

CAREERS

I turned my grandmother's recipes into a \$1 million catering company that feeds people from Sergey Brin to Steph Curry

As told to [Katherine Tangalakis-Lippert](#) 



Blackberry Soul Fine Catering 

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Chef Rene Johnson built a million-dollar soul food empire catering to Bay Area power players.

Using her grandmother's recipes, Blackberry Soul has fed big names like Sergey Brin and Steph Curry.

Now, Johnson coaches entrepreneurs on how to scale their businesses as she did.



This as-told-to essay is based on a conversation with Chef Rene Johnson, the founder of Blackberry Soul Fine Catering and entrepreneur behind Link and Thrive, a mentorship program for business owners. It has been edited for length and clarity.

I didn't even like food as a kid.

What I loved was being with my grandmother, who always made everything from scratch, and the way our family gathered around her food. That's where it started for me — not with cooking, but with connection.

I was her first granddaughter, and I always say she channeled me the most. I cook like her, think like her, have a business mindset like her. Everything I make — the peach cobbler, the red beans and rice, the biscuits — all come from her.

Before I rebuilt my career around her food, I was in the mortgage industry.

I had gotten a job in telephone sales and took to it naturally. When my clients closed on a home, I would gift them a homemade dessert: peach cobbler, pound cake, or banana pudding. That was my way of celebrating them.

When the mortgage industry crashed, I had to figure out what to do with my life. That's when I turned to cooking.

Nobody would have thought that I — a teenage mom without a college degree or formal culinary training — would build a business like this.

My kids were the ones who told me, "Mom, do something with your food." I lived in Georgia for a while and started dropping off meals at barber shops and around the neighborhood, but I couldn't quite get my footing there.

When I came back home to the Bay Area, everything changed. That's when I learned that it's not only about what you do, but also about who you do it with. I tapped into my community, and Blackberry Soul took off.

A broader mindset was key to my growth

At first, I thought I was building a small business, but I knew I had to shift that idea in my head.

I started telling people, "This is not a small business. This is my company." That changed everything: how I showed up, how I hired, how I thought about growing.

A wedding was my first big event. After that, I did a fundraiser for a political event with almost no budget, but everyone important was in the room. They tasted my soul food, and I became the preferred caterer for their events.

At first, I did everything myself, but I was holding on too tightly, trying to control everything. One of my biggest lessons, something I should have done sooner, was learning to let go.

When I finally did build a real crew, that's when the business blew up. As I let other people take over tasks like answering phones or doing the shopping, we grew so much faster than I could have ever imagined.

These days, if I show up to help with an event, sometimes my team will say, "You're not on the schedule. You can go home."

That's when you know you've built something real — when the business can run itself.

Now, Blackberry Soul feeds everyone from our community to major political and business leaders.

We've served thousands of people at once. I've fed 2,500 people at Google, including its cofounder Sergey Brin. I've cooked for Gavin Newsom, Kamala Harris, and so many others, but it's important to me that we treat every client the same.

Whether we're catering for executives or people in my community, I want them to have the same experience — that same "pop" when they take the first bite. So we cook everything from scratch and don't cut corners.

From solo operator to mentor

These days, my passion has grown bigger than food. I still love cooking, but helping other entrepreneurs is my real focus.

I learned everything the hard way. Nobody taught me how to run a business, how to scale, or build a team. I didn't even know I needed PR in the early days.

After I started really growing, people began coming up to me all the time asking for mentorship.

That's why I created Link and Thrive, my coaching program to teach people how to build their own businesses. Rather than being in the kitchen, I now spend most of my days paying it forward.

I always say: You might know how to make a great hamburger, but do you know how to run a hamburger stand?

That's what we focus on — the day-to-day reality of being an entrepreneur. Building your team, creating customer experiences, and navigating the peaks and valleys.

My goal is to pass along the lessons I learned and show people that success is not just about the work. It's about how you show up, connect, and grow.



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