

The Royal Treatment

Does Mauldin Deli serve the king of all reubens?

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Like any good American, I appreciate a challenge. And like anyone who thinks and talks about food at annoying, obsessive levels, I particularly appreciate a challenge when it is issued by restaurants. I'm the kind of guy who sees a restaurant sign saying "Best (fill-in-the-specialty) in town!" and can't stop myself from turning the car around and heading over to make them prove it. That either makes me exactly the kind of gullible loser that restaurants who use the age-old tactic are trying to reel in, or the kind of person who's on a noble mission to compile a life's worth of unforgettable meals (I prefer the latter).

I have particular low-rent food fetishes — hamburgers, fried chicken, barbecue, pizza, hot dogs — that will send me running to distant corners if I hear that someone out there is winning praise for their cooking of one of my favorites. One of those fetishes is the reuben sandwich — the pinnacle of deli sandwich making

— and as such, you can only imagine what happened when I cruised past a sign for the Mauldin Deli that proclaimed the restaurant's reuben to be the best around. What happened is that I forgot about wherever it was that I was going and decided that I was hungry.

The Mauldin Deli is a cozy little nook in a cozy little strip mall along Mauldin's Main St. It's somewhat easy to miss amidst the skyscraper-sized neon fast food signs that clutter the town's central business district, but if you look for a green awning and several images of a boar's head (the restaurant's sandwiches feature meat from Boar's Head), you should be able to work your way there. And if you go

during lunch, you won't be the only person there. Things get pretty active at the deli around noon, and the restaurant's eight or so tables get claimed quickly.

By making room on its menu for reubens, the Mauldin Deli joins the long parade of restaurants that have attempted to master the perfect sandwich. Reubens are kind of like pizza — they're never really bad, but they're too rarely spectacular. There's always something working against you: soggy bread, chewy corned beef, cool temperatures. What keeps you going back again and again is the simple fact that when reubens are good, they're really, really good. I'm happy to report that

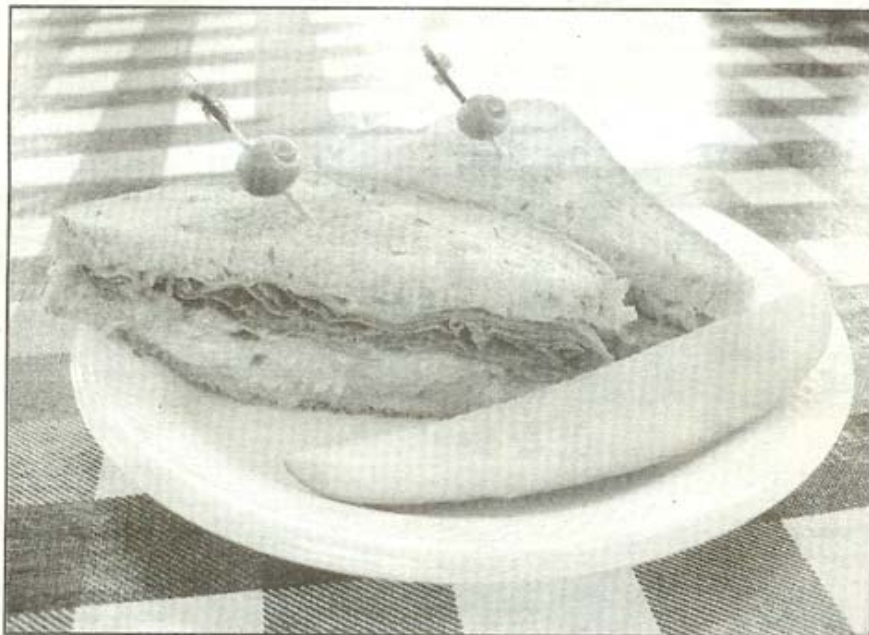


photo: Melissa Anderson

REGAL REUBENS: If you're craving a reuben sandwich, Mauldin Deli is the place for you. The deli also serves other inventive sandwiches.

the reuben (\$5.95) at the Mauldin Deli is indeed really, really good. It's easily one of the best reuben sandwiches in the Upstate, which can't be classified by anyone as a hotbed for great reubens (or any other deli favorites). But despite the relative lack of competition out there, Mauldin Deli's reuben can stand on its own because it gets a few simple — but important — details right. Most reubens I encounter end up somewhere between moist and dripping wet. Here, the rye bread comes out buttery in flavor, but remains perfectly crisp and dry, a difficult task to pull off when you add piles of corned beef, sauerkraut, Thousand Island dressing and Swiss cheese to the mix. Further, the corned beef is sliced into paper-thin layers, allowing its edges to

crisp just slightly during the heating process. And instead of bathing the sandwich in Thousand Island or melted cheese (another frequent mistake), the folks behind the counter instead up the ante on the kraut, which lends a tangy, vinegary burst to the otherwise rich flavors.

Like many sandwich shops, Mauldin Deli divides its menu into hot and cold sandwiches, but unlike many others, it steers clear of rote meat/bread/cheese offerings to stake out new ground. I tackled a wildly interesting "cold" sandwich in the turkey croissant (\$5.50) which found room for a host of unique ingredients. Instead of, say, Swiss or provolone, there's a healthy spread of

cream cheese on the bread. Instead of a leaf of romaine lettuce, there are spinach leaves and alfalfa sprouts. Instead of onion, there are herb seasonings and slices of avocado. Because many of these flavors are mild and mellow, everything complements each other to create a colorful, clean-tasting sandwich where no ingredient is allowed to overwhelm the rest.

One thing the Mauldin Deli isn't is fast, particular during its peak lunch hours. This isn't the "get in/get out" mentality of a fast food joint. Since everything's made

fresh to order here and since patrons pile in at once, it can sometimes take awhile for orders to arrive. On two separate occasions during lunch, I waited solid 15 minutes to receive single sandwich orders — certainly not an excessive wait by normal restaurant standards, but longer than what you're used to for deli sandwiches. That shouldn't be enough to keep you from stopping by, though. The sandwiches are too good. Grab a newspaper on your way and flip through while you're waiting. After all, there's reuben royalty here.

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