Chef Rene Johnson Talks All About Soul Food And How She Makes It Different - Exclusive Interview

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What are some of the first words that come to your mind when you think of soul food? Likely "delicious" is near the top of the list, as well as "comforting," "rich," "tradition," and probably a few choice dishes, too, like collard greens, Hoppin' John, and cornbread. Words you probably don't associate with soul food almost surely include "vegan" and "California," but Chef Rene Johnson, author of the new cookbook "From My Heart to Your Table," is on a mission to change that. And if satisfied palates ranging from that of Vice President of the United States Kamala Harris to actor Danny Glover to author, academic, and activist Dr. Cornel West are any indication, she is succeeding.

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Chef Rene is as warm and welcoming as any of the tasty dishes she offers her diners (be they celebrities or anyone else, including those lucky enough to score her catering services at a private event), but easy smile aside, she is serious about food. Which makes it all the more surprising that, for much of her professional life, she wasn't chef Rene at all, but rather Ms. Johnson, financial executive. During a recent interview with Mashed, Rene Johnson talked about everything from cooking for the stars to what modern soul food means to her and how she went from working in the kitchen with her grandmother as a kid to the finance world as a young woman and back to cooking, finally finding her true life calling thanks to a little nudge from her own kids.

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Chef Rene Johnson's journey from her early days in the kitchen to rediscovering her love of cooking

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How did you first get into cooking? And when was it clear would be more than a hobby but was going to become a career?

So I first got into cooking — and I was a mortgage broker for 19 years — and what happened is that I'm the first granddaughter to a wonderful grandmother and she made everything. And I was in the kitchen with her all the time, but I really didn't like food. I just loved the experiences with my grandmother. And then I have a mother who's a single mom and she could not cook. And she traveled everywhere. I would do my homework by candlelight at some of the finest restaurants, and she would do her sales reports at some of these restaurants. So it was always about the experience. But what ended up happening is that I was a mortgage broker and I had this gift for baking. And so when people would refinance or buy a home, I would always give them a gift of a pound cake or sweet potato pie or a cobbler.

I would let them order that at their closing. And then what ended up happening is that my children and I decided to do holiday baking, something that I would do on the side. So I would give my customers, my clients, an order form, like an order slip for baking, and it kind of blew up. So then what ended up happening, the market crashed and I did not know what to do. My kids said, "Mom, take a year off. We have some money. Take a year off. Travel, do some things for yourself."

Cutest story ever. I was missing my kids. I was in Georgia and one of my daughters became a flight attendant, and they were just going around the world, doing their thing. And I call them, they're in Philadelphia, and I call them at six in the morning and say "good morning" to them. And they said, "Mommy, what's wrong? What's wrong?" And I said, "I just needed to hear your sleepy voice." Well, one of them said, "Oh, mommy, we miss you. And we love you," and hung up. The other one called back and said, "Mom, you better get your life and do something with your food. We are out here doing our thing. You better do something with your food." And I started Blackberry Soul Catering then. And that was in Georgia and it just took off. I ended up not liking [living] in Georgia and bringing it back to California, and I ended up feeding some of the most important and amazing people that you could ever, ever, think of. But that's how it all started.

How Rene Johnson defines soul food

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If it can be put in words, what is your definition of soul food?

My definition of soul food is [that it's] about the experience. For me, soul food brought my family together. I am an only child, but my mother had nine brothers and sisters and that food kept us together. My grandmother being in the kitchen, my grandmother making greens and frying chicken and being in her garden ... her making canned peaches. It was about the experience, and it's about the love. Sometimes soul food and how I feel about soul food is that I believe that we should take it up [a notch] because it's a very elegant food if you know how to do it right. So I've taken soul food from out of the kitchen, out of the Mason jars, because that's not how I grew up.

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My mother travels with a wine glass in her car in case she gets somewhere and they don't have a wine glass for her. So I grew up very elegantly. So I have taken soul food and made it very elegant and very fresh. I use only the freshest ingredients. I very rarely open a can for anything. So I have taken soul food and just put my own signature in it. I'm not going to say that I made it better or anything. I just put my own signature, even for what my grandmother has done.

So for me, soul food is not at all so much the soul only, but it's about the experience. And it's also about the stories and where we come from. Black people did not get what white people got back in the day. We literally had to take what was the leftovers and make gumbo and make red beans and rice and make dirty rice. That's how all this stuff came about is because we took what was left over from a feast and made our own feast. Greens are considered a weed and we made greens taste so beautiful. So I think that it's a story, it's an experience, and it's about the love. And that's how I describe soul food.

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What too many people misunderstand about soul food, according to Chef Rene Johnson

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What are a few things you think people misunderstand about soul food?

So I think that people misunderstand soul food in that they don't think that soul food can be healthy. And really, healthy soul food is not really complicated. Sometimes I get in trouble because I think that soul Food is... You can only make mac and cheese so many ways. You can only make smothered chicken so many ways. You can only make those things so many ways. So it can almost get caught in this one way road. But soul food is so much bigger than that. And soul food is around the world, too, because not only do I cook Southern soul food, I cook Nigerian food, I cook African foods. I make Nigerian oxtails. I make African greens, which are greens with tomatoes in it and onions, and you stew do it that way. It's just all kinds of different ways you can make soul food.

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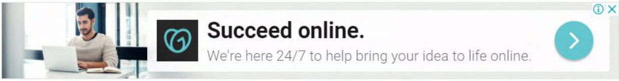
So I think that soul food gets a bad rap, for, first of all, just being unhealthy. And the other thing, I think it also gets a bad rap that it has to be just this one way with the fat or with the ham hock. And that greens have to have meat in them. So I think that's one of the bad raps about soul food when it literally does not have to be that. And it's not that way really because back in the day, even though if we did use a ham hock, it was a very simple food. It was greens and onions and garlic and a ham hock. My grandmother makes the best salt and pepper fried chicken in the world, and I have not mastered it. But she would just take some salt and some pepper and dredge in some flour and fry it, and it'll be off the hook.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How Chef Rene Johnson makes vegan-friendly cooking work for her clients

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So do you eat meat?

Very little.

How has embracing mostly vegan foods worked for your cooking with soul food?

So how veganism has affected my cooking is that I'm a caterer first and I feed 2,500 people to 50 people. And when I learned that I can make vegan soul food and it tastes so good that nobody would miss the meat, I realized that I had something. And so what I ended up doing was I didn't want to ... Because they were saying, "We want to order 50 vegan meals." And when I realized that I didn't want to work that extra hard to make a side dish for 50 people, I realized that I was going to make sure that everybody that I knew could have the Chef Rene experience and the same experience. So when people were getting in line or they're being served, they're being served the same exact meal. So that's how the vegan thing came about.

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Then when you realize how healthy it is and how good it is for the environment and the kicker part about this, I feel like when you put meat in greens, it's just extra calories. So all that stuff is just extra calories. So I've been able to take vegan soul food and make it appetizing for everybody. Everybody can eat it. So when you're in a line, the only thing that you'll experience with me when you're at my events is that if it's a piece of protein, it's a piece of protein. Everything else is either vegan or vegetarian. So people are safe to eat everything, but that's how it came about. And then when I realized that I could do it as good as I can do it, I was like, shoot, I got something here!

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How Rene Johnson makes California Soul Food work

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What is it like cooking soul food far beyond the South?

I do believe that they think it's different. I think that so many times when people experience my food, they say, "We didn't know California people could cook like this." People think that

California and Californians can not cook soul food. They think that it all has to come from the South. And that's not the truth. My grandmother came from the South and gave us that gift. So I think that the experience is different there. And I also think that everybody has their own specialty. We're known for California food, which is fresh and organic, and we're known for that. Memphis is known for barbecue. The South is known for red beans and rice. Everybody is known for what they are known. New Orleans is known for gumbo. So I think that's the experience that you have to just know what they're famous for more than anything else. And it's always so funny to me when I cook for people out in the South and in Georgia and everywhere else. And they can not believe that they're having these greens. One, they're vegan and two, I'm from California. So they're always like, "What?"

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And let me say this. First, it was when I was in Georgia, I named my business California Soul, and my friend said to me, "Girl, you cannot name your business California Soul because we don't think California people can cook like you," and that's how Blackberry Soul came about.

Chef Rene Johnson dishes on cooking for famous folks

Paul Marotta/Getty Images

Who have been some of your favorite celebrity diners, and what did they enjoy most?

So my favorite is Dr. Cornel West. He's been my favorite and I talk about him all the time. He was the most fun. He gave me the best kiss. He danced and he loved our mac and cheese. He took some home with him! And then my other favorite is [Governor] Gavin Newsom. I love Gavin Newsom. He's vegan and I make a vegan quinoa meatloaf that he absolutely loved. So I do an event for Congresswoman Barbara Lee every year. And we always do a Juneteenth event. So it was more of an elegant barbecue. We have everything decorated so beautiful and it's all vegan.

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And so Gavin gets to eat, but he always wants his meatloaf and baked beans with no meat in it. ... And then last but not least is that I have had the opportunity to feed most of the musical stars in the Bay area.

Where Chef Rene Johnson finds inspiration and her advice to other cooks

Instagram

Where do you look for inspiration and what chefs who are working today or in the past have been some of your main inspirations?

So I always channel first and foremost, my grandmothers, both of them. I feel like if my grandmother, when she passed, that her whole spirit came into me, the good parts, just that love that she had. And I sew like her, I cook like her. So those two, and my other grandmother the same. And then as far as chefs are concerned, it's going to crack everybody up. My favorite chef right now is Jamie Oliver. I love Jamie Oliver. I think Jamie Oliver brings the soul into his food, that soul thing we talk about. He's fun. He does fresh things and I recreate his things mostly vegan style. And then my other favorite is Sunny Anderson. I love Sunny Anderson. I love her energy and how she makes soul food right and fun and exciting. So those are my two, Jamie Oliver and Sunny Anderson, and most importantly my grandmothers.

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What are some general tips you have for the home cook who wants to take their cooking up a notch?

My favorite thing to tell the home cook is this, especially those new cooks, is do not be afraid to use your measuring spoons and your measuring cups because so many times we grow up seeing people just sprinkle things in, and you think that you don't need your measuring spoons. But you need your measuring spoons when you first start out because it's a safe tool to make sure that you have good seasoning. I say, "Start off with one teaspoon, and if it doesn't taste right, add another teaspoon or another half teaspoon," and then you can kind of learn your food. I also tell people, "Make sure you taste your food." I know we get full sometimes, that doesn't mean you have to have a big gigantic bowl there, but make sure you taste your food before you serve your food.

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My other favorite thing to do is I say, don't be afraid of fresh. Don't be afraid of getting corn on a cob and just slicing that corn off that cob and using that fresh corn. Don't be afraid to just take a fresh tomato, throw it in some oil, fry it up with some fresh basil and some onions and a bell pepper and have you some sauce. I always encourage people just to go fresh if you can. Don't be afraid to get fresh herbs and make and pull that fresh oregano off that stalk. Or take that sage and slice it up and put it in your dressing or in your meat or whatever you're doing. Don't be afraid of going fresh. You don't have to always use dry spices. You don't have to use canned food. So those are my things. Use your measuring spoons, [and] go fresh.

The dishes Rene Johnson never gets tired of making (or eating)

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Beyond soul food, what are some other cuisines you most enjoy?

I love African food. I love Nigerian food. I love Asian food. I love Italian, but my favorite is African, Nigerian, Jamaican. I love the peppers that they use and the colors that their food brings. And I do love Italian too, because Italians have so much soul and so much passion. So those are my favorite favorites.

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What's a quintessential Nigerian and Jamaican dish that you encourage people to try?

I love my Nigerian oxtails, and I love Teri Peri chicken as well. And with both of those, the base is peppers. So with my Nigerian oxtails, you take red bell peppers and onions and garlic and a bit of lemon. You put it in your blender and that's your base for your oxtails. But Teri Peri chicken is the same thing. It's all peppers, it's red peppers, yellow peppers, a red chile pepper, basil, lemon, olive oil, and you make a base and you drizzle that on your chicken. And it's just amazing. It's just amazing. So those are my two favorites as far as African food is concerned. And my other one is I love African greens, Zimbabwe greens. Zimbabwe greens are when you take some spice and fresh tomatoes and onions and garlic and you sear those. And then you throw your greens inside of them. So I love cooking around the world a lot.

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Is there one dish that you have made a thousand times and will never get tired of making?

I think the one dish that I make a thousand times that I will never get tired of making this my sweet potato waffles. I make a sweet potato waffle that is absolutely amazing.

Is there a dish that I would happily never make again?

I don't think there's anything that I would never ever make again because I think that can make almost everything good. So I don't have a dish that I could say that I would never make again. Okay, maybe Jell-O.

You can keep up with Chef Rene Johnson by following her on Instagram and Blackberry Soul catering on Facebook. Grab a copy of her new cookbook, "From My Heart to Your Table," on Amazon.