THE SOUL OF ALASKA

Thirty-five years in, the Wyche family serves Southern comfort and soul food in our 49th state.

BY JULIA O'MALLEY

Roscoe Wyche III

A LITTLE BEFORE NOON MOST DAYS, IN a strip mall just outside the gates to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER) in Anchorage, Alaska, you can smell catfish frying.

It's lunchtime at Mama Carol's Soulfood Events and Catering, a family restaurant known until recently as Roscoe's. An example of the far reaches of Southern cuisine, they've been serving catfish, pulled-pork sandwiches, collard greens, and peach cobbler in this northern city since 1988.

Almost all the food Alaskans eat travels at least 1,500 miles north from Seattle to reach grocery store shelves and restaurant kitchens. Since Russians built the first non-Indigenous settlement about 250 years ago, the food culture here has been influenced by waves of newcomers. Whether they came from San Francisco looking for gold or from Manila to work in the salmon canneries or from Tulsa to work in the oil patch, all of them brought a longing for the flavors of home.

Anchorage's dining scene is now rich with restaurants that have opened to feed those cravings—from pancit to kimchi to African American soul food. Mama Carol's is an institution whose fan base is nearly as diverse as the city itself. Its regulars include Southern service members stationed at the base.

"When my military guys come in here, that's not with their family, they are like, 'Oh my gosh, this tastes like home,'" said Rosalyn Wyche, who recently took over running the restaurant from her brother, Roscoe Wyche III.

Mama Carol's is also beloved in Anchorage's Black community, which numbers about 15,000 citizens, or roughly five percent of the city's population.

On a fall morning, Rosalyn clicked open the front door lock to get ready for lunch customers. She also runs a beauty salon just across the street. Her phone constantly buzzes with texts from children, grandchildren, friends, and clients. Her family's restaurant has served three generations of diners who come there to connect to the foods they miss—and to each other.

"That's what soul food is all about, that homey feeling, that comforting mother's love, grandmother's love, of making things from scratch and putting it on the plate," she said.

Anchorage is Alaska's largest city, home to just under 300,000 people, hugged by the Chugach Range to the east and Cook Inlet to the west. Air

Photos by Nathaniel Wilder

Oxtails (l) and fried catfish (r) are two of Mama Carol's most popular offerings.

"We wanted the collard greens, we wanted the baby back ribs, we wanted the sweet potato pie, we wanted pound cake.... It was our way of trying to stay in touch with the South."

Force planes rumble daily out of the north. The restaurant, its sign hanging between a gas station and one of Anchorage's many legal weed shops, has a modest dining room with a few booths and tables. Its walls, painted red, are crowded with photos of famous visitors, including Rosa Parks, M. C. Hammer, Snoop Dogg, and George Clinton. There are also framed news stories from the local paper and articles about when Roscoe III was named a Lawry's Seasoned Salt spokes chef in the mid-1990s. (Lawry's, a seasoning with California origins but long associated with soul food, is also commonly eaten by Inupiat people indigenous to northern Alaska to flavor a cut of whale skin and blubber known as muktuk.)

As the weather turns cold and the mornings grow dark, Mama Carol's steam case glows invitingly next to the register. Food is mostly served cafeteria-style, so diners can customize plates with proteins like ribs or fried chicken and sides like green beans, macaroni and cheese, and mashed potatoes, reminiscent of a meat-and-three joint. Many customers come in military uniform, stopping in quickly and heading out with Styrofoam cartons that smell like warm cornbread and barbecue sauce.

ROSALYN AND ROSCOE III'S parents, Roscoe Wyche Jr. and Annie Carroll Wyche, were the first owners of the family restaurant. They had been high school sweethearts in Thomasville, Georgia. They brought their three children to Alaska in the late 1970s, when Roscoe Jr. was stationed at what is now JBER.

The family took over an existing restaurant in 1988 after Roscoe Jr. retired from twenty-six years of service, ending his career as the head of procurement for the base. Having a soul food

restaurant had been "a lifelong dream," of his father's, Roscoe III said, and the space near the base was a good opportunity. The Wyches also owned a beauty shop and a beauty supply store nearby that catered to the African American community. Roscoe Jr. and Roscoe III worked at the restaurant, and Annie, who everybody called "Miss Carol," worked at the beauty shop.

"My mom would get off at the salon and still go home and make pies and peach cobblers in the middle of the night," Rosalyn said.

The Wyche family has persevered through serious challenges over the years. They continued to operate the restaurant after the elder Wyches died, first Roscoe Jr. and then Annie. The restaurant was twice the victim of arson, once in the 1990s and more recently in 2021.

The business occupied five different locations over the years, each one offering a slightly different name and menu. This time, Rosalyn decided to change the name to honor their mother. Many of the recipes came from her side of the family.

"Now I'm going to infuse my mom in there, because that's where we got the sweet potato pies and the peach cobblers," Rosalyn said.

Anchorage is home to many small immigrant communities and a large indigenous population, with more than 100 languages spoken in its schools. That diversity shows in the restaurant's menu and clientele, Rosalyn said. Until the 2021 fire, Roscoe's occupied a former gyro shop, and it still offers gyros. The current base-adjacent location was formerly a Caribbean lunch counter, and you can still get plantains daily. On that morning in mid-November, a chef sliced a generous pernil in the kitchen, just as the first lunch customers lined up, chatting in Spanish.

"We do catering for church events, weddings, funerals," Rosalyn said. "We don't just deal with one culture; we deal with all cultures. It's kind of how Anchorage is."

Alaska's sheer distance from the South means that sourcing specialty items, like chitlins, can be tough, Rosalyn said. Scarcity necessitates some uniquely Alaskan substitutions, like Alaska-grown collard greens in the summertime and reindeer sausage in the gumbo. Though reindeer aren't native to Alaska, reindeer herding, a strategy for food security, began in Alaska over 100 years ago. Now a small amount of reindeer meat is added to pork sausage creating "reindeer dogs."

The restaurant holds a special place for many in Anchorage's Black community. Cal Williams, a scholar of Black history in Alaska, remembers Roscoe's in its earliest days as a tiny storefront with lots of regular customers. They may not have agreed on all the issues that came up in conversations, but they connected over food, he said.

"Like aromatherapy, there is a certain taste therapy—and sometimes your body tells you that you aren't going to be fully satisfied until you eat some sweet potato pie," Williams said.

Black Americans first came to Alaska in the mid-nineteenth century to work in the commercial whaling industry, he said. They were also part of the gold rush in the late 1800s. Black labor helped to build Alaska's railroads, as well as the highway that connects Alaska to the lower forty-eight. But Williams said the biggest driver of growth in the Alaska's Black population over the last 100 years has been the military.

There are few other restaurants in Anchorage where a diner can find soul food, and none with such a large menu or long history. Roscoe III sees his family's restaurant as a place where anyone, from any culture, can learn about and eat the kinds of food cooked for generations by Black families in his parents' home state of Georgia and throughout the South.

"Along with the Black community, Roscoe's food reaches out to everyone, and we invite them to

come in and enjoy our Southern cooking," he said.

When Anchorage attorney Rex Butler, a longtime regular customer, breezes through the door of the restaurant, he's usually looking for fried catfish or chicken, he said. He grew up in New Jersey but spent ten years in the South when he was in the Navy, which is where he had the opportunity to eat staples like gumbo, fried chicken and smothered pork chops. (People cooked that way in the Northeast, he said, but it just wasn't the same.) Roscoe's introduced him to oxtails, which he now orders regularly.

"It doesn't matter how long you've lived in Anchorage—and I've been up here for forty years—there is going to be a time when you want to taste Southern food," he said.

Marilyn Stewart-Richardson, originally from Alabama, was stationed in Anchorage when she was twenty-one.

"First off, I was beginning to think I was the only African American there. I was looking for others. I remember what my grandmother said as I was leaving Alabama for the first time: 'The first thing I want you to do is unite with a church,'" she said.

She joined New Hope Baptist Church, one of a half-dozen prominent Black churches in the city. And she found Roscoe's. "I've been coming ever since," she said.

For a time, Stewart-Robinson lived in a suburb of Anchorage and would drive fifteen miles to the little neighborhood where the restaurant was originally located. "When I would go there, I could honestly tell you I never ever had a bad meal," she said. "Miss Carol and Roscoe III's dad always talked to me like they had known me all my life."

Her favorite order now is ribs or catfish. The restaurant has always been a way for Alaskans to carry on their Southern heritage, she said.

"We wanted the collard greens, we wanted the baby back ribs, we wanted the sweet potato pie, the pound cake—we craved for that," she said. "It was our way of trying to stay in touch with the South."

Julia O'Malley, a third-generation Alaskan, lives, writes, and cooks in Anchorage. She is the author of The Whale and the Cupcake: Stories of Subsistence, Longing and Community in Alaska.

A cook slices smoked brisket;
OPPOSITE: Rosalyn Wyche