



Cotham's is Country Cool

By Doug White



A half hour from the state capitol in Little Rock, near the historic Toltec Mounds State Park, sits Cotham's

Mercantile. This dusty old wooden structure, built in 1917, is perched atop stilts near a river and oxbow lake, where 100-year-old cypress trees reveal we aren't in town anymore. This is the country.

History buffs start to get goose bumps as they open the doors to the former country store. The walls are filled with artifacts and mementos, from apothecary bottles to farm implements. (I believe they found my old 1964 John Deere toy tractor and displayed it just for spite.)

Our group wisely arrived early on a Wednesday, yet still had to wait on the porch with other hungry patrons because of the lunch rush. Cotham's reputation continues to grow. Aside from the annual "Best of Arkansas" awards ("Best Burger," "Best Southern Food," "Best Home Cooking," etc.), the restaurant has been featured in numerous national publications including *Food Network* magazine, *Southern Living*, and now, ahem, *Arkansas Living* magazine!

Our wait was short as the efficient staff prepared our table. Once seated, service was incredibly prompt and pleasant. The lunch crowd is an eclectic mix of locals, farmers, families and tuck-tie-in-shirt businessmen and women from the city.

The menu is surprisingly diverse, which is surprising because Cotham's is known for their hubcap burger (more on this baby later). There are salads and sandwiches, appetizers galore and an impressive array of vegetables for the healthy eater. But the mainstay for the bustling lunch business is the daily plate lunch special. They deserve to be mentioned, so here we go:

Monday: fried pork chops and northern beans
Tuesday: chicken and dumplings with black-eyed peas

Wednesday: chicken-fried steak and pinto beans

Thursday: fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and turnip greens

Friday: chicken spaghetti and lima beans

These "blue plates" are first rate – hearty portions, two sides, reasonably priced (\$7.49) and cooked to perfection. The veggies each had their own special seasonings and the beans were delicious.



Despite the allure of the blue plate, no trip to Cotham's is complete without trying their now world-famous hubcap burger. So take an extra lap around the track or bike that extra three miles this

weekend in order to get ready to indulge in one of the finest cheeseburgers you will ever try. The hubcap is a masterpiece filled with nearly a pound of ground beef rising to a half inch of thickness and nearly a foot in diameter. It is loaded with all the fixin's.

Sure, you can share it, but why not join the thousands that have come before you with visions of finishing this baby, only to meekly request a doggie bag (and we all know the dog isn't getting ANY of these leftovers)? Add some fries or, better yet, the homemade onion rings and what you have is a burger fit for a king.

Our group tried a little of everything during our lunch visit. The fried green tomatoes were a huge hit, as were the aforementioned sides (we especially loved the sneakily spicy turnip greens – greens with an "afterburn") and the salads were fresh and plentiful.

But the nicest surprise was Cotham's fried farm-raised catfish. The three-piece platter is served with fries, slaw, corn fritters and hush puppies. The batter was sweet and tasty, and

was fried hot enough to seal in a moist piece of tender white catfish.

In the interest of research for our loyal readers, we went ahead and ordered dessert, despite the fact that we were all waving white flags of surrender. In retrospect, we made the right decision as the three desserts we ordered were positively perfect.

There were two cobblers, peach and blackberry. Big slices of sweet peaches and a blend of sugar and cinnamon were tucked into a nice crusty cobbler. The blackberry, though, stole the show. The blackberries were picked fresh, which gave a lighter and sweeter note to the cobbler. Delicious.

Dessert number three? I give you Mississippi Mud Pie, Cotham's famous interpretation of this southern favorite. Graham cracker crust, layers of ice cream and chocolate cream topped with whipped cream and hot chocolate syrup. Good gracious!

We Arkansans are blessed in so many ways, not the least of which is the ability to experience the beauty and pace of

rural life, no matter where we dwell. The British writer

Cyril Connolly wrote, "It is only in the country that we can truly get to know a person or a book." It is also an

ideal place to truly enjoy a fine meal. Thanks, Cotham's, for

another great experience.

Cotham's is easy to find at 5301 Arkansas 61 in Scott. Check it out at www.cothams.com. It is open for lunch Monday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Dinner hours are Friday and Saturday from 3 to 8 p.m. Closed Sunday. Want to know more? Find video interviews, photos, recipes and more at Arkansas Living on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/ArkansasLivingMagazine>. Do you have a restaurant to recommend for Doug? Contact him at doug.white@aecc.com.