

RESTAURANTS

Papa loves Mambo's - so will everyone else

BY RENÉE SKOGLUND
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Ask Reece Rainwater, owner of Mambo's, a new take-out restaurant in Livonia, what's in any of his mouth-watering Louisiana-style barbecue dishes, and he has a one-word answer: "Secret!"

Well, Rainwater deserves to keep his secrets, especially when he can bring your taste buds to their knees with his deep-fried jumbo shrimp, Cajun sausage, BBQ ribs and real, honest-to-goodness homemade gumbo. Then there's the daily specials, which include Wally Gator, Beer-Boiled Crawfish and frog legs.

"If you come to this carryout, you get everything fresh," he said, removing a jumbo shrimp from the refrigerator and dangling it in front of me between his thumb and forefinger. "I opened this place because I got sick of junk food, all that pre-



Orders: Livonia resident Steve Ferrier picks up a phone-in order from chef Reece Rainwater.



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Mambo's
Address: 15385 Merriman, Livonia (off Five Mile Road)
Phone: (734) 524-5670
Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday
Menu: Louisiana-style barbecue: Ribs, chicken, shrimp, catfish, clams, sausage, gumbo and an assortment of sides. Specials on Thursday, Friday and Saturday
Prices: Dinners, \$7.45-\$10.50; snacks, \$5.45-6.99; sandwiches, \$5.25-\$6.55
Extras: Children 10 and under eat free; Delivery on the weekends

packaged, pre-pressed, pre-manufactured stuff." Rainwater, who has 25 years of experience as a chef, threw a slab of ribs on the grill and splashed it with a ladle of "secret" liquid. He fanned the aroma in my direction. My taste buds got ready to kneel.

"One of the things you don't do is load the ribs with a bunch of sugar and goo," he said. "You can't load them with a bunch of Open Pit and call it barbecue. I'm not giving you the

razmatazz. Our food is very good. I take a lot of pride in what I do."

Okay, so Rainwater talks the good talk, but can he make good on his claim? He can.

Admittedly, I didn't taste everything, but I did get to sample the shrimp, ribs, chicken, sausage, red beans and three kinds of gumbo. Let's start with the gumbo, which is the same soup but with either lobster, crab or shrimp added. I thought it had a nice smoky taste with just enough spice to claim a Cajun heritage. The ribs were succulent, the shrimp crisp, the chicken tender, and the sausage delicious, especially when it was topped by some hot yellow pepper slices.

"The taste is just sensual," said Rainwater about the sausage-pepper pairing. "It's a Cajun dreamboat."

Building customers

Mambo's location, in the shadow of a Rite Aids Drugs, makes it easy to miss. However, people are beginning to find it, and Rainwater and manager David Kwiatkowski are working hard to make sure customers keep coming back.

"You've got to be creative when it comes to lure people are not used to. Louisiana barbecue is not standard fare in the Livonia area," said Kwiatkowski, who claims the Wally Gator tastes like duck or chicken, depending if you bite into a dark or white chunk of gator.

"We get a lot of people coming in and asking for it," he said.

But are suburbanites really ready for a take-out of Lobster Voodoo, which takes its name from the spicy Cajun sauce produced by the Voodoo Lounge in New Orleans? Rainwater seems to think so. His version is tame enough for everyone.

"People get the impression that Cajun food is very hot and they're not going to enjoy it. Uh, uh, it's not."

In fact, nothing I tasted at Mambo's was overly spicy. Sure, it had some "kick" to it, but the true flavor of the food was always there.

Next time, I'm going to tap into my French-Canadian heritage and sample the frog legs. Rainwater claims they're "the size of small chicken legs."

You do get your money's worth at Mambo's. Dinners average \$7.45 to \$10.50, and the Mambo's Famous Combo —

shrimp ribs, perch and sausage for two — costs \$14.95. All dinners include fries or rice, slaw and cornbread. Also, each child, age 10 and under, who comes in with a parent eats free.

Rainwater has no plans to make Mambo's a dining-in spot. He likes it just as it is — a place with cheerful Cajun music, a

kitchen full of great aromas, friendly service and a menu just big enough to keep customers happy.

"I think people can enjoy themselves in the comfort of their own home rather than go somewhere with illusions of grandeur and be disappointed," he said.



STAFF PHOTO BY JIM JACOBELLI

Good stuff: Mambo's chef, Reece Rainwater, prepares the ribs for an order of Mambo's Combo, a popular dinner-for-two item.

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