



DUKE'S BREAKS LOOSE

Vonda McPherson's recipe for a Jazz landmark

By Mark Stewart

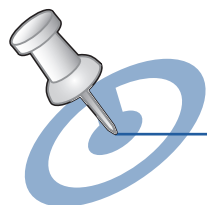
Suburban foodies have known about Newark's hidden-gem restaurants for a while now. What has caught them by surprise about Duke's Southern Table, the city's newest culinary hot spot, is that they can't get in on a whim. A table at Duke's on the weekend now requires a reservation a week or more in advance.

"Friday and Saturday night, and Sunday brunch, we are packed," says owner Vonda McPherson. "Less than five percent of our customers are walk-ins. Most of our reservations come in a week in advance and, for holidays, three to four weeks ahead."

Live jazz (Friday through Sunday), specialty drinks and a relatively healthy approach to authentic Southern cooking have proved to be an unbeatable combination for Duke's. This is McPherson's fourth restaurant (Vonda's Kitchen is an iconic Brick City breakfast and lunch stop) and her devoted following has followed her to Clinton Street, a block north of the Prudential Center.



Photography by Daryl Stone



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Weekdays are a bit tamer, but still busy. Duke's does a steady lunch business, and its private room, which accommodates 25 to 30, is often used for private parties and business meetings. Weeknights before a concert at NJPAC or The Rock, the crowds can get a little crazy.

"That's where we have the greatest challenge," McPherson says. "The weekend folks know me and know the restaurant. They meet with friends, relax, have fun and soak up the atmosphere. Before a Stevie Wonder concert, everyone wants to show up at 7:00, eat fast and get to the venue. That messes with the timing of what we do, because the people who are here for dinner want a little bit slower pace."

Staffing has been another challenge, she admits. Finding the right people for the personality of the restaurant isn't easy. A few have been naturals, while others require a month or more of training.

"Always having everything balanced and working smoothly, it can be tough," she says. "Getting the food, the ambience, the total customer experience just right is so important to what I'm doing here. Everyone needs to be where they need to be, doing what they need to do."

Although Duke's is a reflection of McPherson's personality, and the jazz gets the room jumping, the food is always the star. The menu features Southern standards, including Maryland crab cakes with ginger grits, smothered turkey wings, red wine oxtail stew, blueberry spare ribs and slow-roasted chicken. On weekends, it's all Duke's can do to keep its four top-sellers from running out: North Carolina catfish, sautéed jumbo lump crab jumbalaya, brown sugar salmon and short ribs. Not surprisingly, the top-seller off the specialty drink menu is the Vonda's Kitchen, a refreshing combination of Tanqueray, fresh cucumber, fresh-squeezed ginger, agave and a splash of prosecco.

McPherson claims she is not surprised at the success Duke's has enjoyed in its first half-year ("My people follow me"). However, she admits to being bewildered at how deeply attached her customers have become in such a short time ("They deeply love this place"). She is proud to have received so many positive reviews, including making *New Jersey Monthly's* Top 20 new restaurants after being open for just a couple of months. And pleased that Duke's has become something of a drop-in spot for music celebrities coming through town.



Among the notable jazz musicians who have already graced the Duke's stage are Pat Van Dyke, Lezlie Harrison, Lance Bryant, Dakota McLeod and Branford Hayes. "They tore up the room," McPherson smiles. "Going forward, I want to keep bringing in bigger and bigger names to make this a jazz landmark. I'm realizing that this is an amazing place. I get the feeling it could be here for 20 years."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Duke's is open Tuesday through Saturday for lunch and dinner, and Sunday for a jazz brunch and dinner. Hours of operation and more information is available at DukesNewark.com. Reservations are highly recommended through Open Table or by calling the restaurant at (862) 763-5757. Secure parking is available across the street and next door. 