

Eighth Wonder of Mississippi?

by Mike Handley

Seeing no Visa sticker on the door and having all of two dollars in my wallet, I had to ask the tall moon-faced man in faded Carhartts, who'd just shaken my hand: "Y'all take plastic?"

"No, but we take green," smiled Jeffery Vassel. "Green's always welcome. And the gas station down there has a cash machine."

I'd seen the station because that's where I'd executed a 180 to return to Brittani's Restaurant. Greenwood, Miss.-bound passersby have less than a minute to notice the small banner above the portico. Those going north on Hwy. 49 E, toward Clarksdale, might miss it altogether, which is a shame.

Fortunately, our friends Steve and Sandra Davies, who were visiting from the U.K., not only had green, but Steve also wasn't completely turned off by the chicken on the steam table. He doesn't do poultry, so he ordered the \$8 fish plate, despite the forewarned 15-minute wait.

Inside the bottom portion of this cafe-below-a-home in the flyspeck town of Minter City is a single room with several tables, a small counter supporting a cash register and a steam table with the same food you'd see in hundreds of similar establishments, except the others don't have Lula Vassel in the kitchen.

You'd think that opening a can of lima beans, tossing in a strip of bacon or ham hock, and adding pinches of salt and (usually too much) pepper would be Waffle House science — a dish that tastes essentially identical whenever and wherever it's on the menu. Well,

it isn't. Lula Vassel's limas, and by "limas" I mean the green ones (not the big white ones, which are butter beans), are the kind you'd want for a last meal in Parchman Prison, which is so close, by the way, they might not require reheating.

Frying chicken is far more complicated, or some cooks make it so. I didn't ask Miz Lula if she double-battered hers, if she marinaded, injected or added spices to the egg or buttermilk stage. I didn't try to pry from her the nature of the oil she used, so it could've been anything from pure lard to canola. Doing so just felt wrong, like asking Van Gough how he mixed his blues and yellows, like asking the late Bobby Blue Bland what Dranoed his pipes and gave him the signature hawking rasp that made women swoon.

All I can say is it might have been her pressurized skillet. Maybe. Because I saw one. Not that it matters if she'd cooked up a yard bird in a No. 2 washtub. I'm just sayin ...

Lula's fried chicken should be served on the hem of Jesus's robe rather than out of a styrofoam box. It's so good that I kept glancing at the little tray on the steam table, hoping to be hungry again, ready to yank pieces out of the grasp of strangers, to snatch up the remaining thighs and legs so that I could eat them later, again and again, and plant the bones with the hope they'd grow a chicken bush.

The offerings on the table included chicken baked and fried, limas, green beans, "bacon gravy," mashed potatoes with just the right hint of black pepper, hoecakes (when's the last time you saw THOSE in a restaurant) and cabbage. There might've been a stew.

Meat-and-threes are \$6.90. Or you can order burgers and barbecue sandwiches, with or without big crinkle cut French fries. The helpings are generous, too. Steve's fish plate could've easily fed an 18-year-old, which is to say three normal people.

You can even opt for squirrel-sized dill pickles or pigs feet as appetizers, or a piece of cake — store-bought, I think — for dessert.

Sweet tea and lemonade fill the two big drink dispensers, and the less desirable unsweet (this is the Deep South, after all) is available in a pitcher. There are a few soft drink cans in a case, too, for those who simply must have Coke.

It's a family business. Brittani is the daughter with the ladles; Lula the cook; and Jeffery, who built the place from scratch, is now a former paper mill employee on disability. It's his job to entertain his bright-eyed granddaughter, which might explain the bag of Skittles tucked deep within his right hand.

NOTE: Brittani's Restaurant, 28111 Hwy. 49 EN, Minter City, MS 38944

