

Sweet Tea & Grits

Raleigh's Betsy Hunt found the answers to her midlife crisis within her memorable Southern background.

A few years ago, Betsy Hunt showed all the telltale signs of a midlife crisis. She'd amicably ended her marriage of more than 20 years. Her two sons were on their own. She suffered battle fatigue from working with organizations for battered women, rape survivors, and people living with AIDS.

As she reflected on her five decades of life, she asked, "What's next?" That soul search led to her Southern identity.

"I realized that things in the past that had shaped me were really important," explains the Raleigh native as she sips a cup of coffee and peers through a window. Bustling sidewalk traffic in the



city's downtown historic district passes by. Her eyes sparkle as she ponders a childhood memory. "I remembered the little grocery store just a few blocks from my home," she says. "[The owner] Mr. White would give out Red Hots. I wanted to recapture a little bit of that and what I loved about the old South."

Her ruminating led to the creation of Sweet Tea & Grits, Betsy's City Market crafts gallery and shop, featuring all



ABOVE: Betsy Hunt created Sweet Tea & Grits as a crafts gallery and shop. ABOVE, LEFT: Roscoe King (left) and Alex Gupton take a break at the popular downtown spot.

things Southern. The move required bravery, considering that her sole retail experience—as a sales clerk—had occurred decades ago. For most of her life, she'd been a housewife, mother, and volunteer coordinator.

"Now I'm basically Mr. White," says Betsy with a laugh.

Sit a Spell

The image of a kindly grocer amid a folksy haven fits, even if Betsy's creation resides just a stone's throw away from Exploris Center, one of Raleigh's most modern facilities.

As she relaxes in one of Sweet Tea & Grits' comfortable chairs, Betsy warmly



greet customers, many by name. To each, she flashes the toothsome smile that once helped her capture the title of Miss Cary. A gracious Southern hostess, she provides visitors with a peaceful, friendly interlude.

"If they're having a stressed-out day, we want people to feel they can come

here, have a cup of coffee, and chat," she says. "We ask them how they're doing, what's going on in their lives. We have comfort food and herbal soaps and candles that give off a nice aroma."

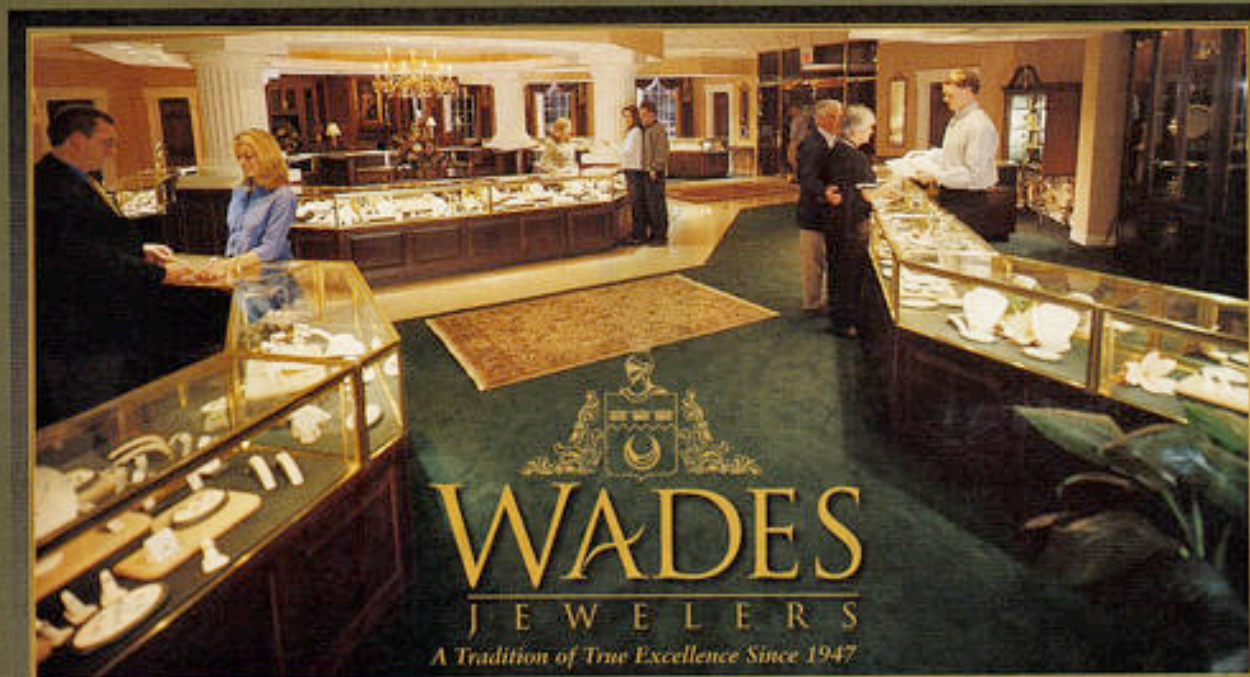
Arts and crafts, books by Southern authors, food such as Immaculate Consumption cookies, music, jewelry, and

gift items—all with a regional bent—make colorful, eclectic displays throughout the store. The gourmet coffee bar, smoothies, and sandwich and dessert list elevate Sweet Tea & Grits to a favorite gathering place. And, yes, sweet tea is always available—but you have to take the packaged grits home to

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FAR LEFT: A pot from noted artist Dan Finch represents the regional arts featured here. LEFT: Regulars Jeff Theriault (left), Tom Bauso, and Sandra Simpson chitchat with Betsy.

relish that particular Southern delicacy.

"The sandwiches are actually named after people from my childhood," Betsy says. The pimiento cheese "Woody Hayes" represents her father, a local musician and bandleader. A vegetarian delight called "Daddy Crocker" is named for Betsy's grandfather. And a tasty ham-and-Swiss on rye honors Betsy's Aunt Dolly.

Flavored milk shakes, too, receive a quintessential Southern touch. "The wild cherry is 'Miss Scarlett,' and the double chocolate decadence is 'Rhett Butler,'" Betsy says chuckling.

Home-Grown Talent

A serious side exists to Betsy's Sweet Tea & Grits. Among the \$5 hand-painted magnets and other less expensive items, she offers space for regional artists, mostly North Carolinians, intent on showcasing and selling their work.

For the curious, Betsy and her staff provide insider information about the creators of the pottery, paintings, clay and copper garden ornaments, and other art. Craftspeople range from notables such as Bailey potter Dan Finch to little-known emerging artists.

All in all, Betsy's quite pleased she suffered that midlife crisis, given how she answered the "What's next?" question. As it turns out, her dilemma wasn't anything a little Sweet Tea & Grits couldn't fix. Bless her heart.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

Y'ALL COME

Sweet Tea & Grits is at 307 Blake Street, City Market in Raleigh. It's open daily—early with coffee and bagels in the morning, and late on weekends with dessert, after-dinner espresso or cappuccino, and live music. Call (919) 834-7752, e-mail teangrits@aol.com, or visit www.sweetteaandgrits.com.

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