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COOKING FROM THE HEART

Chef Rene Johnson gives soul food a plant-based twist

WORDS | Gina Kelly

Chef Rene Johnson has built much of her career on nurturing her community through plant-based soul food. As the owner of Blackberry Soul, a corporate catering company, Johnson has grown from cooking with her grandmother as a child to running Oakland's number one destination for vegan soul food. Whether she's in the kitchen or stepping up as a mentor, her journey has always been about vibrant flavor, respect for tradition, and plenty of warmth and heart.

Meet Chef Rene Johnson

Chef Rene is defined by dedication—to health, to fostering entrepreneurial growth in her community, and to tradition—while remaining unafraid to shake things up. As the first granddaughter in her family, Johnson recalls cooking alongside her grandmother from an early age. "She brought the country into Oakland, and everything we ate my grandmother made. So, when we had peaches, there were peaches that she canned," explains Johnson. "She stewed tomatoes, she made jelly, she made bread." This focus on fresh, simple ingredients would go on to shape Johnson's approach to cooking in both her personal and professional lives.

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While Johnson has always been a pro in the kitchen, it wasn't until her children began enjoying a plant-based diet that she became interested in the kind of cooking she's now famous for. This interest soon extended to her catering company. After watching her vegan dishes disappear faster than the meat, Johnson knew that Blackberry Soul would become Oakland's premier healthy soul food caterer. >

Taking the Soul Food Stroll

Inspired by a desire to connect with her Oakland neighbors, Johnson came up with the idea for the Soul Food Stroll. At the Stroll, Blackberry Soul opens its doors to the community (of which kids eat free—with the caveat they must serve their parents) and serves a sumptuous, primarily plant-based feast containing crowd pleasers such as sweet potato waffles, biscuits (both sweet and savory), tofu, cobbler, and creamy grits.

Traditional soul food is celebrated for its rich, savory, and smoky flavors, many of which are rooted in Central and West African and Indigenous cuisines. With a roster that includes fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, braised collard greens, and black-eyed peas, these soul food classics are big on taste—as well as saturated fat.

Thanks to Johnson's focus on fresh ingredients, the now-200 people who attend the Stroll can experience a healthier-but-still-authentic side of soul food.

Never sacrificing flavor for the sake of being strictly plant-based, Johnson's technique involves sticking to the basics as often as possible.

Mindful eating: Chef Rene style

When it comes to enjoying food, Johnson has two rules: keep it simple and savor each ingredient. "Many people think that you need to see all the seasonings. You don't. You need to be able to put that food in your mouth and taste the flavor of that red tomato or that fresh pepper," she explains.

Similar to mindful eating—a technique that centers eating as a whole-body experience—Johnson's minimalist approach gives people the opportunity to fully experience each component of their meal. Research shows that mindful eating may be beneficial in terms of improved digestion and stress relief.

Enjoying a plant-based diet may lower your risk of digestive system cancers by up to 30 percent.

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Fresh ingredients and measuring spoons are key

Fresh ingredients stand on their own when Johnson's in the kitchen. "I'm a very simple cook. People don't believe this, but I hate things that have more than five ingredients, so I keep a lot of basic ingredients in my kitchen," she says. As for seasonings, she prefers to work with the classics. You'll never find her without salt, pepper, granulated onion and garlic, Cajun seasoning, chili powder, oregano, basil, and cumin.

A favorite muse for Johnson, the humble tomato is a canvas just waiting to be turned into a simple sauce. She urges, "Instead of opening up a can of tomatoes, I would love for you to cut up a fresh tomato. Throw some olive oil in there. Do some fresh basil, some onion, and garlic, and just see the difference between a can of tomatoes and a fresh tomato. Even just what the coloring looks like."

Similarly, she cites green beans as an example of another blank canvas for home cooks. She recommends "taking some fresh olive oil, throwing in some salt and some pepper, maybe some granulated onion and granulated garlic, something else, or not, and just touching and feeling that realness of food."

Although canned vegetables share a comparable nutrient profile to fresh or frozen, it's important to check labels for added sodium or sugar. Because of high temperatures used in the canning process, vitamins A and C may be depleted.

Proper measuring technique is essential when cooking for a crowd. Johnson swears by this step, saying, "Use your measuring spoon so that everybody can have the same experience every time." While her grandmother may have performed her culinary magic largely by intuition, Johnson's preference for accuracy has real-world benefits, including more control over nutrient intake and portion sizes. >

Uplifting her community

When she's not planning Blackberry Soul's next big catering event, Johnson is still committed to lifting up those around her. Not only does she invite local chefs to build exposure at the Soul Food Stroll, she also facilitates mentorship programs with underserved women and has built Link and Thrive, a business referral program for small business owners.

The importance of life experience isn't lost on her as she develops these relationships. "I love people and building connections, and I wanted to share what I've had to learn the hard way," Johnson says. "I'm not a traditional college student. I've got my school of entrepreneurship, which is a school of transactions and experience."

SUPPLEMENTS TO BOOST DIGESTIVE HEALTH

While a diet rich in plant-based ingredients has been shown to support healthy digestion, pairing it with the right supplements may help the process even further:

- **Probiotics:** Friendly, live bacteria and yeast found in fermented foods; strengthen existing beneficial microbe communities.
- **Prebiotics:** High-fiber foods that feed probiotics.
- **Digestive enzymes:** Taken to aid digestion, can also be found in pineapple and avocado.
- **Mushrooms:** The dietary fiber in mushrooms has a beneficial effect on digestion.

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It's clear from the success of her business ventures and love of plant-based, high-quality ingredients that Johnson's philosophy is having a positive impact on her Oakland community. At the end of the day, this is Johnson's goal. Her motivation is almost always the same: "to touch somebody's heart. To make somebody feel good. I'm going to make somebody smile, and I do that every day and one day at a time."

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