



Owners Rasheed Owens and Shawntalae Johnson inside the main dining area at their newly opened Vault Cafe & Cabaret on Culver Road in Rochester on Aug. 30. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

New restaurant brings an iconic Southern dish to Rochester

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When Rasheed Owens and Shawntalae Johnson opened their own restaurant, the engaged couple took some inspiration from one of Owens' favorite establishments.

"I love the Waffle House," he said. "We took the Waffle House and put our spin on it."

Vault Cafe and Cabaret, at 1322 Culver Road, serves flat, wide waffles made with the same waffle irons used at the popular chain. They come in a choice of three flavors: buttermilk, red velvet or cinnamon swirl. And of course there's the option of chicken and waffles, pairing a choice of waffle with crispy fried chicken.

The menu spans other breakfast and brunch favorites: pancakes, breakfast sandwiches, omelets, shrimp and grits, fish and grits, eggs Benedict and more.

Friday evenings bring fish fries and on Sundays, soul food is prepared from family recipes. In the kitchen you may find Debra Clark, Diane Smith and Annette Brown making their mac and cheese, cornbread, greens and more. They're known to Owens as Auntie Debra, Auntie Diane and Auntie Nette. "We grew up eating at Aunt Debra's house," Owens said. "Every time it was time to cook, we looked to Auntie Debra and Auntie Nette and Auntie Diane."

But the Waffle House inspiration was left behind when it came to creating the vibe. The space was recently remodeled from its identity as The Toast Factory, which is heading to CityGate.

The formerly open kitchen is now behind walls, and



Shrimp and grits at Vault Cafe & Cabaret.
PROVIDED BY VAULT CAFE & CABARET

the décor includes eye-catching Rochester-themed murals created by TB Creations. A wall of portraits honors family members who work at the restaurant, and also pays tribute to Odessa Walters, Owens' grandmother. Outside, an inviting outdoor seating

If you go

Vault Cafe & Cabaret, 1322 Culver Road, is open for breakfast and brunch 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. In addition, it is open from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. Fridays for fried fish, and 4 to 8 p.m. Sunday for Soul Food Sundays. It is closed Mondays.

Parking is on the street and in lots next to the laundromat and in back of the building. The space is wheelchair-accessible, with most of the seating being standard height.

area has a new pergola and fire pit.

Behind the dining room is a space used for events like birthday parties, baby showers and wedding showers for as many as 60 people.

The space will also be used for live entertainment: comedy shows, live bands and more. Its lineup is being organized by Curtis Kendrick, known for founding the jazz band Cabo Frio. "I'm trying to establish a high-end music scene here," he said.

The establishment has a bar with a full liquor license. Among the offerings are three flavors of mimosas served by the glass, carafe or tower. A half-dozen signature cocktails have been given creative names to go along with the vault theme.

Owens also owns a successful cleaning service; Owens and Johnson also own the building that houses the restaurant.

"We love the neighborhood," Owens said. "The neighborhood has definitely been good to us."

Tracy Schuhmacher covers Rochester's food and drink scene. Notice something open or close in your neighborhood? Send tips to tracvs@gannett.com.