



Mac 'n' cheese, collard greens and jerk chicken egg rolls with ranch, sriracha and mango salsa dipping sauces
KATLYN McQUAID PHOTO FOR REDEYE

WORTH A TRIP

EGG ROLLS

Dream Cafe & Grille 748 W. 61st St. 773-891-5334

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Befitting its name, Dream Cafe is a reverie, or at least an oasis, of sorts in Englewood. The restaurant is surrounded by empty lots and boarded-up homes. Most of the restaurants within a mile radius are greasy spoons, hot dog and gyro shacks, or franchise fast food.

But according to managing partner Howard Bailey, Dream Cafe is aiming to be a different kind of beacon. "This is a spot where people can come and see someone like myself being successful in business in the community I live in," he said. "We can be an example to show people you don't just have to be an athlete or a rapper to make it, that this business represents something attainable for all." Brightly colored tables are painted with inspirational messages such as "life" and "dream" made by school kids from the Little Black Pearl, a nonprofit art and cultural center in Bronzeville. The chefs, led by Russell Moore, cook a mashup of southern, Caribbean and American soul food from scratch with produce grown in local gardens and hoop houses maintained by Growing Power, a national gardening nonprofit.

Some of that haul includes tender collard greens stuffed into freshly fried egg roll skins. Bailey describes the effort as "southern meets Chinese." It's certainly not a stretch to marry these ingredients. Many Chinese restaurants fill their egg rolls with 90 percent cabbage and sprouts; I'll take the soft greens dripping in potlikker, a sweet and

spicy broth, instead any day. According to Bailey, the idea behind it was to "introduce a younger generation for whom greens weren't part of their diet," he said. "We figured the fried shell would appeal to the fast-food generation."

If greens aren't your thing, then you'll likely dig their cousin, egg rolls stuffed with mac 'n' cheese and sweet corn. The combination of the sweet elbow noodles dripping in cheddar and the crispy egg roll shell reminds me of a perfect Jewish kugel. Kugels start out crispy on top but gets soggy quick, which doesn't happen with the fried-to-order egg roll crust. Both kinds of rolls come with a choice of made-from-scratch dipping sauces, including a thick, almost mayo-like ranch, honey-sriracha or mango sauce. I dug the spicy honey-sriracha sauce with both rolls and the sweet mango with the collards. Note: You can order them individually (\$1.49) or as part of an egg roll trio (\$3.99) with a third roll stuffed with jerk chicken, but I'd steer away from the latter due to the mushy, bland jerk chicken roll.

So far, Dream Cafe has hit the mark with this dish. "We've had so many orders, we've run out of egg roll shells," Bailey said a week after opening in mid-January. "I'm waiting for a shipment as we speak."

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATRINK

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