

# Ground Zero

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## Ground Zero Blues Club

**Have lunch at a place where the Delta blues is celebrated and preserved.**

By Nancy Dickinson



**Down home is the rule for the food at Ground Zero.**

*Nancy Dickinson*

To say one appreciates the blues is rather an incomplete sentence as there is a variety of blues—New Orleans, Kansas City, Chicago and Memphis, to name only a sample. However, most blues historians credit the Mississippi Delta—the northwest section of Mississippi between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers—as the home of the blues.

The Mississippi Delta was once home to numerous blues clubs, also called juke joints due to the omnipresent jukeboxes found in the establishments. One thing visitors to a juke joint could count on was good Southern cooking available for a good price.

### Preserving Tradition

Actor Morgan Freeman, along with local attorney and businessman Bill Lockett and Memphis entertainment executive Howard Stovall, recognized the need to preserve the rich heritage of the Delta blues. Their plan was to open a true juke joint in heart of the Delta. After months of searching, Freeman and Lockett found an old building in the center of Clarksdale, Miss., to house their club. They called it The Ground Zero Blues Club.

Called Ground Zero by the regulars, it still looks like the unassuming building it once was. On the porch of the faded brick building sits an old couch and a smoker filled with pork and brisket for meals served in the diner. In the evenings, the building fills with the sounds of local blues bands playing traditional Delta Blues.

Not open for breakfast, Ground Zero serves classic Southern dishes such as fried grits (a favorite of Lockett's), turnip greens, fried catfish, fried green tomatoes and peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream. The cook—whose recipes are passed down from his granny—has been known to add meals to the daily menu, just because he feels like it.



**Grabbing a table at Ground Zero is like sitting down for a big family gathering, when chairs have to be gathered from all around the house to accommodate the hungry.**

*Nancy Dickinson*

### **Accolades**

Ground Zero has been featured in the HBO documentary *The Last of the Mississippi Juke Joints*. Southern Living chose the club's fried catfish as the best in the South. Night Club & Bar magazine chose it as one of the top 100 nightclubs. In 2005, it was chosen as one of the top 25 favorite spots in the South by Southern Living Favorites.

As part of a project to preserve the Delta blues, Ground Zero has captured the attention of former Led Zeplin lead singer Robert Plant, who has visited the club, and Eric Clapton. Dan Aykroyd, Elvis Costello and members of Blondie have also visted.

During its former life, the building was home to Delta Wholesale Hardware Corp. in back, Delta Wholesale Grocery in front and a cotton-processing plant on the top floor. Lockett refurbished the old cotton company on the building's top floor. Now there are seven apartments, each given a name reminiscent of cotton manufacturing. Apartments called Fair Middling, Good Fair Middling and Good Ordinary were taken from the process of grading cotton. The apartments are available for rent, if guests don't mind the music downstairs on the weekends. The first room at the top of the stairs, Good Middling, is the room Freeman sleeps in when he's in town.

The atmosphere at Ground Zero, and Clarksdale, is similar to taking a step back to a time when life was simpler, folks walked a little slower and people still waved when they walked down the street. The moment the doors close, it's as though the world outside never existed. People from the town and outlying areas come to the restaurant for great Southern home-cooked meals. They greet each other like long lost friends, always with a hug and a smile.

To find out more about the Ground Zero Blues Club, visit [www.groundzerobluesclub.com](http://www.groundzerobluesclub.com). For help planning your Mississippi vacation, contact your AAA Travel agent or [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

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