



EATONVILLE ON THE POTOMAC

by Thomas Head

ANDY SHALLAL owned several successful restaurants in Washington, D.C. and its suburbs, but he was troubled that his client base at the restaurants—almost 100 percent white—continued to be so different from the demographics of D.C., a city in which blacks make up about 55 percent of the population.

Shallal saw the opening of his restaurant Busboys and Poets, located in the U Street corridor, the historic center of black culture in the Capital, as a chance to rectify this imbalance. The name of the restaurant came from the life of Langston Hughes, who worked as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel in the 1930s before he became recognized as a poet. Shallal thinks of his restaurants as community centers as well as places to eat—Busboys and Poets includes a bookstore and a diverse program of cultural events.

But as popular as Busboys and Poets had become, it still did not fulfill Shallal's vision of an establishment where the racial balance reflected that of the community. When space became available in a

new building across the street from Busboys and Poets, he saw it as an opportunity to create a place equally appealing to blacks and whites.

Shallal had read Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He was aware that the novelist grew up in Eatonville, Florida, one of the first all-black towns formed after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. And he knew that D.C. played a part in Hurston's life. While she wrote and attended classes at Howard University, Hurston had worked as a maid and chauffeur to the local gentry.

So Eatonville the restaurant was born. From the very beginning, Shallal saw it as a way of paying respect to Hurston's enormous energy and dedication to her craft. It was also a way of demonstrating that Washington was an important literary center.

The restaurant was greeted by more than a little skepticism. Here was an Iraqi, who came to this country when he was 11 years old, starting a restaurant that paid homage to an African-American writer.

Here was a restaurant, named after an all-black town, serving a menu calculated to appeal to a black clientele. “For the first year,” Shallal says, “the question most frequently asked the servers was ‘Is the owner black?’”

“I wanted to incorporate the traditions of a community into a restaurant, and it took a while to get it right,” recalls Shallal. He was determined to make his African-American clientele feel that their traditions were being respected, not exploited. But that did not go as planned. He hired an opening chef who created a menu of gussied-up versions of the foods that Shallal had envisioned as the menu’s core. (Chef and owner parted ways before the restaurant even opened.)

By chef two, Shallal got it right. On chef Rusty Holman’s current menu, gumbo, fried green tomatoes, hushpuppies, catfish, grits, and collards take center stage. “Often the adjustments I made were as simple as keeping a bottle of hot sauce on the table,” Shallal says. “I didn’t realize it at first, but that seems to signal that African-Americans are welcome.”

“The choice of music, even the art on the walls,” Shallal says, “plays a part in getting the community to trust you.” He has organized a series of Food & Folklore dinners at the restaurant, evenings that pay homage to Hurston’s training as an anthropologist as well as her literary accomplishment. These have included an evening with Valerie Boyd, one of Hurston’s biographers, and a night with Camille Akeju, director of the Anacostia Community Museum. Scheduled for January, 2010, is an event with Annette Gordon-Reed, author of *The Hemingses of Monticello*.

Andy Shallal’s is determined that his restaurants be places in which community is as important as food. As an eleven-year-old Iraqi immigrant—with darker skin and curlier hair than most of his white classmates—he found it easier to identify as African American than as white. What’s more, his training as an artist played a part in forming his vision of an integrated life in which individual creativity and community, tradition and innovation, art and food—all play an important part. The success of his restaurants—particularly of Eatonville, which now has a clientele that nears 60 percent black—seems to show it’s a vision shared by many.

Tom Head is a Louisiana-born-and-bred food and travel writer based in Washington, D.C. Photos by Thomas Head.

JUST SHOOT ME

by Hanna Raskin

