

By LYN DOBRIN

Collard Greens and Southern Cooking

"These days, people don't cook," says Leisa Dent, co-owner (with her mother, Lillian) and chef of LL Dent in Carle Place. "So this is a place where you can get your home cooking, sit around the table, eat, talk and laugh. That's what we're trying for here."

Feasting together is part of the family tradition of the Dents. Leisa's parents originally moved from Georgia to Brooklyn, where Leisa was born, and then settled in Roosevelt.

As other relatives came north, the group around the table got larger.

"We would all share," says Leisa, "getting together for holiday meals." At LL Dent, the mother and daughter team have created a welcoming ambiance, serving southern style cuisine, with Lillian welcoming guests and Leisa running the kitchen and coming out now and then to greet old friends and new customers.

On the menu is catfish, sweet potato pie, fried chicken and collard greens. Cornbread is brought to the table.

I ASKED, "IS THIS SOUL FOOD?"

"When I went down south," says Leisa, who after graduating from the Culinary Institute of America moved to Atlanta to work as executive chef for Georgia Pacific, "I saw that soul food was southern food; black and white people were eating the same thing. All of us make the same collard greens. It's not only black people making it; it's southern. They go way back; everybody had collard greens."

Way back is an understatement. Collard greens, one of the oldest members of the cabbage family, were eaten in prehistoric time. They are thought to have originated in the Mediterranean region and were a regular food item in Ancient Greece and Rome. They spread to Africa centuries ago and were brought to North America by slaves.



Collard greens are a close relative to kale and both are rich in calcium, potassium and antioxidants. Collard leaves are dark blue-green, smooth and relatively broad, distinguishing them from the frilly-edged leaves of kale. Collard greens have a softer, sweeter taste than the sharper kale.

The collard greens served at LL Dent are a family recipe that Leisa tweaked to what she likes. "I like a little sweet and vinegar," she says. "It balances it on the tongue."

LEISA DENT'S COLLARD GREENS

8 servings

2 ham hocks or 2 smoked turkey legs or 4 wings

2 Tablespoons crushed pepper flakes

2 bunches of collard greens

1/4 cup cider vinegar

1/3 cup sugar

2 Tablespoons salt

Fill a large pot with six quarts of water; add the ham or turkey and red crushed pepper. Bring to a full boil and cook until the meat is falling off the bone and the water is reduced to four quarts. Pull the meat off the bone and put it back in the pot.

Clean the greens by pulling away the tough stems and discarding any yellow leaves. Gently rub the leaves under warm running water. It is important to wash each leaf individually to get rid of bugs, spider webs and sand. To cut the greens, stack them one on top of the other. Roll them up like a cigar and slice crosswise, about half an inch thick. Make the slices even and not too thin, says Leisa. "If they're too thin, they'll turn to mush."

Bring the stock back to a boil and add enough greens to fill the pot; when they've cooked down add more until you've used them all up. After they've cooked a bit, add the cider vinegar, sugar and salt. Keep turning over the greens. They are done when they are olive green and tender. Taste them, says Leisa. "You try it and if you 'hmmmm,' then you know you've hit it." When tasting, she warns, don't try to eat directly from the pot. "It will burn your tongue; let the spoonful cool and then taste."

Cooking time is about 20 minutes for tender greens and 45 minutes to an hour for tough leaves. You can freeze the cooked greens.