

# Black Chefs' Struggle for the Top



Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times

A matter of pride: Matthew Raiford's father did not want him to be a chef.

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MILTON GUZMAN arrived in the kitchen of Alinea, an avant-garde restaurant in Chicago, with a prestigious culinary degree and a sterling recommendation from the New York restaurant Per Se.



Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

Beyond Fried Chicken: Keith Williams, left, said he jumped at the chance to be the executive chef at BG in Bergdorf Goodman. Lloyd Roberts is his executive sous-chef.

He didn't feel he had truly made it, though, until the freezer broke down several months after the opening. Forced to remake a tray of melted confections as dinner was about to begin, the pastry chef, Alex Stupak, asked Mr. Guzman to spray a tray of newly frozen ganache with liquid chocolate, a technique requiring such speed and finesse that Mr. Stupak always did it himself.

Mr. Guzman, now 29, remembers that as he watched the chocolate receive layer upon layer of cocoa-butter mist from his paint gun, he was proud: he felt he truly belonged. But he still knew that he stood out from the rest of the staff. He was, once again, the only black chef.

Before going to Alinea, he had been the only black chef at Per Se. And at the French Culinary Institute in Manhattan he had been the only black student in his class. "Why is that?" he wondered. "Where are they?"

Years ago, when cooking at even the best restaurants was considered menial labor, blacks often worked the stoves. But as employment options opened up for blacks in the 1960's and 70's, kitchen work became less attractive. Now, with the restaurant industry booming and chefs becoming celebrities and wealthy entrepreneurs, few blacks are sharing in that success, and as young black men and women enter the profession they are finding few mentors or peers. "The adulation that the chef gets now and the rank that chefs are on the social scale now, African-Americans are not taking part of it at all," said the chef and cookbook author Jacques Pépin.

Ask any professional cook to name one black chef other than Marcus Samuelsson, at Aquavit in Manhattan, and you're likely to hear silence, followed by a nervous chuckle. That was Mr. Guzman's response.

Mr. Samuelsson said that blacks fill the ranks of lower-paying and nonmanagement positions in kitchens throughout the industry, "but not in the fine-dining community."

"The sadness of it," he said, "is I can mention every black chef on one hand."

Interviews with dozens of black chefs and restaurateurs revealed that struggles with family members, struggles with employers and struggles with themselves have all contributed to the scarcity.

Mr. Guzman said that when he told his family in 2003 that he was leaving his job as a client manager for ACNielsen after six years to become a chef, his parents "thought I was taking a step backward."

"I don't think cooking, when parents want their children to grow up and prosper, it's something that comes to mind," he added. What is more likely to come to mind, in his words, is "the house Negro" or Aunt Jemima.

That might be one reason why of 2,700 students at the Culinary Institute of America, in Hyde Park, N.Y., 85 list themselves as African-American, up from only 49 in 2001.

One of those students is Matthew Raiford, who delayed attending the school for 10 years because his father forbade him to enter an industry that had virtually no black success stories.

"African-American parents — our parents — were Pullman porters and waiters and waitresses," said Mr. Raiford, an Atlanta chef who has returned to the institute to earn his bachelor's degree. "Once they had the ability for their children not to do that, they didn't want to choose that."

The dining rooms of high-end restaurants often hold little more attraction for African-Americans than the kitchens.

"It's very common that you go and don't see a single black face in the entire restaurant," said Alain Joseph, a black chef in the test kitchen at Emeril Lagasse's headquarters in New Orleans. "A restaurant with 200 people, you don't see a single black face."

"If you never had that exposure to even dine in a fine-dining restaurant," Mr. Joseph said, "the thought of getting into the kitchen is greatly diminished."

But while cultural stigmas have held back many aspiring chefs, others blame racism. Joe Brown, the chef at M<sup>e</sup>lange Cafe, which he owns with his wife in Cherry Hill, N.J., remembers, at his first job, being choked and called a racial epithet by the chef. He didn't stay long, but he continued to cook at numerous other restaurants.

Lance Whitney Knowling, a veteran of high-end Manhattan kitchens who is now the chef and owner of Indigo Smoke in Montclair, N.J., said that five years ago he received a call from the owner of an upscale restaurant in New Jersey to whom he had sent a cover letter and r<sup>e</sup>sum<sup>e</sup>.

"I'd have to have somebody like you," Mr. Knowling recalled the restaurateur's saying. "I couldn't have a black guy or a Latin guy back there, because it would make my customers uncomfortable." When Mr. Knowling said he was black, the restaurateur said, "You're kidding." No, Mr. Knowling said. The conversation grew awkward, and the restaurateur apologized.

Even in questioning a chef's qualifications, employers can reveal their prejudices.

Keith Williams, 47, said that he jumped at an offer last year to be executive chef at the chic restaurant BG at Bergdorf Goodman in Manhattan, but that job discussions in the past had been less pleasant.

"The first thing they say is, 'The only thing you know about is fried chicken and collard greens,'" Mr. Williams said. "And anybody you know that's in this business that's a black chef — in most cases that's what he's cooking. Even if he came out of a French kitchen, he ends up cooking Southern food."

Mr. Knowling pointed to his own experience: "I'm classically French trained. I wanted to be the French chef, and that's what I studied for years and years, and now I run a barbecue restaurant — an upscale barbecue restaurant and soul food restaurant."

Black chefs aren't the only workers to deal with insensitivity in restaurant kitchens, where abuse can be freely ladled out when the pressure gets high. Countless numbers of Hispanic workers have advanced through the ranks in top kitchens in the face of slurs and prejudice. And women have braved flagrant sexism that was once endemic in the male-dominated kitchen. But black chefs say the abuse raises especially sensitive questions of respect.

Lloyd Roberts, 31, who is Mr. Williams's executive sous-chef at BG and is Jamaican, said his fellow black graduates of the New York Restaurant School are not comfortable facing that sort of abuse when they are the only blacks. "It's hard for African-Americans who were born here," he said.

"It's as if the chef is picking on them," he added, "when in reality he's not."

That's not much of an issue for restaurants if they've had few black employees.

"We have had very few African-Americans apply for cooking positions over all in the 18 years I've been at Zuni Cafe, out of what I'd guess is thousands of applicants," said Judy Rodgers, the executive chef of the restaurant, in San Francisco.

The chef Tom Colicchio said there were few blacks in his kitchens, including those at Gramercy Tavern and Craft. "Those roles are not being filled," he said, "and we're not getting the applications."

And since many applicants hear of opportunities through word of mouth, the scarcity can be self-perpetuating.

"For you to move up in this world, it's not just talent anymore; it's who you know," said Walter King, 36, a 1990 graduate of the Culinary Institute of America who left the professional kitchen in frustration several years ago to work in New York real estate. "And there's not enough of us in high positions to play the 'who you know' game."

One person in a high position who has helped blacks to succeed is [Jean-Georges Vongerichten](#), whose restaurants have been incubators for the careers of several talented black chefs. Sylva Senate and Greg Gourdet are chefs de cuisine at two of Mr. Vongerichten's places, Mercer Kitchen and 66, respectively. Mr. Williams and Mr. Roberts of BG both rose at Vong, as did Charlene Shade, who has just been hired as executive chef at the Morgan Dining Room and the Morgan Cafe, which are to open soon at the Morgan Library. And moving up through the ranks of Jean Georges is Preston Clark, a son of Patrick Clark, who gained fame at Tavern on the Green. Patrick Clark, who died in 1998 at 42, was one of the first bona fide celebrity chefs and a role model for many, black and white.

Even with the difficulty of advancement, some successful black chefs say that, for younger blacks, the rewards are now clearly worth the struggle. As Gerry Garvin, who started as a dishwasher in his hometown, Atlanta, and is now host of the cooking show "Turn Up the Heat With G. Garvin" on the TV One network, put it: "I heard everything you hear when you're a young black child coming into a culinary world where it was 90 percent European and a few white guys from Jersey. You can ride that culinary horror story of racism, and it doesn't go much further. Or you can embrace it, realize it happened and try to make it different for guys who are coming into the business, particularly young black males, and teach them how to get past the things I had to deal with."

Richard Grausman, president and founder of the Careers Through Culinary Arts Program, which has headquarters in New York and provides scholarships and guidance for high school students interested in culinary careers, said the new acclaim for chefs in general is helping to breach the barriers.

At first, Mr. Grausman said, "when I saw somebody had talent, they might say, Yes, but my mother doesn't want me to, or my family doesn't want me to."

"That prevailed up until the last few years," he continued, "when the explosion of food and chefs' success has come through the Food Network and other TV shows. So that now I'm not hearing that. I haven't had resistance from family to let their kids pursue a career. The floodgates haven't opened, but that resistance doesn't seem to be there any longer, which is a big, big plus."

As at the Culinary Institute of America, the black enrollment at the French Culinary Institute has risen by about half since 2002. Of the approximately 480 students, 35 to 40 are black, said officials at the school, who attributed much of the increase to scholarships from Mr. Grausman's program.

One of those scholarships was won by Janise Addison, 19, of Corona, Queens, who graduated from the institute last year. She worked first at Town in New York; then, through word of mouth, she found her current job as a pastry chef at the Modern.

"You make it based on what you can do or can't do," she said recently at the restaurant before beginning her shift.

After graduating from Stanford, Beth Setrakian, 49, got her first job as a pastry chef in 1979 for Mark Miller at the Fourth Street Grill in Berkeley, Calif., where, she said, "I was definitely the only African-American in the kitchen." She opened her own business, Beth's Fine Desserts, in San Francisco in 1988; she said it now has annual sales of around \$8 million.

"There are so many black cooks," she said, adding: "We're on the verge of change. And thank goodness, because the heritage that we bring is a great addition to American cuisine as a whole."