

Dinner as Dialogue in the Up South

A meditation and a menu

by ERICK WILLIAMS



Virtue Restaurant & Bar

“What happens to a dream deferred?”

Can the poem “Harlem” by Langston Hughes apply to the contemporary Southern culinary experience?

Confronting bigotry and racism through my practice as a chef, I bring attention to the deep hatred Black people have suffered in America. As a Black citizen, I confront the hypocrisy of our country’s founders, who oppressed Black people while touting standards of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

My goal is to encourage dialogue about decency, integrity, and respect as it relates to the people of the African diaspora. Through my cooking, I aim to ask questions that connect to the questions Mr. Hughes asked.

Each generation is born with a moral and civic responsibility to make America a better place than they received it. I often hear the cry to our government to make the changes we need. I believe it is the responsibility of citizens to use our God-given rights to make those changes.

Sandy Noto

A quote that my father drilled into my head as a young man comes to mind: “If not us, who? If not now, when?”

My greatest resource is food. Eating is a biological necessity that offers possibilities for building trust. My greatest talent is cooking. Service and hospitality set the table to resolve disputes, tear down generational barriers, and forge lasting bonds.

“Harlem” references questions asked then and now. While the poem’s title, of course, takes its name from New York City’s famous historically Black neighborhood, these questions resonate in the land of the free that has yet to be. “Harlem” speaks to a potential renaissance of equity and empathy and a balancing of the scales of opportunity. Like this imagined menu, “Harlem” reminds us that the American dream is a dream deferred. No matter how delicious food looks in a dream, it only becomes real when we can taste it. 🍴



Erick Williams is the Tabasco keynote chef for this year’s virtual Fall Symposium. He is the owner and executive chef at Virtue Restaurant & Bar in Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood, where he combines fine dining, Southern cuisine, and his studies of the Great Migration. Visit poetryfoundation.org to read “Harlem” by Langston Hughes.



THE MENU

Inspired by the questions posed in the 1951 poem by the late Mr. Hughes, I've used some ingredients that speak to the stigmas of being Black in America. And to the joys of being Black in America. The notes that follow speak to those inspirations.

Seeking to answer the question "Or does it explode?" I use Tabasco sauce throughout as a metaphor to catalyze thought and amplify flavors.

Watermelon and Cider Reduction with Tabasco Sea Salt is a bright and refreshing appetizer. I have juxtaposed summer deliciousness with the negative, stereotypical assumption that "Colored folk love watermelon."

Smoked Turkey Wraps are petite lettuce packages stuffed with pulled turkey, spiced with the heat that Tabasco sauce affords.

A Salad of Cucumbers is a nostalgic take on salted cucumbers, marinated in vinegar, chilled, and shared with my mother on hot summer Chicago days.

Catfish and Chow Chow with Tabasco Mustard Greens and Honey-Poached Turnips is a progressive take on scrap cookery that challenges misconceptions about premium ingredients. (See insert for greens recipe.)

Finally, I reject the insults lobbed at African American food choices and channel the age-old combination of chicken and hot sauce with Tabasco-Brined Cornish Hens (see insert for recipe).

Enjoy.



TOP: Chef Erick Williams plates Tabasco-Brined Cornish Hen;
BOTTOM: Cucumber Salad

This page: Sandy Noto; Opposite: Katie Bailey

SFA FUTURE
OF THE SOUTH
2020 FALL SYMPOSIUM

South by Sur

A BrunsMex stew
in every pot

by OSCAR DIAZ



LODGE
• CAST IRON •

Oscar Diaz is the Lodge Cast Iron chef for this year's virtual Fall Symposium. He is the chef of Cortez and Jose and Sons, two Raleigh restaurants that meld his Mexican heritage and his Southern home.