

Rising above

[Lindsey Nair](#)



Editors note: In an earlier version of this story, Domonique Finney's last name was spelled incorrectly. The story has been updated to reflect the correct spelling.

Derrick Beverly always wanted to be a chef.

In high school in Indiana, he was the only boy in home economics class.

At church, he beat out 11 girls in the youth bake-off.

Now the Henry County man has been in the kitchen for 15 years, ever since his graduation from Johnson & Wales University in 1993.

Professional cooks run in Beverly's family, so it's hard for him to understand why he's one of the only black chefs in Southwest Virginia -- and the only one in the American Culinary Federation's Southwestern Virginia chapter.

"Coming up through this field through the years, I have grown accustomed to that," he said, "and that just makes me want to work even harder."

Statistics show that the number of black culinary students in America is fairly small.

At Johnson & Wales, about 600 out of 5,250 culinary students are black -- that's 11.6 percent -- but the school's ethnic information is only based on students who volunteer it.

The Culinary Institute of America had 88 black students out of 2,700 in 2006. A spokesman did not return phone calls for more recent figures.

At Roanoke's new Culinary Arts Institute, which is housed in the former Ebony Club in Gainsboro, there are eight black students out of about 110, according to Virginia Western Community College.

Gerry Fernandez, president and founder of the Multicultural Food Service and Hospitality Alliance, a national nonprofit think tank, says the scarcity of black chefs is a nationwide problem that needs to be addressed.

"It is an issue," he said, "and I'll tell you what I think is driving the agenda."

Not enough role models

Fernandez, who is black, said that before the civil rights movement, blacks were only welcome in restaurants and hotels as employees.

"People don't like to talk about it, but our heritage in the hospitality industry routinely denied blacks access as customers," he said.

Post-civil rights, that sense of exclusion remained a perception, if not a reality, Fernandez said. And when black parents prepared to send their children off to college, the last place they wanted them to end up was in a kitchen or a hotel lobby.

Fernandez also believes that modern black culture is driven by get-rich-quick success stories. Blacks see images of their fellow man making big bucks in the sports and music industries, but not in the culinary field, he said.

"The imagery is all wrong," he said. "They do not see images of blacks being successful behind the stove."

Alex Askew, president of the Black Culinarian Alliance, pointed out that you don't see black celebrity chefs on television. In fact, until the Food Network premiered its new "Down Home with the Neelys" Saturday, black cooks appeared on shows only as guests.

A spokesman for the Food Network did not return a call for comment.



Derrick Beverly carries a wedding cake to a customer while employee Martha Gwynn works on a birthday cake.

Josh Meltzer | The Roanoke Times

A champion for change

None of that stopped Beverly, who recently left a seven-year stint as executive chef at Chatmoss Country Club in Martinsville to start his own bakery, The Cake and Dessert Pantry, in Ridgeway.

Beverly, 37, who also teaches culinary classes at Patrick Henry Community College, said he has always strived to mentor youth who are interested in the field. Beverly says he has never intentionally supported one ethnic group over another -- in fact, he has been more concerned with boosting the number of female chefs in the field.

But of the six students who left his tutelage to complete culinary school, four were black.

"I want to be known as a chef who can actually teach and motivate and really just push or pull the best chef in you out for everyone else to see," he said. "It makes no difference what color you are -- if you have that strong inner ambition to tackle this profession, I will stand behind you one hundred percent."

He agrees that because of the past, culinary jobs still hold a negative connotation for some blacks. He has seen it in his own students and employees.

"If it ever comes up, which it does, I squash it right there," he said. "It is up to you to think differently."

Following their dreams

Domonique Finney and Tamika Smith, both of Roanoke, are thinking differently.

The two young black women are both students in Virginia Western's culinary program, and they both dream of running their own restaurant or catering business someday.

"Being a chef was my own path to take," said Finney, 24.

She says some of her peers may not think of cooking as a way to express creativity. And she wonders if others may associate culinary careers with fast food, not high-paying positions in restaurants and hotels.

"Maybe it's just [that] people don't know what's out there," Finney said.

Smith, 28, says she wanted to be a chef ever since she watched her grandmother whip up meals from scratch in the kitchen. She thinks many blacks don't think of cooking as a way to make good money.

As Fernandez pointed out, some top chefs can pull in upwards of \$200,000 per year.

Personally, Smith said, if she ever makes it to the executive-chef level, she'll be "ecstatic."

"I would love it," she said.

But increasing the number of black graduates from Roanoke's culinary program doesn't necessarily mean we'll see more black chefs in our restaurant kitchens.

Finney and Smith both said that when they graduate from the culinary program, they want to move to a city with more opportunities for themselves and their children.

"She is my inspiration to venture out and do more with my life," Finney said of her infant daughter. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life in Roanoke."

Askew, with the BCA, believes it's important to encourage all minorities -- not just blacks -- to pursue culinary careers. Fernandez agreed, saying his organization is working on a strategy to attract a more diverse work force to the field. He hopes to roll something out within the year.

In order for his group's efforts to be successful, Fernandez said, others in the culinary community will have to join in and pour more energy into a solution.

"Nobody is doing much because they haven't woken up to the fact that this is the future of our work force."