

50 Years in South LA Cements Mama's Kitchen as a Living Legend

by [Tony Chen](#), photos by [Elizabeth Daniels](#) Jan 30, 2015, 2:37p



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Mama's Chicken serves a completely house-made chicken sausage biscuit with cheese during breakfast.

One day in 1970, Karen Whitman's older sister asked her to fill in for the day at a small burger shack called Mama's. If not for that happy accident, South LA icon

Mama's Chicken might not be around today.

Karen Whitman, then a petite girl previously deemed too "little" to be working on the tough kitchen line by **Elbert Hall Jr.**, the original owner of Mama's, tried to fill in for her older sister without Hall knowing. That was day 1 of Karen Whitman's 44 year journey with Mama's Chicken on Slauson in South Los Angeles.

Weeks had gone by and Hall, an enterprising young man of 19 when he first opened Mama's, was shocked to see little Karen cooking at his restaurant when he dropped by. (He was a busy man who also owned nightclubs and dabbled in the barbershop business). Nervously, he surveyed the customers to check on the food; the frequent diners mocked him for not knowing Karen had been cooking. Whitman was allowed to stay on after Hall tasted and approved her burgers.

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Earl Hall died in 2002 due to kidney disease and Whitman ended up with his share of the business, which had included a full service market and liquor store expansion in 1998.

Hall had promised her the business when she

was a teenager, but on the condition she graduate college after graduating from Crenshaw High School. Whitman, to the best of everyone's knowledge, is the longest employee (and now owner) of any burger shack in Los Angeles. Mama's Chicken, which started out as a burger and dog shack, just celebrated its 50th anniversary last year.

All these years later Whitman still runs a tight ship, and looks like the first lady of Slauson when manning the registers. She greets everyone warmly, and nothing fazes her. Not the drunk retiree paying for two King Cobra tallboys at 10 A.M., not the nasty girlfriend threatening to dismember her man after he failed to pay for her chicken wings breakfast,, not the out-of-place Asian guy asking for an unscheduled interview. She finds solace on her baking production days, and pridefully cracks a "yo-mamma" joke when a new customer

questions the value of her tea cakes. "They're better than yo-mamma's". The new customer dutifully agrees after a small sample. Whitman laughs.

The "chicken" in Mama's Chicken comes in several formats: chicken sausage links, Southern style chicken sausage patties (available in mild, extra mild, hot, extra hot) and fried chicken. Despite their popularity and local fame, the sausages weren't added to the menu until 25

years ago. The shack started with burgers and hotdogs.

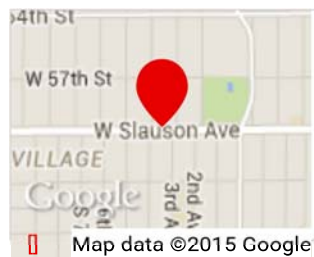
According to Whitman, everything on the menu board sells well, even the chopped chicken sausage taco, which seems to be a culinary oddity. Nevertheless, the best sellers are clearly the chicken sausages and fried chicken meals, because "black people loves fried chicken."

All the chicken (and turkey) sausages are produced in-house, on site. Those in the know buy the frozen sausages to-go, in 2 or 5 pound boxes, as the kitchen isn't known for expediency.

However, the only way to taste Karen Whitman's chicken sausage biscuit with cheese is to head straight to the rear of the store between 9 a.m. and noon, order the sandwich, return upfront to pay, then wait. On the way out, even if it is 10 A.M., grab a peach cobbler to go, but please don't compare her biscuits to McDonald's.

Prices here are absurdly low, with the last increase six years ago despite a significant interior

overall last summer. A SNAP 2-piece fried chicken thigh and leg meal with potato salad rings in at only \$3.50, and it has plentiful takers. Mama's is Slauson's famous food hall, and Whitman, despite her business degree, knows her low prices serve the community well.



Mama's Chicken [0]

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2510 W Slauson Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90043
(323) 292-9696

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[0] <http://la.eater.com/venue/mama-s-chicken>

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