Eatonville: Far More than a Play on Words

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Combine magnificent chandeliers, a picket fence, old-fashion rocking chairs plus a mural that depicts the Florida swamps, and a cast of colorful characters drawn from the pages of well-known books and you€™re in Eatonville.

No, not the first established Black town, in Florida, but the next best thing. Eatonville is a relatively new restaurant located on the corner of 14th and V streets in Northwest, a stone's throw away from the bustling U Street corridor. Named in honor of the hometown of Harlem Renaissance writer, Zora Neale Hurston, Eatonville gives customers a hefty helping of southern comfort.

"The author is eclectic, a visionary. She has many multifaceted layers. I wanted to show a place that shows those layers. The columns are raw. Zora was not rich but she had elegance about her. Zora was complex but simple at the same time," said owner Andy Shallal.

To create the unique ambiance, an arts collective composed of 20 different artists were asked to bring the barren walls to life prior to the restaurant's grand opening on May 11, 2009. Of course, Shalall, 55, reserved the right to paint over their artistic interpretations. He commissioned several artists from the collective to create murals from Hurston's works that include, *Mulebone* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* along with the American folklorist herself in the Eatonville landscape backdrop.

Along with the decor of the restaurant, Eatonville hosts Food and Folklore, a monthly event that features the foods of the Florida town which are menu offerings served during the event. Another charming touch includes a guest speaker who recounts folklore of the time. The next Food and Folklore event takes place on April 19.

Shallal also owns the popular restaurant and bar, Busboys and Poets, based on the life of Langston Hughes, a political activist and poet, located directly across the street from Eatonville.

Shalall said that he has lived in the District and Arlington, Va., for the majority of his life and he's fascinated by how little credit Washington, D.C. receives regarding the Harlem Renaissance. The District was extremely influential.

"The Harlem Renaissance was fed and nurtured by Howard University. Many writers of the Harlem Renaissance went through the philosophy department," Shallal said.

He also added that many patrons who frequent the restaurant are unaware of the history and many think that Eatonville is a play on the word "eat."

"The U street corridor is full of rich history. I was concerned about change on U Street. I wanted to unearth the U street heyday. The gentrification was not representative of the U street

history," he said.

The Ellington Apartments named for Duke Ellington is not Ellington at all. I wanted to use this opportunity for social change; I wanted to bring out the history of the Harlem Renaissance. I think it is fascinating to share history. U Street is not another generic street," the restaurateur said.

To further add to the charm of Eatonville, the menu consists of, regional southern foods that hail from places like such as Savannah, the Carolinas, and of course Florida. The drink menu also has a southern flare with original, creative ideas from the Eatonville staff. For instance, Ice Pick, which consists of vodka and sweet tea, is a crowd pleaser and house favorite.

Shallal said that he's pleased with the success of Eatonville. However, his next venture will be to open a Busboys and Poets in neighboring Prince George's County.

"Prince George's County is underserved, not enough service restaurants. The area needs something unique."

The new restaurant will open in about a year in Hyattsville, Md., in partnership with EYA development near the Route 1 corridor," he said.

"There has been a lot of interest in Busboys and Poets. I am always mindful of the next location," Shallal said.

The affable owner is also mindful that you get the whole Eatonville experience once you cross the threshold -- surrounded by the decor of Zora's rich layers, the food of her time, and the sounds of the era -- with exciting jazz playing as you dine. You get far more than you eat at Eatonville.