

Automatic's Pilot

Karen Carrier creates a Memphis thang.

Karen Blockman Carrier rushes through the pepper-strewn doors of her restaurant as if she's being chased. She's just returned from a weekend trip to New Orleans, taking the eclectic-styled foods of her catering company — Another Roadside Attraction — to the happy mouths of *The Client* movie crew.

A Memphis catering firm taking food to New Orleans? Sounds like carrying coals to Newcastle. But anyone who's been to Automatic Slim's Tonga Club, at 83 S. Second, or witnessed the panache of her catering crew, knows that Carrier's brand of banquets are not easily gotten anywhere. Tom Cruise made her his personal chef for the four months he was on location here with *The Firm*; Susan Sarandon ate-in or carried-out from Automatic Slim's at least twice a week while she was here filming *The Client*.

What's so special about Carrier's food? Gingered tenderloin with molasses, sauteed onions and chili aioli (a garlic and chipotle pepper mayonnaise) in a flour tortilla; a Caribbean Voodoo Stew with mussels, shrimp, whitefish, and crab legs; Brazilian citrus-glazed pork chops stuffed with country sausage, apples, japones, and pecans, and served with coyote potato. . . a little bit of Mexico and South America, tossed with some traditional Southern and New York, dressed with Santa Fe and Caribbean.

Like many modern young chefs, Carrier takes her formal training as a base, then adds her own life experience and personality to come up with a style uniquely her own. Hence the menu that features a salmon burrito stuffed with arugula, chipotle relish, and avocado.

So evident in Automatic Slim's decor,

with its zebra skins, tumbleweeds, kitschy '50s lamps, canoes hanging from the ceiling, and pictures of a young, bare-chested Elvis. Carrier, her husband, and a collage of local artists and designers created the Automatic Slim's look. While it's been called a slice of New York or Santa Fe, my first impression of it was "This is Memphis." Many might think of the Memphis look as dark leather captain's chairs, oil paintings of fox hunts, and a menu of steak and potatoes, but that's only one aspect of the Southern lifestyle. Automatic Slim's mirrors a strong undercurrent of Memphis life. The restaurant has a "vibe" that only Memphis — the young, hip, and progressive side of Memphis — could give it.

And Carrier, 40, is the epicenter of that vibe. An energetic and vivacious woman, she was born and raised in Memphis in an Orthodox Jewish family that kept strictly kosher. Her grandfather, an English opera singer who once sang for the Queen Mother, moved the family to the United States after World War II.

Carrier carried on the family's artistic tradition. Her first love was painting and that, in a very roundabout way, is what got her a start in restaurants.

A graduate of the Memphis College of Art, she won a scholarship in painting to Hunter College in New York and moved there in 1981. "When I got up there, I realized I needed to make a living," she explains.

After a six-week cooking course, she met



Karen Blockman Carrier (left), Tom Cruise, and other film crew members of *The Firm*. For four months, Carrier cooked dinner for Cruise daily. She says he loved her pecan chicken.

Susan Trilling, owner of the catering company Seasons of My Heart, and began what was to be a long and fruitful business relationship. "She was really ahead of her time," Carrier says admiringly. They worked together the next several years, "riding the Tex-Mex wave," and helping to usher-in the Cajun/Creole craze at the acclaimed Wall Street restaurant, Bon Ton Ruler. As her cooking career was moving into high gear, the rather pretentious New York art scene was starting to wear on Carrier, and she dropped out of grad school. "I thought 'I can do my art, I don't have to make a living at it.' But basically, I guess, I was really enjoying [cooking]. . . ."

A few years later, Trilling decided to move

to Australia and Carrier, needing a break from the fast restaurant pace, instead started catering lunches for the fashion industry. With the extra time, she was going down to Jamaica "a whole lot" and got hooked on the down-home island cooking. "I studied under these people. . . who literally cooked on the beaches from these little pans. They'd dig out a hole [in the sand], build themselves a fire and put a pot or a pan down on it. . . . They made some of the best food I've ever had." It was during this time that she met her husband at a Manhattan concert by the late Memphis jazz pianist Phineas Newborn. Memphian Bob Carrier, a "gaffer" in the film industry, did the lighting for New York's first Hard Rock Cafe, the lighting design and sconces

at Automatic Slim's, and is currently doing the lighting for *The Client*.

Carrier opened the first Automatic Slim's — One Bar Under a Groove ("Automatic Slim" is a character in *Wang Dang Doodle* by Willie Dixon, a song recorded by Howlin' Wolf and made popular by Koko Taylor) on July 4, 1986, during the Statue of Liberty centenary. "It's a little piece of Memphis," she says of the New York Slim's, which features black-and-white photos of Memphis blues and soul legends on the walls, as well as the best of Memphis and Memphis-inspired music belting from the loudspeakers. The Greenwich Village Slim's was a hit from Day One.

She followed Bob Carrier back to Memphis in 1987 (he'd moved back in 1985) and started her catering company, Another Roadside Attraction. "I was bored, I didn't know what I was going to do," she says. "I figured, okay, I'll do a little catering, it won't be any big deal, I mean, how much work would you think I'd get in Memphis?" She would soon find out.

"After five years of establishing our clientele and working our butts off — because catering is so hard — I thought we were ready to open a restaurant." It took her a year and a half to negotiate the location of her restaurant, which opened in 1991. The spot had been vacant for 10 years and her friends couldn't understand why she chose it to begin with. "It [downtown] had died right before I got out of high school, but I had a lot

of memories down here. . . it was a real melting pot once, with the Italians and the Jews. . . and there was no East Memphis shopping back then, so you'd take a bus downtown," she recalled.

While it was hard finding the right kitchen people for her style of operation, her current cooking staff has been with her for years and Carrier is extremely proud of them. She's even hoping to take them to Jamaica next year, during January.

But she has lots of plans for the future. Right now, she's intent on marketing five of her sauces (Jamaican jerk sauce, dry jerk seasoning, a cilantro-lime marinade, a Korean barbecue marinade, and a sun-dried fruit chutney). But she'd also like to compile a cookbook, as well as host a monthly event where male celebrities take over the kitchen. She also spoke enthusiastically about having a "Gospel Brunch" on Sundays, with a full choir, but was having trouble getting a group together that didn't mind singing for people drinking champagne on Sunday.

"Memphis has been good to me," she smiles, and looks around, as the noise level begins to rise. Slim's is getting packed, again, for lunch. "The thing about this place. . . it's my baby. It's been a labor of love." Leaving Carrier, I can see her running about, seating customers, clearing and setting tables, running food to servers. I was wrong about the way she looked when she dashed in for the interview: She's not being chased, she's driven. ■