Year's

Southern Living
GARDENING SCHOOL

at the show's
Great Garden Stage

Sat., March 6
11:00, 1:00, 3:00 and 5:00

Sun., March 7
1:00 and 3:00

Admission: \$9.00 at the door, \$7.50 in advance
For more information visit
www.SouthernSpringHomeandGardenShow.com
or call 1-800-849-0248.