

Soul to soul: Lord, have mercy—your mama's down-home cooking has gone gourmet

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Like any soul-food restaurant worth its weight in red beans and rice, Soul Folks Cafe feels more like someone's living room than someone's place of business. The Los Angeles eatery just won't let you rush--not through its warehouse-style restaurant filled with eclectic artwork and comfy furniture; not through owner/ chef Yealang Smith's menu, with selections such as "James Brown's 'Hit Me Two Times' Fried Chicken;" and certainly not through a meal.

Soul Folks is one of a number of gourmet soul-food establishments cropping up nationwide. It's a trend that makes sense for anyone who grew up on cornbread, fried chicken, seafood gumbo, catfish, and macaroni and cheese--and who's now looking for the equivalent in a gourmet restaurant. "Anyone born in America has eaten soul food at some point," explains Smith, 39, who started Soul Folks in 1996, moved into her 10,000-square-foot location in March 2004, and now averages up to \$30,000 monthly in sales. "The high-end chefs are now taking soul food and translating it into their own creations."

New York City international investment and commercial real estate consultant Andrew A. Pittel has seen evidence of the trend in Harlem, where upscale businesses are helping to revitalize formerly impoverished neighborhoods. "I don't know that it's a trend--it's a way of life," says Pittel, noting the success of longtime Harlem soul-food icon Sylvia's. "Families are moving into Harlem and enjoying [it]."

The same is true in other cities, such as Detroit, says Frank Taylor, the 39-year-old founder and owner of Magnolia, an upscale soul-food restaurant in downtown Detroit. Launched in July 2004, Magnolia is expected to gross \$2.5 million annually. "It's comfort food," says Taylor, also proprietor of nearby Sweet Georgia Brown restaurant and Seldom Blues Jazz Restaurant and Supper Club. "It reminds you of your mom's or your grandmother's cooking."

Undoubtedly, eating soul food hearkens back to days when a meal meant not only nourishment, but also camaraderie, conversation and a collective "mmm." "The world is overworked. [My restaurant] should be a refuge for the spirit," says Smith, whose clientele has included comedian Martin Lawrence, actors Danny Glover and Sharon Stone, and hip-hop band Outkast, for whom she threw a Grammy soiree. "I want customers to experience bliss."