

# local business

## The West Side Needs a Good Bowl, Baby!

by Bren Herrera



Founder Mike Blum (far left) and the Chow Baby team.

**C**how Baby, The Real Chow Baby, that is, sets its standards pretty high these days. With a three-year tenure now under its belt, the swanky Midtown location has outgrown its capacity and is coming to the West Side!

Don't be scared, in-towners — they're not moving, simply adding a new location to their portfolio. I've been eating at Chow Baby since I moved to Atlanta two years ago and can say it's one of my favorite spots. If you haven't had the distinct pleasure of taking a break from cooking at home or eating gourmet cuisine, let me brief you real quick. The concept is mirrored after the Midwest style found in Mongolian barbecue outposts, only better, says owner Mike Blum. Fresh ingredients in abundance, tasty sauces, which are patented, by the way, and a variety of meats and spices from around the world make up this all-American stir-fry.

"I ran the U.S. looking and eating, basically trying to get an idea of what was out there and what I could do here in this burgeoning city," Blum says. In my opinion, he hit gold. I stood in line my first time and instantly became overwhelmed by the options. Eggplant and asparagus always make it to my plate. I forcefully avoid the oyster sauce only because of the high calorie count, which is ubiquitously placed on the back wall as you make your way through the line. If you lack "cheffing" and creative skills in concocting a savory and hearty bowl, don't fret, plenty of suggestions are offered.

My second and third and fourth and, well, you get the picture, visits were always satisfactory. If I got too greedy with ingredients, thus ending up with a less-than-edible mix (possibly because the pineapple chunks did not

sit well with eggs and five-spice blend), I'd hurry back in line. I'd recommend you do the same. During lunch, right at about 1 p.m., you can easily stand in line 10 to 15 minutes just to take the first step. Dinner is potentially longer. This consistent variant does not deter the faithful or even the anxious to know what the hype is all about.

While I love to eat at Chow Baby, conveniently parked on Howell Mill Road near 14th Street, I haven't eaten there since December. My last visit was tough as I failed miserably at making a bowl that satiated my picky palette. I wasn't too concerned, since the cost for unlimited bowls is only \$11.99. You simply can't go wrong. That last visit, being a romantically bittersweet one, coupled with gas being \$4 per gallon, caused me to make Vinings my grubbin' grounds.

By the third week in January, I was going through withdrawal. Until one rainy day, as I'm driving to another Vinings eatery, the jumbotron at Cumberland flashes that red and black logo with which I had become so familiar (I have a Frisbee, baseball cap, sexy girl's tee and a notepad). It read "The Real Chow Baby Coming Spring 2008." What?! Is it true? TRCB coming to my side of town? I called a close friend and confirmed it, as if the flashing lights were only there to provide some color to an otherwise gloomy day.

I sat with Blum at the original Chow Baby last month, after making a perfect bowl that included new items like tomatoes and grouper. With a big smile on his face, he says, "Where you been, girl?" I love that. I miss that familiarity Chow Baby offers. Blum proceeds to rightfully boast an exponential growth in his Midtown

location, affording him the \$2 million build out in Cobb Galleria. Curious, I asked what would be different about it. "A lot," he responded. "For one, my mother designed it! I wanted the Cobb location to be more upscale, and so she's installed more Manhattanesque lighting and seating. We have two food stir-fry lines and two bars." Secondly, diners get more food options. Because offering the freshest of ingredients is at the top of his successful business plan, Blum asserts, "We always get fresh stuff."

Three new meat and fish offerings are among the additions. Having taken over the old Ruby Tuesday space of 9,000 square feet, the new location will house enough seating for concertgoers at the Performing Arts Center and any large-scale event going in the Galleria itself. Other conveniences we all will get to enjoy are free valet for lunch and dinner and most importantly, the same pricing! At least for now. They're toying with the idea of upping lunch by \$1, but only for unlimited trips. One trip stays at the beloved \$7.99 (dinner will be \$12.99). Not bad, considering all the new mixings and posh ambiance.

Chow Baby has also secured space near Emory University for a 2009 opening. For now, the entire city is welcome to join in good eats at Cumberland in mid-July. It's all about the bowl, baby!

*Bren Herrera is the owner of Flanboyant Eats, a Latin fusion catering company, and a freelance writer. Visit her at [www.flanboyanteats.com](http://www.flanboyanteats.com). For more information on The Real Chow Baby, visit the Web site [www.therealchowbaby.com](http://www.therealchowbaby.com) or call 404-815-4900.*