Restaurants

Chef 'JJ' Johnson Wants to Take Your Taste Buds on a FieldTrip

Slaven Vlasic/Getty Images

SHARE: ✉ f 🐦 P

We take a look behind the inspiration for his unique dining experience in Harlem.

By Kwin Mosby on September 14, 2020

The ability to travel has stalled for many of us over the past few months due to pandemic, but chef Joseph Johnson and his staff at FieldTrip, a community-based dining experience in Harlem, want to take you to explore different cultures around the world through the restaurant's food. Albeit, it's no substitute for traveling real time, but Johnson hopes you leave his restaurant with happy and culturally aware taste buds. But before we talk more about FieldTrip, let's take a step back and find out more about the man behind this popular restaurant, located in one of New York City's most vibrant neighborhoods.

Inspiration, Family, and Food

RICE
IS
CULTURE

Courtesy FieldTrip

DEPARTURES
Get Social
DAILY DOSE OF LUXURY
Follow Us

Johnson, also known as Chef JJ, was born in Long Island, but at the age of 5, his family moved to the Poconos of Pennsylvania. He barely remembers much about his childhood in New York, but he does remember the weekend trips (twice a month) to visit family in Harlem and in Queens. The highlight of every trip was spending time with his extended family, especially at the backyard barbeques his grandfather's family would organize and usually included a chef skilled in pig roasts.

"I remember being that one kid. While everyone else was playing basketball—and I would be playing basketball, too ¸—I'd be so intrigued by the food," said Johnson. "I'd ask questions like, How did you put the pig on the spit roast? Walk me through it…how did you get the skin so crispy? Why are you hitting it with this jerk spice?" Even though his teenage friends responded to all his food inquiries as "lame" or "wack;" they were questions a novice foodie and potential chef would ask.

Johnson said his inspiration to become a chef came from spending a lot of time in the kitchen with his Puerto Rican grandmother, who had a flair for cooking dishes, like her *asopao*–made by simmering rice in chicken broth and white wine with collapsed tomatoes, sofrito, and olives. But after his grandmother passed away, he said the only rice on the table was Uncle Ben's.

BOWLS
FIELDTRIP
VEGGIE BOWL
SALMON
CRISPY CHICKEN BOWL
FRIED FISH BOWL
SEAFOOD GUMBO
FIELDTRIP
RICE

Briana Balducci/Courtesy FieldTrip

Crab cake battles on his uncle's boat in Virginia was just one of several ways his family created unforgettable moments around food. Growing up, Johnson was surrounded by relatives steeped in American Southern culture (his paternal grandfather is from Mississippi and his grandmother is from North Carolina) as well as his island roots (his maternal grandfather is from Barbados and his grandmother is from

Puerto Rico). His family, its blended cultures, the food, and his parent's tenacious work ethic laid the foundation for what Johnson would become.

Related: Where to Eat in New York City Right Now

A Life-Changing Experience in Ghana

In 2007, Johnson graduated from the Culinary Institute of America, and honed his skills in reputable New York City restaurants, such as Tropico, Jane, Tribeca Grill, and Centro Vinoteca. Four years later, at 27, the culinary craftsman appeared on the Bravo TV show, *Rocco's Dinner Party*, taking home the $20,000 prize in a competition to impress the celebrity chef and host Rocco DiSpirito. And it was his appearance on the TV show that caught the eye of chef and restauranteur Alexander Smalls.

Smalls extended an offer to the young chef to join him on a trip to Ghana to study West African cuisine. Johnson had to make the difficult decision to either accept Smalls' generous offer or start a new gig working at The Tao Group Steak Restaurant with French chef Laurent Tourondel, but first, he consulted his parents for their advice. His mom told him, "Don't go to Ghana. You're crazy. Don't do it." And just seconds after talking to his mom, his dad called him—away from the prying ears of his mother—to encourage him to go. Johnson said his dad's advice was what he needed to embark on a two-month life-changing experience in Ghana.

"Most chefs just cook what they've been told to cook, and they just hone the craft and they make the most beautiful risotto or the most beautiful polenta," said Johnson. "But to be a chef and to evolve into something better...through food...is really a one in a million experience." Johnson found himself through the food in Ghana, where he had also traced his ancestors' heritage. This hands-on cultural experience ignited his new mission: to tell his and his family's story through food.

The Rise of a Culinary Trendsetter

Courtesy FieldTrip

After his culinary pilgrimage to Africa with Alexander Smalls, Johnson put what he learned into practice. In 2013, he worked with Smalls to create an Afro-Asian inspired menu for the Black-owned Harlem restaurant, The Cecil. Smalls was co-owner with Richard Parsons (former Chairman and CEO of Time Warner), and with Johnson at the helm as the executive chef—the restaurant quickly became a popular food destination. In 2015, *Esquire* called the legendary eatery the "Best New Restaurant in America." A celebrity chef and culinary trendsetter in his own right, Johnson had already received stellar accolades, including recognition on *Forbes*' "30 Under 30" list in the Food & Wine category.

In 2017, Johnson left his role as executive chef at the Cecil and Minton's to spread his wings and become the co-founder of Ingrained Hospitality Concepts, with his longtime friend Will Sears. Their first business venture was The Henry, located at the Luxe Life Hotel in midtown Manhattan. Patrons were served dishes with a mixture of flavors from Africa, the Caribbean, the American South and Asia.

It proved to be a big year for Johnson, who started to flex his culinary skills on BuzzFeed's Tasty platform, and he was also approached about starting a new series on TV One's new Cleo TV network. Two seasons later, *Just Eats with Chef JJ* continues to capture Johnson cooking, entertaining and breaking bread with friends, such as celebrity trainer Robert Brace, writer Shaun King, singer Kimberly Locke, and activist Tamika Mallory.

DEPARTURES
Mindful Discovery
A CUSTOMIZED WELLNESS EXPERIENCE WITH SENSEI LANAI, A FOUR SEASONS RESORT
April 9-15, 2021
AN EXCLUSIVE EXPERIENCE FOR PLATINUM CARD® MEMBERS
BOOK NOW BY CALLING 844.757.4922
Space is limited. See terms and conditions for additional details.

TASTY
Short Ribs Stuffed Sticky Rice As Made By C...
Watch later
Share
FLOTRIP

In addition to his on-screen time, Johnson collaborated with his mentor Alexander Smalls again to co-author a book, *Between Harlem and Heaven*. Published in February 2018, the book is a homage to Afro-Asian-American cooking, and it was the winner of the coveted 2019 James Beard American Book Award.

Related: 5 Hotel Chefs Share Their Favorite Easy and Delicious Recipes to Make at Home

Serving World Flavors and Culture in a Bowl

Courtesy FieldTrip

DEPARTURES
Mindful Discovery
A CUSTOMIZED WELLNESS EXPERIENCE WITH SENSEI LANAI, A FOUR SEASONS RESORT
April 9 - 15, 2021
AN EXCLUSIVE EXPERIENCE FOR PLATINUM CARD® MEMBERS
BOOK NOW BY CALLING 844.757.4922
Space is limited. See terms and conditions for additional details.

Johnson admits that one of his proudest accomplishments is FieldTrip, a fast-casual restaurant in Harlem that focuses on the Afro-Asian style of cooking grains and rice from around the world, such as Jefferson red rice, blue barley berries, Carolina gold rice, Tribune Chinese black rice, aged basmati rice, Italian pilgrim rice and glaberrima rice.

“I was in India, Singapore, Ghana...all these places where rice was part of the food culture,” said Johnson. “Rice being at the center of the table really caught my eye and made me get excited watching how other people were celebrating rice in other countries.”

Johnson reached out to Glenn Roberts, founder of Anson Mills, to find out more about Western African rice, an indigenous crop called Oryz glaberrima. Johnson learned how to look at rice through a different lens, gaining valuable knowledge about different types and grades of rice. This wasn't a random journey for Johnson; he wanted to create a culinary experience that would celebrate rice in a unique way. Originally, he envisioned opening a new restaurant that would be similar to Momofuku. But after he discussed the initial concept with his close friend and business partner Will Sears, both of the men worked to fine-tune the restaurant's concept to an affordable fast-casual dining experience with rice as the focal point of the food. Johnson's casual scroll on Instagram gave him inspiration when he saw a post of restaurant critic Tejal Rao describing her field trip to try a dish made with rice, sugar cane, and other ingredients. The idea was to name the new restaurant FieldTrip.

"We shot the name around, and defined the concept as a field trip, where every rice bowl is like your own a field trip," said Johnson. "The foundation of the bowl is the rice and we pay homage and respect to the rice with the flavors and everything else that's added into every bowl."

In July 2018, FieldTrip opened its doors to customers for the first time. The Quinoa Bao Buns, Small Crab Pockets, Crispy Chicken bowl, and the Salmon bowl with China black pineapple fried rice, and piri piri sauce are just a few crowd pleasers. But Johnson's favorite bowl is the Shrimp bowl because he loves how the sticky rice soaks up the flavor of the green curry sauce. "Every bowl talks to everybody different and everyone has that special one," said Johnson.

During the Coronavirus pandemic, Johnson has been spending extra time with his wife Smiyyah (a nurse) and their twins, Myles and Taya. Occasionally, he returns to New York City to visit family. From his Puerto Rican grandmother to his father's encouraging words, Johnson has continued to persevere because of his family. And now under dire circumstances, the 36-year-old chef is extremely happy that he can keep the doors of FieldTrip open—thanks to loyal patrons and his dedicated staff. "They're stellar…they have kept this place alive…they believed in me more than anyone," said Johnson. "It's an amazing vibe with the FieldTrip family. They're like my true backbone."