

IT TAKES GUTS

For Shauna Anderson, chitlins are a calling.

BY DEBRA FREEMAN

SHAUNA ANDERSON IS THE QUEEN of chitlins. And she wants you to eat more of them. She adamantly believes that chitlins can bring people together. She is on a quest to bring back The Chitlin Market, her former Maryland carryout market and restaurant.

Chitlins are pig intestines, typically cooked with vinegar, celery, and onion. Although the dish is a bit more difficult to find these days, it was often served in African American restaurants and homes and dates back to the era of enslavement in the United States. Preparing the dish is labor intensive. Most uncooked chitlins are sold only partially cleaned. The intestines need to be boiled to kill harmful bacteria, followed by rinsing several times to remove hair, straw, and other stray digestive matter.

After cleaning, they are boiled for at least two hours. Some cooks batter and fry them as a last step. Chitlins are

commonly topped with vinegar and hot sauce. Their texture is similar to calamari. They take on the flavor of their seasonings—typically garlic, onion, cider vinegar, and salt.

Chitlins became so synonymous with the African-American community that the term “Chitlin Circuit” described locations where Black artists performed from the 1930s to the 1960s. The Attucks Theatre in Norfolk, Virginia; the Royal Peacock in Atlanta, Georgia; and the Apollo Theater in New York City were some of the more famous stops on the Chitlin Circuit. Many blues and rhythm and blues musicians got their big breaks in these nightclubs and bars, including legends like Sam Cooke, Ike and Tina Turner, Gladys Knight and the Pips, James Brown, and Ray Charles. And yes, many clubs served chitlins.

Anderson knows the Chitlin Circuit well. As a child in Washington, DC, she

Delphine Lee





lived a piece of that history. Her mother was a singer and her father was a saxophone player. They were surrounded by musicians like Otis Redding, Little Richard, and BB King. Her godfather, Clarence Evans, owned Evans Grill in Forestville, Maryland, a stop on the Chitlin Circuit. She remembers watching through a crib backstage as her mother sang.

After working for the IRS as a statistician, Anderson used her savings to open the Chitlin Market in Hyattsville, Maryland, in 1995. The following year, a website and shipping department followed. She cooked chitlins for her neighbors, who loved them, and it occurred to her that opening a chitlin business would be a good idea because it was difficult to find cleaned chitlins for purchase. First she needed to see if her instincts were right, so she asked a childhood friend to help do some research. They'd open the phone book and, one by one, cold-call folks. If the person on the other end picked up, Anderson or her friend asked

if they would be interested in a source for cleaned chitlins. Most said yes.

After the Chitlin Market opened, it gradually gained a devoted following. By 2004, she purchased a building to open a larger location.

The Chitlin Market created a sense of community, Anderson says. "Everybody loved each other there. I have never seen anything like it in my life. When they cross the front of the door, they become family, and when you have two people who don't know each other and have a bowl of chitlins, they're going to talk. That's the power of chitlins." For years, the business stayed busy, hosting neighborhood regulars as well as visiting celebrities. It received accolades in the local and national press.

But Anderson faced challenges, too. According to her 2006 memoir, *Offal Great*, when she sought city and county approvals for the new location, members of the city council voiced their opposition, citing the smell of the restaurant's signature dish. Inspectors made

Delphine Lee

unscheduled visits, and the building was vandalized. Anderson still pressed on.

In 2006, the restaurant was depicted in a scene of *Commander in Chief*, a short-lived ABC drama that featured Geena Davis as President. Hyattsville officials were concerned that the image of Anderson's business painted the area in a negative light. Peter Shapiro, a former county councilmember, told the *The Washington Post* that the Chitlin Market was a "stereotype of a poor, dangerous black neighborhood." Then-Mayor Bill Gardner, County Executive Jack Johnson, and Representative Steny Hoyer denounced the episode in a press conference.

"When the President of the show gets out of a car and is in front of a restaurant that advertises chitlins and pork chops in today's America, what any right-thinking American knows is we are harking back to an age-old inability of this country to celebrate the leadership and achievement

of African Americans and other diverse people in this country," said a spokesperson for Johnson, who quoted his speech. In a 2006 press release, Anderson said, "Some of us just don't fit into a developer's idea of what's acceptable."

Later that year, the city rezoned the area where her new restaurant was to be located into a residential zone. Anderson was outraged at the unfair assumptions that many people make about chitlins. "Everybody deserves to be able to come to The Chitlin Market and eat chitlins and enjoy the company. We shouldn't have to close a location because of people's lack of knowledge," she said.

Anderson sued the county and other local agencies for \$18 million on the grounds of harassment, tortuous interference with contract, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. A judge dismissed the case. "They didn't want chitlins in that area," said Anderson. "It's an old school stigma and it's ignorance, and people take their ignorance all over the place."

For now, the Chitlin Market's legacy is preserved at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum.

Anderson now sells cleaned chitlins and a chitlins seasoning blend online. But she's not stopping there. Her dream is to revive Evans Grill, which closed in 1991. As she imagines it, Evans Grill for the Performing Arts would be a place where visitors could learn about African American and Southern cooking along with celebrating music, dance, and performances. And of course, the venue would serve chitlins. 🍖



Shauna Anderson sold chitlins from a mobile trailer while waiting on restaurant permits.

Courtesy Shauna Anderson

Debra Freeman has written for Epicurious, Garden and Gun, Plate Magazine, Southern Grit Magazine, and Gastro Obscura. The Huffington Post, The New York Times, and BBC Radio have featured her work.