

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

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Periodic clouds and sunshine. Hot. Humid. Highs in 80s to middle 90s. Partly cloudy tonight. Strong thunderstorms late. Very warm. Humid. Weather map appears on Page A25.

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Food The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, JULY 17, 2019



Ashleigh Shanti

Max Hardy

Kia Damon

16 Black Chefs Changing Food

These leaders have finally crushed the notion that the food they cook must be rooted in the American South.

By JOHN ELIGON and JULIA MOSKIN

When Ashleigh Shanti, 29, journeyed across the country on a six-month sabbatical last year, she decided that her next step as a chef needed to fulfill a critical desire: cooking food that celebrated her heritage as a Black woman from the South and rebuffed assumptions about what that food could be. For hummus, she replaced chickpeas with black-eyed peas, and instead of tahini, used fermented benne seeds, an African staple. Her cabbage pancake played on okonomiyaki, a traditional Japanese dish. Her buttermilk cornbread soup paid tribute to her grandmother, who would put leftover crumbs of cornbread into buttermilk and drink it.

Those are just some of the dishes featured at Benne on Eagle, in Asheville, N.C., that have helped Ms. Shanti become one of the many Black chefs across the country who are considered new leaders in the food world, making their voices heard in new ways. These chefs have crushed the notion that the food they cook must be rooted in the American South.

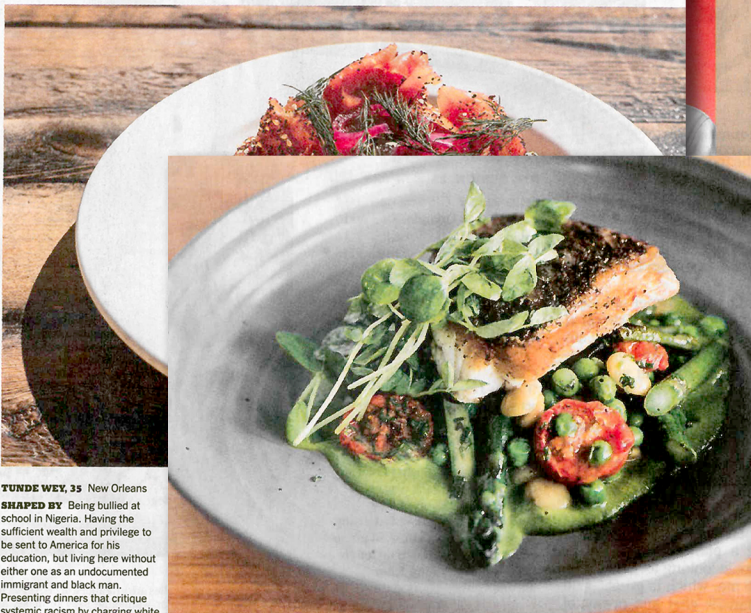
At the same time, they have pushed their way past the Eurocentric traditions that many absorbed in culinary school. They are reflecting Africa and its diaspora in their kitchens, using techniques from places like Nigeria, Brazil, Morocco and Trinidad and Tobago, and ingredients like conch, berbere, fonio and cassava.

"In culinary school, I learned to cook at a very high level," said J.J. Johnson of Henry at Life Hotel restaurant in Manhattan. "In Ghana, I learned who I was and what I should be doing with my life."

The spotlight, many say, is long overdue. Black cooks have historically seen their foods and techniques co-opted, getting little credit for their influence on America's culinary traditions. "There have always been Black hands in American food," said Jerome Grant, the chef at Sweet Home Café in the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

But this new vanguard is working to make sure that its ascent is more than a passing moment.

"It's up to us to be transparent with our information and our techniques, and pass along to the next generation," said Mashama Bailey, executive chef and partner at the Grey in Savannah, Ga., and the winner of this year's James Beard award for Best Chef: Southeast. "We got to kind of



TUNDE WEY, 35 New Orleans

SHAPED BY Being bullied at school in Nigeria. Having the sufficient wealth and privilege to be sent to America for his education, but living here without either one as an undocumented immigrant and Black man.

Presenting dinners that critique systemic racism by charging white people more than Black people for the same food.

KEY DISH Stewed chicken, steamed plantain with egg, fried endive and cornmeal with black chile sauce.

"Everywhere, the mechanics of making food are the same. The process of grinding spices, the textures and ingredients, the burning of fuel. We all experience life in the same way, but the social superstructure is different. Everything has politics. Food has politics. It doesn't mean it can't be enjoyed. But it can't be separated into a rarefied medium that transcends everything else. When food is separated from politics, that is a political act."

NOLIS ANDERSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



ERICK WILLIAMS, 44
Virtue, Chicago

SHAPED BY His great-grandmother's Southern cooking, and her insistence on connecting with every person who sat at her table. His personal faith and Christian teachings on service and community.

KEY DISH Salmon with sweet peas, asparagus, tomatoes and sorrel.

"I don't know that I decided that restaurants were the path, but the path became clear to me. I find the height of my purpose working with my hands, collaborating with farmers, serving my community. That farmer that needs you to buy his bell peppers is the same as the homeless guy on the street asking for money. Everybody's just trying to get their needs met."

The New Vanguard

Sixteen black chefs who are changing food in America: A collaboration with Race/Related from The New York Times. PAGES 6-8

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