

Dinner at Sylvia's

Erika Munson

*SYLVIA'S ***§. The most renowned soul food restaurant in Harlem has expanded into a second dining room and during warmer months into an open patio next door. Southern-fried and smothered chicken are stand-outs, as are dumplings, candied yams and dessert puddings. Luncheonette-like atmosphere. Southern M-Sa. 7:30-10 pm; Su. 1-7 pm.*

348 Lenox Ave. (126th-127th Sts) 996-0660.

*Richard Saul Wurman
New York City Access
Restaurant Guide*

I WAS IN A SCHOOL BUS WITH FIFTY OTHER ADULTS headed down to Harlem. At the time, we didn't know our destination. The invitation had read only, "April Fool's Day Party." Our host, the former bishop, was known for his generosity and love of good times, so the turnout had been high. The mysteriousness of the affair, combined with the capacity of a yellow school bus to bring out the fifth grader in anyone, succeeded in creating a festive atmosphere. There we were, all dressed up in our sacrament meeting clothes, giggling, flirting, talking too loud.

As I looked out the window, affluent middle Westchester County became lower Westchester. I was reminded that the Bronx was fast approaching. It was getting dark and started to rain as we went through Yonkers. From the bus the town looked grim, crowded, as unbeautiful as ever. Only the raceway stood out—a horsetrack always lighted at night. It may have been conceived as sleek and modern in the 1950s, but now the hospital-green raceway was out of date and down around the edges.

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The Dewey Thruway became the Deagan Expressway, and we entered the city of New York. When the bus took the 155th Street exit, jokes began to fly. Were we touring New York's most dangerous neighborhoods? White faces disappeared from the streets. The bus came to a stop, and there were more jokes—"Please don't leave us here alone, bus driver!" Letters over the door of the building beside us read, "Sylvia's Soul Food Restaurant." Apparently we had arrived.

Once outside the bus, we knew we were in Harlem, but that is all we knew. The storefronts were crowded and shabby but pulsing with a persistent neon energy. The sidewalks were dirty, but pedestrians seemed to be moving on to their evening destinations with purpose. Was this a good place to be or not? We were not equipped to make the call. Life was happening here in a language different from our own.

Inside the restaurant we tripped over ourselves into a small front room, then squeezed past a busy lunch counter and some crowded tables into a banquet room with long tables. A gaudy floral mural, pictures of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and framed restaurant reviews decorated the walls. Tonight someone had hung a sign that read, "Welcome Latter-day Saints." I was delighted to know that someone at Sylvia's was glad to see us. It would be easy, I thought, for the management to resent us: a busload of whites come to gawk.

I grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the sixties and seventies. Civil rights, equal rights, and human rights were foremost in that academic community's consciousness. But the heart cannot always embrace what the mind will conceive, and amidst the excitement and idealism of that era was plenty of hypocrisy for a child to observe. Sincere soldiers of civil rights were often supported by the lazy postures of the radical chic—quick to shift their allegiance when the wind changed. In my progressive grade school, we studied the teachings of Dr. King and Malcolm X, learned all the verses to the African-American national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Song." But each class of forty had only two or three black children. They lived in Roxbury, at the end of the subway's red line—and the earth—as far as I was concerned.

So during this period known for its absolutes—justice, freedom, equality—I became comfortable with the gray world of contradictions. And what better place for me, then, than the LDS Church? While I admitted that my church practiced a blatantly racist policy, I did feel that someone was listening when I would cry about the situation to my bishop. I did not feel alone in the Cambridge Ward. We were all suffering through this nonsense. "Wait. Be faithful," we heard. Then, on the same day that Alexander Solzhenitsyn addressed a Harvard commencement crowd about the decadence and immorality of the West,

the word came from Salt Lake City that finally everyone (well, half of everyone) could hold the priesthood.

At Sylvia's, we arranged ourselves just as we would on the basketball court for a ward dinner: young marrieds, old marrieds, a smattering of singles, and an occasional nonmember being anxiously hovered over by a member host. Their introduction to black culture was via another culture that perhaps they knew just as little about. As the water pitchers followed the corn bread, fried chicken, and greens, I felt sorry for the nonmembers. Weren't they dying for a beer?

Thirsty gentiles notwithstanding, most of us were in high spirits. The men forced a bravado to prove they were at ease in what for them was unfamiliar territory. The women smiled with round, wide eyes—amazed to be in this place. Betsy, who was sitting next to me, leaned over and said softly, "You know, I think this is really great. I tell you, times have changed. A lot of ward members were pretty upset about the priesthood revelation."

It was the elder's quorum president's birthday, and three women burst out of the kitchen's double doors with a cake, singing "Happy Birthday" with a lively syncopation that the rest of us couldn't follow. We all sang along anyway, a sluggish chorus to the waitresses' bright counterpoint.

After dinner the owner, Van Wood, came out to greet his guests. To my astonishment, I learned he was a Latter-day Saint, a member of my own ward. I hadn't ever noticed him at meetings, but someone told me his was the fancy silver car I had seen occasionally in the church parking lot. He mingled now, shaking hands and accepting compliments. He told us that he had started with his mother Sylvia's lunch counter, gradually adding rooms to create the Harlem landmark it was today. At some point, a tall, thin man dressed in a brightly colored African-style robe and hat joined the group. He had a Muslim clerical look about him, and Van made a point of introducing him to our bishop. They left Van and walked over to a quiet corner where, I supposed, they talked shop.

We stuffed ourselves with pecan and sweet potato pie. When the meal was over, we all clustered into the front room again to wait for the bus. I sat down next to my friend Debbi, who looked tired. She and her husband had recently moved from BYU to New York with their three young sons. They probably couldn't afford many nights out. I think Sylvia's had disappointed Debbi. Had she been hoping for an evening that would include continental cuisine or a Broadway show? Sitting there in her pastel dress, she looked wilted. She hadn't absorbed any of the energy.

I fell asleep on the bus and in no time was back in the other world of Scarsdale. The fine houses waited quietly on their green lawns, strong against the rain.

Back and forth. That is what the night at Sylvia's was to me. The experience wasn't wrong, but it wasn't entirely right either. I admired our hosts, a former bishop and high priest group leader, for showing us more about Van Wood than his fancy car. I was proud to have a bishop who would respectfully sit down with a Muslim clergyman. But I was disappointed that, as a group, we were treating the event as an April Fool's joke—white folks from Westchester slumming in Harlem. Some ward members considered the magnificent food at Sylvia's greasy and second rate. Not many guests that night recognized soul food as an art created by a people who could only get the scraps.

Well, I can't ask everyone to have the proper liberal sensibilities I received in Cambridge. But I do look forward to the time when there will be no back and forth. "We" will not welcome "them," but you and I will be working on each other's salvation. The white, middle-class American culture that currently presides over the Church is, after all, only temporary. My night at Sylvia's, with all its contradictions, reminded me that a sumptuous feast awaits those who eagerly seek out the variety of human experience. So bring on the chitlins and the jello. Bring on the ribs and the tuna casserole. We will all be filled.