



In this series, Black food writers share the stories of black restaurant and nightlife professionals with the mission of presenting their accomplishments, the adversity they've faced, and their personal experiences to educate, inspire and help foster a more equitable hospitality industry.

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# Tren'ness Woods-Black: Stepping into a Legacy

## By Korsha Wilson

Tren'ness Woods-Black, granddaughter of Sylvia Woods, is walking in the footsteps of her grandmother and making sure she's leaving behind a trail for Black hospitality workers to follow.



When people speak of Harlem, and list landmarks found in the borough, they always mention one restaurant: [Sylvia's](#). Beyond being a haven for delicious soul food since 1962, the dining room has become a meeting space for Harlem, as iconic as the Apollo Theater marquee or Abyssinian Baptist Church.

But for Tren'ness Woods-Black, Sylvia's is more than a restaurant, it's a second home where she works alongside her family and welcomes guests who eventually become family. "We call growing up in our family 'growing up Sylvia's'," Tren'ness Woods-Black says of her upbringing as part of the third generation of the family behind the legendary soul food restaurant. She says her late grandmother understood that in order to truly provide hospitality it has to go hand in hand with humility. "My grandmother didn't like to call the people that came in 'customers', she would always say, they're 'our guests' and they're in our living room when they're in our dining room and we should appreciate that they spent their hard earned dollars with us." It's an ethos that she keeps in mind as she leads restaurant operations, a large Sylvia's product line, a consulting business and as a founding board member of the New York City Hospitality Alliance.



Woods Black says what the restaurant is known for, and what guests have loved over the years and come back for is the company's commitment to serving "unapologetic soul food", a term she uses to describe the menu that Sylvia's. It's about paying testament to a long line of farmers and cooks, and enslaved Africans who took what grew on the land they were forced to maintain and made it into an entire cuisine, nourishing families and providing opportunity for Black cooks and chefs to make a living using their culinary skills. "Someone once asked my grandfather why it was called soul food and he said, 'you know, I think the reason is because it comes from soil'," she says. When she thought about that comment, and her family's long line of cooks and farmers that used their gifts to carve out a life, she saw how the love put into the earth can rival the love put into a dish and served to guests. "That comment really stayed with me," she says. It's a lesson that she brings into her work everyday as she thinks about her brand and about providing hospitality to guests. "This food, this service is paying homage to our history," she says. "Soul food is the original farm to table."



It's also a big part of how she views the future of her work with NYC Hospitality Alliance, a role that requires looking at the culinary industry in New York and at large. "I want to see more inclusion, more recognition, more scholarships for African Americans in hospitality," she says. Seeing how Black culinary innovators are often overlooked despite their brilliance and hard work is something she knows firsthand being the granddaughter of one of New York's most legendary culinarians. When she was younger and worked at Sylvia's as a hostess, she watched chefs, dignitaries, neighbors, presidents and celebrities come to her grandmother's restaurant, and ask for pictures. What she saw later was a business owner who shaped a generation of restaurateurs in New York City and beyond as she was building an empire and breaking barriers as a Black woman in the 1960's without ever getting proper credit for that work.

"My grandmother bought ten buildings in Harlem, owned a city block, has two cookbooks still in print and Sylvia's has 40 product sku's and my grandmother doesn't have a James Beard Foundation award," she says. Noticing how her grandmother is often overlooked has inspired her to push for change in the industry, starting with the [Sylvia and Herbert Woods scholarship](#)

[program](#) which has given out over 130 awards to students, and including her work on the board of NYC Hospitality Alliance. “My goal is to ensure we are the leading hospitality organization that’s going to recognize the contributions of African Americans and make space for the necessary change.”

Recently during a video shoot, Woods-Black noticed that the floor of her family’s restaurant needed to be swept. She could’ve asked for someone to take care of it, but instead she rolled up her sleeves and took care of it and even took a few orders and said hello to longtime customers as she waited for filming to begin. “In my family, you just kind of get in and do whatever needs to be done,” she says. Jumping in and getting it done, while also providing hospitality is just how she was raised and the way her grandmother would want her eponymous restaurant to run.

# Karl Franz Williams: My Turn

## By Petra E. Lewis



A funny thing happened in the midst of the pandemic. Karl Franz Williams, one of the world's top mixologists (point blank) and his businesses began thriving in ways that they hadn't before. One could call it a case of the three R's. Not reading, writing, and arithmetic (Williams received his undergraduate degree from Yale—so, that's covered). But, rather, Recuperation; Renewal; and Recognition. These three R's ushered in a plethora of growth and opportunity for Williams in a world that, for most—and particularly restaurateurs—remains mired in uncertainty.

### **Recuperation**

Williams first recovered literally—after contracting COVID-19 in the spring. Like Isaac Newton, Frida Kahlo, and Matisse—who had inventive breakthroughs during forced bed rest or quarantine—Williams used his convalescence productively. “Once I got COVID, I basically became a researcher,” he says. “That was my job—just doing tons of research when I wasn't sleeping.” This positioned him to pivot once he recovered.





## Renewal

Like most people, and businesses, at the start of the pandemic he was in survival mode. Williams owns two restaurants: the lauded cocktail bar, 67 Orange Street, in Harlem, New York and, the iconic, Prohibition-era, vintage-celebrity favorite, the Anchor Spa, in New Haven, Connecticut.

He and his team kept both afloat through cocktail kits; takeout and delivery; and collaborations. He notes: “Collaboration is key for survival.”

Since his last full-time role in branding and beverage innovation at PepsiCo, Williams has launched four businesses (starting with Society Coffee, 2005, as well as Solomon & Kuff Rum Hall (S&K) in 2015—both Manhattan locations now shuttered). Beyond startup seed, he notes, “The one thing I’ve never had is the amount of capital I needed.”

Then came CARES Act relief: The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). As Williams puts it, though some found it challenging: “Loans that anybody could get.”

Along with receiving an Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL), he elaborates, “One of the reasons why I’ve been able to do as well as I have during the pandemic and to be in a solid place right now is because the pandemic provided some of the most democratic and easy access to capital, certainly at any point in my lifetime and my business lifetime.”

He’d already been recalibrating his businesses pre-pandemic, closing S&K (“the best decision”) and using a “playbook” he’d mastered (helping 67 Orange Street survive its opening, just as the 2008 financial crisis hit), in order to stabilize and rebuild Anchor, “brick by brick.”

Loans in hand, he says, “We were able to quickly level up to the level we were heading to—but that we hadn’t gotten to yet.”



## Recognition

Twelve years in, he says of 67 Orange Street, “We’re one of the oldest [new-guard] cocktail bars, but we have not been recognized the way that some of the other bars that have been here that long have.”

He notes that 67 Orange Street has “never even been nominated” at Tales of the Cocktail, one of the spirits industry’s preeminent conferences. This despite Williams being a graduate of The Bar, a rigorous five-day course and exam, “similar to becoming a sommelier of cocktails and spirits,” that “just a few hundred people” have graduated from—“a handful” of them Black. “I feel like there is very poor recognition of Black folks and places—and what they are doing,” he says, “particularly in craft cocktails.”

Yet, once more, 2020’s grey clouds have a silver lining: “I would argue that one of the great things about the pandemic and this BLM thing,” he says, “is a lot more people want to hear from me than ever before, and they want to talk about me and write about me.”

After reading an interview with Williams in the spirits-industry publication, *SevenFifty Daily*, where he also spoke about imbalances in recognition and rewards for Black mixologists and hospitality owners, David Kaplan, co-owner of cocktail-bar competitor, *Death & Co*, reached out. Williams and Kaplan did a charitable event in November, where each bar’s bartenders swapped places for two nights to highlight diversity and collaboration.

“It was really genuine and cool,” says Williams.

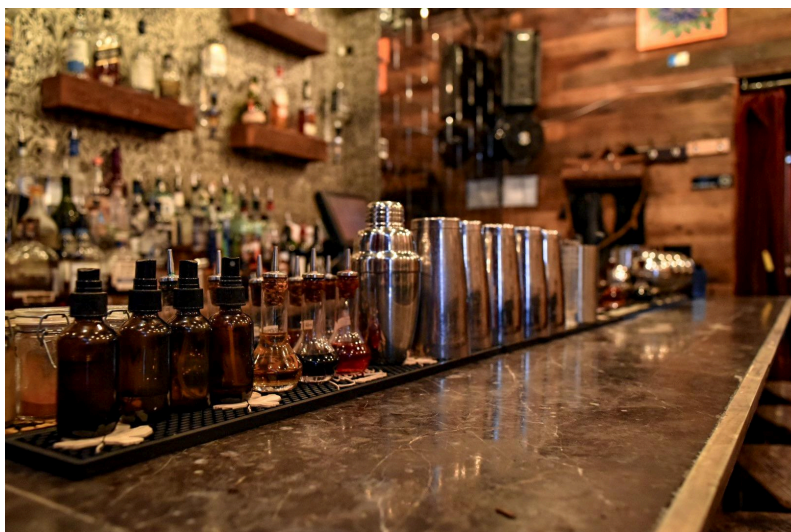


## Reset

Perhaps there should be a fourth “R”...Reset. In the wake of the economic and racial inequities that 2020 further amplified, the hospitality industry can’t continue doing business as usual—and needs to reboot.

"I don't make a habit or an effort about griping. And about saying: Oh, I don't get my shine because I'm Black," says Williams. He continues, "The restaurant business is tough—and it's tough for everybody. That doesn't mean there aren't people who deserve to get more recognition and opportunity—and, given the same amount of cash, can do as much or better." Citing the usual litany of reasons trotted out for why Black hospitality establishments are not doing well (e.g., service or professionalism), Williams says, "I'm calling bullshit on that. You need capital to be successful. And you need exposure."

He continues, "We, as Black entrepreneurs, are extremely talented. We can do things. We've got that hustle. We've got that drive. We know how to make things happen."





## **Redux**

When it comes to capital and exposure, Williams says of his own 2020:

“Right now, what’s happening? I’m getting both. I’ve got capital. I’ve got access. And we’re getting recognized. And the results are showing in our numbers and what we’re doing.”

The irony isn’t lost on him that “finally after all these years,” it all came together for him “with the help of a pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement.”

What’s next? For Williams, greater diversification: a delicious, premium, bottled ginger beer—out early 2021; a semi-autobiographical, Harlem-focused cocktail book (only one other cocktail book written by a black author has been published in the last 100 years); more real estate investments; and putting his “money, and experience, and direction behind smart folks who have great ideas.”

Says Williams, “If we never win a plate at Tales [of the Cocktail] for anything that I do—OK.”

Shrugging, he adds, “But there are a lot of great bars with [trophy] plates from Tales of the Cocktail that are no longer open.”

His final word on recognition: “I’m not the person who walks around looking for handouts. I don’t need people to necessarily validate me.” He adds, “The greatest validation is having people walk into my places and be extremely happy, enjoying themselves. That—and seeing the register ring.”



## Loycent Gordon On Giving From the Heart

### By Korsha Wilson



When Loycent Gordon heard about the potential closing of Neirs Tavern on 78th Street in Woodhaven, NY in 2009, he knew someone should do something to keep the space open. “It’s a historic place that’s part of the fabric of New York City history,” he says of the restaurant and bar. Open since 1829, Neirs Tavern had become a neighborhood fixture and landmark where locals could stop by for a drink or dinner with their family. As the closing date inched closer and closer, Gordon determined there wasn’t someone who was going to step in and save this bar. “Three days before it closed, I was like, ‘well, who’s going to do something’,” he remembers asking himself. “So I said, ‘you know what, I’m gonna do something’.” Now, 11 years later Gordon is the owner of this casual, neighborhood bar, serving a menu of comforting dishes like burgers, fish and chips and beef stew.

Owning a bar has come with its share of challenges that have put his “feet in the fire”, as he says. “I got into this with no experience,” he says of the early days of owning the restaurant. He’s made plenty of mistakes, he says, but he’s gotten one thing right since day one: providing hospitality from the heart. “When I’m looking back and thinking about how I was able to succeed, I’ve realized it was creating strong customer relationships,” he says.



Gordon moved to the United States at ten years old, from Jamaica and saw first hand how neighbors and community can come together to provide support for his family who was new to the United States. "I wanted to give back to this country as an immigrant because they gave me so much," he says. That community has supported him and Neirs through tough times.

In 2019, Neirs Tavern was nearly shut down by a rent increase and was able to stay open thanks to a grant from a local small business association and then, earlier this year as a pandemic ravaged the restaurant industry nationwide, the restaurant shut down and customers created a GoFundMe to support Neirs' workers. Then over the summer the restaurant was hit by burglars. Amidst wave after wave of challenges, the community stepped in to help. Gordon started a virtual show and people contributed ideas, buying gift cards and even helped set up outdoor dining, bringing by picnic tables and setting up tents. "This year, the constant changes and uncertainty of where things are going, we were just kind of lost," Gordon says of running a restaurant in this challenging year. "For me personally one thing that's certain in this business is people still crave connection and people still want to get together somehow."



Providing hospitality to someone is to see them and what you can do for them in a way that's empowering to both parties, Gordon says. Looking at his neighborhood and his bar as a place where that neighborhood can come together and relax over good food and a drink enables him to think about how he can best provide space for them and foster those connections with the community. "I call it empowered contributions, and they can be both large and small," he says. "You don't get anything out of life by thinking what can I get for it, you gotta start out by asking questions like, 'what can I give? What can I offer? Who can I help?'" He says that's ultimately why he stepped up to keep Neirs open back in 2009. "People have a generational history of knowledge and memories in this restaurant. It's almost like a people's museum and I figure the average person can have their memories at a place that means a lot to them." Being "responsible for people's memories" keeps him going.

And he says his guests can see that when they come into the restaurant. "Your customer community and having a strong relationship with them is the key to weathering any storm," he says. But there's something else too that makes Neirs a special place to be. "When you have passion and you believe in something you can do anything," Gordon adds. At the end of a challenging year, with twists and turns, providing hospitality for his customers keeps him going and shows him the way forward. "There's no other way to create value."



Images credit: Anastasia Rusetskaya

# Safari's Concrete Jungle Journey

By Petra E. Lewis

When Maymuuna Birjeeb was asked why she and her husband, Shakib Farah, chose the name “Safari” for their Harlem-based Somali restaurant, she explained that it has a double meaning.



"I wanted something that when you see it, you think of Africa," Birjeeb said of the Swahili term. "When you hear 'safari,' of course you're thinking about safari in Africa."

However, going one level deeper, she shared: In Swahili, "safari" means journey. Birjeeb, who goes by the name Mona, grew up in Sweden and worked in finance at JPMorgan Chase prior to opening the restaurant. Her husband had been an engineer. Mona had always been passionate about food, particularly Somali food.

Since there are not that many Somalis in New York, she was often confused for being Ethiopian. When she worked at the bank, once people learned she was Somali, she recalls that she often found herself fielding questions about her heritage, particularly: "What's Somali food like? What do you guys eat?"

Her husband, who is also Somali and the restaurant's chef, is the youngest of ten children, and learned about cooking from his mother.

Mona elaborates that it was a combination of New Yorkers' unfamiliarity with Somalia and the couple's missing food from home that inspired their idea of "opening a Somali restaurant, and introducing Somali food and culture to New Yorkers."

She says of her spouse, "He always had a passion about food, and when we met, we always had the same goal, same passion. I was like: Well, let's come together and make our dream come true."



Starting off, she and her husband bootstrapped their restaurant launch. “Literally,” she recalls of her job, “I quit. And I was like I’m going to follow my dream.” They used their savings and borrowed money from family. They also tried to get a loan in the midst of their launch and weren’t approved—it wouldn’t be the last time.

Because her personal credit was strong, Mona was surprised by the rejection. Starting out, they had a year’s worth of rent saved. Then she and her husband used their credit cards when they ran out of money.



Reflecting on the experience, she says, “It was kind of scary leaving your secure job to follow your dream and starting up a restaurant...you don’t know anything about.” She adds, “Everything you have passion about, there’s a risk behind it as an entrepreneur.”

She recalls lenders telling them, “The idea you have is great.” But... Even though her personal credit was good: They had never had a business. And restaurants are risky—many don’t survive. And people had never heard about Somali food, and bankers didn’t know how people would react. And, and, and...

“But that didn’t stop us,” she said firmly. “It was very challenging. I didn’t see it at the time. I was seeing what I was going to do, what it’s going to look like, and I can provide that food people are looking for.”

But as she and her husband became seasoned business owners (they opened their restaurant in May of 2015) they became wizened—and perhaps jaded—that race played a factor, too.

“Especially when you’re black and you never did business,” says Mona, “there’s not that much funding for you out there.”



Still, she wished she hadn't been so green starting out. "I didn't know," she says candidly. "I didn't have that connection." By this she means being in touch with more experienced entrepreneurs. "I didn't know how hard it is," she adds.

Having that peer connection with other restaurateurs would have helped the pair understand the potential difficulties and pitfalls of business ownership on the horizon, and better navigate complex and tricky topics, like obtaining funding.

Then came the pandemic—and many cliffs and forks in the road they could never have foreseen. No one could.

The start of the pandemic was so sudden, she and her husband decided to shut the restaurant for two weeks—and get their bearings. She recalled, "We didn't know what to do. We were like, let's sit down and figure out what is going to happen." Like many restaurants they pivoted to takeout and delivery. But in the midst of this, some of their employees became scared of contracting COVID-19 and left.

They didn't have any cash reserves, so they sought loans again, applying for all the available funding. It was the same as their last loan attempt: Nothing. No Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) or Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) approvals. She remembered saying to her husband, "Let's do it. You know we always do it ourselves."

Many small business owners still have bumps, bruises, and bandages to show from their PPP application failures. However, Safari's PPP odyssey has been particularly dizzying. It was an uphill climb for them, as it was for many, yet "I didn't give up," she said. "I kept sending them letter after letter." PPP money dried up, but she kept reapplying. The frustration still thick in her voice she said, "Every time they made one mistake, it set me back four weeks to get an answer again."

The couple actually was approved for a \$50,000 loan in December 2020. They were happy for the money, she said, even though they should have been eligible for more. Then they experienced a snafu where they were told that they hadn't submitted enough paperwork to prove they are the owners. So, the loan still has not been released.

Still exasperated, she said of that time, "I was like, they're not going to destroy my Christmas over this mess." So, they doubled down on the DIY path that has always kept them afloat and brainstormed inexpensive ways to innovate.

Pre-pandemic, their restaurant, located on 116<sup>th</sup> Street, was small, but mighty. But during the pandemic their operation's diminutive size became a liability when it came to outdoor dining, which is based on a restaurant's normal indoor capacity. During the warm months, their allotment outside was fewer than 12 chairs.

“Indoor is hardest,” she said. “it’s 25% “And that’s not helping us.” She added, “The transition from dining in to takeout is really a struggle. It is hard, but we’re getting there. We’re learning every day.” Then winter came. Her husband had built the outdoor seating himself—with no funding.



When the wind blew too strongly, they were forced to take it down. And now, in the colder months, outdoor-heating became an additional expense, so they’ve eliminated their exterior seating for the winter. They’re trying to build a coffee bar outside instead. “I want to meet them there,” she says of customers, “since they cannot come in here.”

Despite their own personal setbacks, during the height of the pandemic, the couple donated food. They’re not the only restaurant to do so, but it’s meaningful that they were willing to help others, even as they were facing uncertainty.

Mona confides, “I’m from a culture where if you have five dollars, you share it. If you see someone who has less than you, and you have a bread or tea and you’re stronger, and that other person is dying, you give it—instead of eating it.” Their giving coincided with the couple’s celebrating Ramadan.

Mona continues, “Being in Harlem and seeing all those people with no food, it just broke my heart.” She remembered saying to her husband, “God will help us in another way.” For them, the experience of seeing other people, particularly those experiencing food insecurity, be able to eat was its own reward. “The least thing you can do is give them food,” she said, “if you can’t give them anything else.

The sentiment she shared with her husband about divine providence taking care of their selfless giving came full circle, in a beautiful way.

Pre-pandemic, she had once had a visit from an eight-year-old boy, accompanied by his mother, who wanted to interview the couple for a school assignment. As he asked questions about how they had started their business, he became very inspired. Mona thought, “That was great.”

Even greater? Mona shared of the boy, “When COVID happened, his mom was the first customer reaching out—asking us how we’re doing?” Her husband was a doctor at NYU Langone Hospital, and the child’s parents collected donations from friends, then gave the money to Safari so they could feed first responders at that hospital.

The best way to describe where Safari is now is “parlay.” They’re parlaying past and present opportunities into larger ones as they try to strategize their post-pandemic future.

Like most business owners, the pair is seeking ways to diversify their revenue streams. They’d been selling a bottled hot sauce for several years online, but that has slowed down with all they’re juggling during the pandemic. They have long-term plans to sell the hot sauce at retailers like Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s. They’re also hoping to get a license to open a food truck. They had applied in 2018, but licensing for trucks had temporarily shut down.

They’re also trying to roll out a plan to sell weekly meal plans online that customers can pre-order, and Safari can drop off. The menu would be different from what they offer at the restaurant. It will be lighter, she says, with more crepes and Somali-style food. She compares it to a Bento box. It’s for customers who don’t want to go out and eat, but want more diverse and healthy eating options. The pricing for a weekly plan would be less expensive than comparable daily takeout at the restaurant.

In addition to the meals they have donated, a year into the pandemic, the husband and wife continue to demonstrate their altruism in how they’ve restructured their product offerings. Specifically: Their new “family” meals. Since some who would like to patronize their business may now be financially unable to do so, this new offering can serve 5-6 people affordably, for only \$40.

Mona speaks of the “family” in the meal plan as literally being the entire Harlem community. She shared, “A lot of people can eat, or they can buy it for other people who don’t have food.” She continued, “People don’t have any money, anyway. And there are so many [restaurant industry] restrictions. Still, we cannot pay our bills, but at least we can sell, so we can help the community, too. Money doesn’t mean anything anymore.”

Potential big breaks may have been derailed, but the couple remains undeterred. Whether it’s a penny, a speck of dust, or a stick, they’re determined to maximize whatever they have in their hand at any given moment—large or small.

What is Somali culture like? There’s an old saying for book writers and other creatives: Show—don’t tell. As mentioned, part of the couple’s mission in opening the restaurant was to teach New Yorkers about Somali culture. They’ve done so by simply being, by living it—as people who view the world not in terms of “I,” but “we.”

On a lighter note, when asked what one thing the couple wants people to know about the restaurant—and each other—that most people don’t, the husband, Shakib, talks logistics.

He speaks of the many hats they wear: working both the front and the back ends of the business; executing the communications, administration, and emails; and soliciting new clients.” Then off he went, to deliver an order of wings for a customer’s Super Bowl party.

Given her turn, Mona said, “He thinks I’m stubborn, because I like things in a certain way. He’s more, like, laid back. He wants me to relax; I don’t know how to relax.” She begins to gesticulate with her hands, making a zapping sound, like that of dangerous, high voltage. “Crazy,” she says.” Then her answer heats up, spicy as pepper sauce. “They think it’s cute,” she says of people, “that we’re husband and wife working together. It’s not that cute. It’s really tough.” She laughs scandalously, in that knowing way of true love, one half of a pair—when a couple is committed, in sickness and in health, for the long haul.

The pandemic continues to bring new daily twists and turns.

But, just like in times past, the couple’s passion for their restaurant’s mission and sharing Somali food and culture will help them get through these tough times—and keep going, growing, and rising. The journey continues.



# A Childhood Dream of Building Community

## By Vonnie Williams

Starting a restaurant may be the last thing on anyone's mind after obtaining a law degree and an MBA. For Beatrice Ajaero, it was part of her plan all along.

"I knew I was very passionate about the food space from a very early age, and my earliest preparation was around baking," Ajaero says. However, as a child of immigrant parents from Nigeria, Ajaero was encouraged to build a foundation outside of the culinary arts first. "My parents were very clear that they wanted me to be prepared in a wide range of skill sets before entering into the culinary realm," she says. Ajaero honored her parents' wishes and attended law school, then business school at Bard, where her capstone project centered around adding more West African food options in college towns.

It was the start of an idea that would take root—and part of Ajaero's bigger dream to showcase West African food to the masses. Last year, that dream was fully realized with Nneji, a West African restaurant comfortably nestled in Astoria's multicultural fabric. "We were looking for a way to tell the story of West African food," she says. "We wanted to have a place that could speak to preserving our heritage and become a gathering point for the community."



Community and heritage are two words Ajaero holds dear—and is embodied in the very name of her restaurant. Nneji is the middle name of her youngest sister and means “mother to hold onto” which translates to always being connected to one’s maternal lineage in Igbo, a language and ethnic group in Southeast Nigeria. The idea of umunne, or never forgetting where one comes from, is at the center of Nneji. “Umunne is the place where you can do no wrong,” Ajaero says. “Your umunne has to carry you. If you’ve ever committed some kind of calamity and you’re looking for a place to hold you—no matter where you are in the world—umunne has to open their doors to you and embrace you.”

This spirit of radical acceptance and belonging is channeled in Nneji’s cozy space, with warm terracotta walls adorned with African mudcloth artwork in earthy tones, and vibrantly colored Ankara fabrics used as decor. West African pantry staples, such as garri, mingle with Grecian baklava and Italian biscotti stocked in a pastry counter, a nod to some of the longstanding communities that have cemented their place in Astoria. Ajaero’s food—like her goat meat stew, punctuated with a ginger and Scotch bonnet pepper blend and accompanied with a choice of fonio, among other grains—are equally comforting, hearty, and warm. “I’m channeling a lot of my mother’s and aunt’s recipes, particularly from my umunne where every gathering point was around food,” Ajaero says. “We really look to share that with every guest that comes through our doors.”



Nneji proudly serves as the physical manifestation of umunne, a tribute to kinship, and the food traditions she cherished in childhood for all to enjoy—and a classroom for customers curious about West Africa’s myriad cuisines. “My hope is to have West African food become a very commonly sought after choice for dining,” she says. “It’s something that we’re doing one guest at a time, and one conversation at a time.”

Ajaero doesn’t want to limit the conversations to customers, either—she wants them to catalyze connections between Nneji and some of Astoria’s ethnic enclaves. “It’s our hope that in engaging and examining these crossroads, we hear about recipes that come from a wide range of food traditions that cross into ours,” Ajaero says, citing the Greek and Serbian communities as examples.

With Nneji, Ajaero now counts herself as part of Astoria’s multicultural tapestry. And, despite being the neighborhood’s first West African restaurant, Ajaero knows she’s part of a unique legacy—and a testament to Astoria’s history. “We’re one of many links in the character of Astoria,” Ajaero says. “Queens is the world’s corner.”

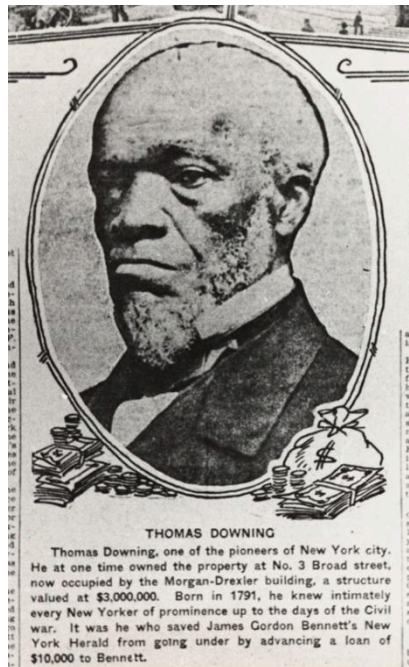
# Thomas Downing: Oysters and Civil Rights

## By Daniel Levinson Wilk, Professor of American History at SUNY-Fashion Institute of Technology

The intertwined history of restaurants and civil rights goes back much further in U.S. history, maybe even to Black Sam Fraunces, who founded Fraunces Tavern in New York (it's still there), waited on George Washington and his band of revolutionaries.

African American restaurateurs have a long history of fighting for freedom. Just last year, Georgetown professor Marcia Chatelain published *Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America*, a book that looks back on ways Black franchisers of McDonald's pushed for civil and social equality. The intertwined history of restaurants and civil rights goes back much further in U.S. history, maybe even to Black Sam Fraunces, who founded Fraunces Tavern in New York (it's still there), waited on George Washington and his band of revolutionaries, and may have foiled an assassination plot against Washington's life.

One of the most interesting civil rights restaurateurs in New York's history is Thomas Downing. In the decades before the Civil War, Downing owned and ran an oyster cellar that attracted the city's elites. In that time, oysters were plentiful—you could pluck them right out of the harbor—and oyster cellars lined the Bowery, the working-class entertainment district. Oyster cellars were the McDonald's of their era: fast, cheap, popular. They tended to exclude most women, who could not afford the impropriety of walking up and down the cellar stairs; they feared their skirts might ride up to reveal an ankle.



Just as Daniel Boulud introduced the \$27 hamburger in 2001, Thomas Downing popularized the high-low oyster cellar. He opened his place in the 1820s at the corner of Wall Street and Broad,



by the current site of the New York Stock Exchange. It was an unusual neighborhood for an oyster cellar, the décor was fancy (damask curtains, mirrors, a chandelier), and the food was gussied up (scalloped oysters, fish with oyster sauce, poached turkey stuffed with oysters). The wealthy financiers, merchants, politicians, and journalists who lived and worked in the area began to frequent his establishment. His fame grew, and eventually he received an endorsement from Queen Victoria for his pickled oysters.

Downing was a Black man who served a rich white clientele, supporting, at least implicitly, the growing conditions of racial segregation. In his off hours, though, he fought for civil rights. He was one of the wealthiest Black men in New York (by the 1850s, he was estimated to be worth \$100,000; that's about \$3.5 million today), and used his wealth for political goals. He donated liberally to civil rights organizations that fought slavery in the South, kidnapping of fugitive slaves (and, sometimes, free Blacks) in the North, and the growing specter of Jim Crow segregation laws that spread through New York and other northern states decades before the South adopted them. He attended civil rights meetings, sometimes speaking from the podium. Occasionally he catered events for civil rights organizations. He successfully lobbied his son's school to hire Black teachers. In 1840, he was thrown off a streetcar and beaten for refusing to disembark because of the presence of two white women. It almost happened again in 1855, but that time he fended off the conductor of a horse-drawn trolley with a brass key that the conductor might have mistaken for a knife.



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Did his rich white customers know about his political activism? Probably some did, but they chose to ignore it. In 1850, a white oysterman published an article calling him “a notorious abolitionist,” but it didn’t affect his business. It’s not that his white patrons supported his political views—right up until the Civil War, white New Yorkers were mostly racists and largely supporters of slavery in the South. But their desire for good oysters and the warm hospitality of Thomas



Downing outweighed any scruples. Today, good food keeps bringing people of different political stripes together. Hopefully that will always be the case.

1 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. (1860). Thomas Downing, New York City pioneer and restaurant owner Retrieved from <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8692940a-ff1b-1f62-e040-e00a180661b3>  
2 The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. (1882). The Great Fire, December 16 and 17, 1835. Retrieved from <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-ce5b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>