

Cops' free meals in bad taste?

Restaurants

may think officers deserve a treat, but some authorities have had their fill of the idea.

By STEVE VISSER / visser@ajc.com

Martin Calloway still remembers the deputy who gave the free lunch a bad name.

The Fulton County sheriff's deputy, now retired, would go to a McDonald's in uniform and order a couple dozen Happy Meals for his buddies gathered at his house.

He got the meals free because of the restaurant's no-charge policy for

uninformed law officers.

That was too much for a veteran lawman like Calloway to stomach.

"It was so humiliating that you used to cringe if you came in the restaurant after him," said Calloway, a retired Fulton Sheriff major, who saw the deputy as abusing a hallowed perk.

The story went that after that, the

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McDonald's manager said, "Absolutely no more comps for the Fulton County Sheriff Department."

Calloway knows why cafes, convenience stores and coffee shops comp or discount the meals. A place with a reputation for having police roll through regularly is less likely to face a stickup. A free cup of coffee and doughnut can be the cheapest security around. Barbecue can pay dividends.

"Knock on wood, I've never been robbed," said Ronald Newman, who offers police a 25 percent discount at Daddy D'z barbecue on a historically tough section of Memorial Drive.

"I'm in Zone 3. I want the officers to be here," Newman said. "If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be in business because people are nervous about coming here the way it is."

Law enforcement advocates, police department policies and even some cops warn that the practice seen by many as a harmless perk creates potential conflicts of interest, tarnishes the images of officers and breeds resentment from the public that sees cops exploiting the uniform.

A Union City officer recently made headlines when he arrested a McDonald's worker, whom he accused of making him sick by oversalting a free hamburger. Instead of sympathy, the blogosphere concluded that the cop, who is back on the beat, not only

over-reacted by arresting the worker and getting her suspended, but that he was an ingrate to boot.

"Nothing good comes from a free lunch," said Lou Arcangeli, a retired deputy chief of Atlanta Police. "It is a real problem in police work because nobody wants to step up to the fact that these people who buy your lunches expect something in return."

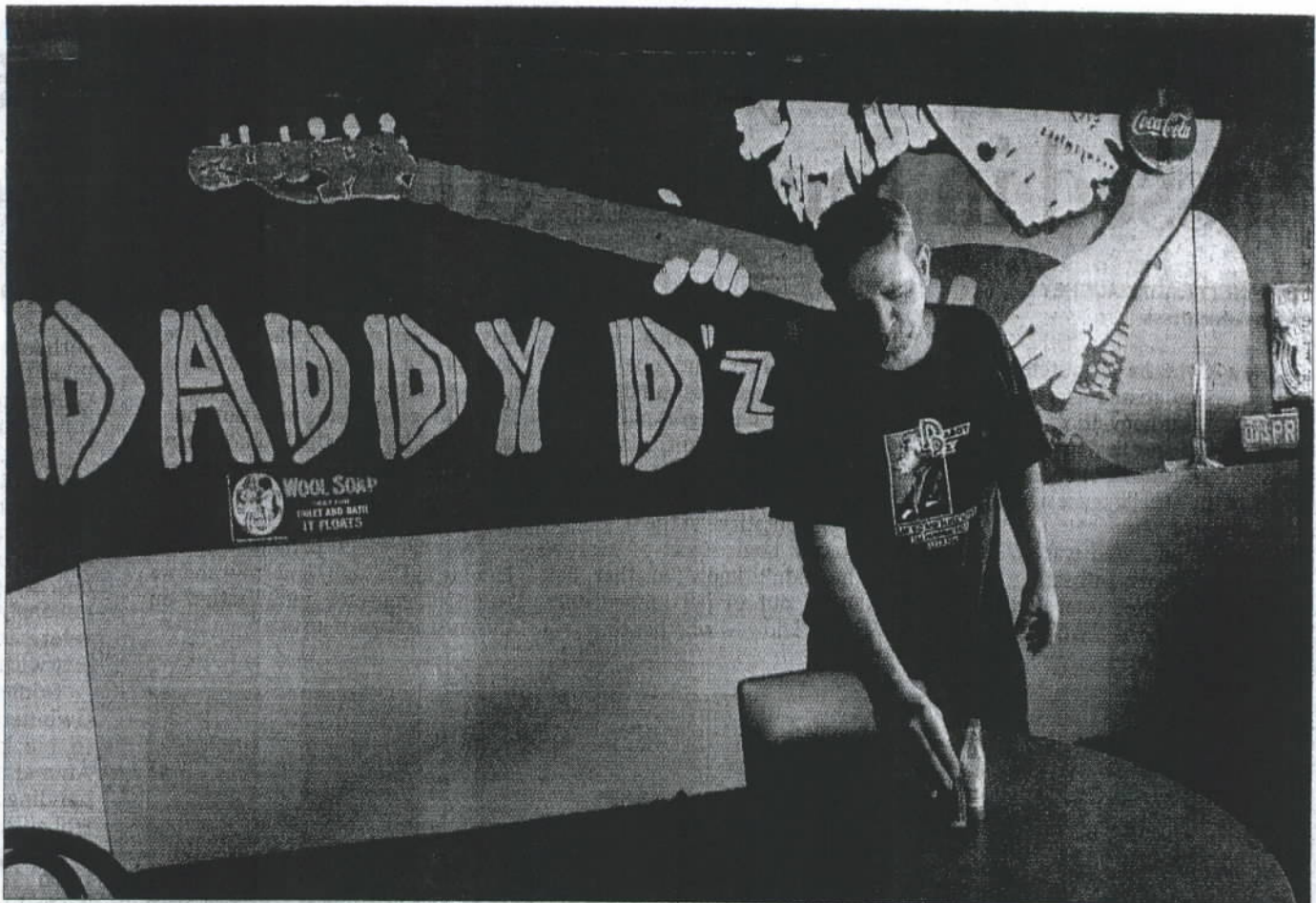
The Atlanta Police Department's policies prohibit accepting meals and similar gratuities. Its brass warns that while they aren't the "food police," an officer will be disciplined for taking discounted food. Peachtree City also prohibits the practice, while some spokesmen at other departments, such as Henry County and Lawrenceville, say it's up to the business.

Other departments, such as Cobb County, have policies that seem to ban the practice but also use language that allows officers some wiggle room to interpret that lunch is not included in the prohibition.

An expert in police ethics says taking free or discounted food undermines respect for the police and diminishes their stature.

"The free meals and free coffee are like tips," said Edwin Delattre of Woodstock, the author of "Character and Cops: Ethics in Policing."

"Bellhops take tips. If you want cops to feel like bellhops, let them take tips." Regardless of department policies, many restaurants



JOHNNY CRAWFORD / Staff

Ronald Newman, owner of Daddy D'z barbecue on Memorial Drive, said, "Knock on wood, I've never been robbed." He's happy to provide some cheap barbecue because "I want the officers to be here ... people are nervous about coming here the way it is."

around Atlanta report that a law enforcement discount is such a common practice that their cash registers have a special key to calculate it.

Six Feet Under, a seafood place on Memorial Drive, says it gives officers 50 percent off meals. The Flatiron in East Atlanta also gives 50 percent, and if the officer is off-duty, it discounts bar tabs as well.

Managers and owners said that appreciation for the work officers do was one reason for the benefit, but an equally important reason was what the officers' presence did for the restaurant.

"Being a bar, if we need help, hopefully they will be here as soon as they can," said Ransom Jackson, owner of the Flatiron, who said the discount also goes to firefighters and paramedics.

The managers say most officers don't demand the

discount and some have to be persuaded to take it. Some officers who accept the discount leave the balance of the full bill for the waitress.

"Every once in a while you'll get a schmuck who says, 'That's all you give us?'" said Daddy D'z's Newman of his discount. "Some of the new guys get nervous. They say, 'I'm not supposed to be doing this!'"

LaGrange Police Chief Louis Dekmar said free or discounted meals for law enforcement is ingrained in the Southern culture far more than in other parts of the country. He was flabbergasted when he moved South 20 years ago and found it a common practice.

He used to forbid officers from taking gratuities but found that restaurant owners were so persistent pushing them that he gave in and said it was permissible as long it

was offered to all law officers, regardless of department.

Delattre, the ethicist, and Arcangeli, the retired deputy chief, said there is always a tacit quid pro quo in the relationship — will owners expect officers to let customers double-park, for instance — and the practice can put an officer on the slippery slope to corruption.

"What's the difference between a lunch at McDonald's and a weekend getaway?" Arcangeli said. "Other businesses get the perception that the free-lunch place is getting special treatment."

Atlanta Police Sgt. Scott Kreher, president of International Brotherhood of Police Officers Local 623, defended taking discounted meals if officers weren't doing favors in return. He noted that many corporations — including restaurants, hotels

and entertainment venues — offered law enforcement, firefighters and the military discounts as a matter of corporate policy.

He said while the "official line" was no discounts, the Atlanta policy is as unenforced as the 55 mph speed limit.

"If I walk into a restaurant and a manager walks up to me and says, 'I appreciate the work you do and the meal is on me, I don't think there is anything wrong with that,'" Kreher said.

"But in my experience in the last couple of years, the free-meal ride is over. It is nowhere like it used to be. Back in the day, you could pretty much walk in anywhere and eat anything you wanted to."

Staff writers Lateef Mungin and Kathy Jefcoats contributed to this article.