



FOOD & DRINK SPOTLIGHT

In Conversation with Safiya Robinson

Safiya Robinson, founder of Sister Woman Vegan, is a creative cook, writer, and wellness advocate passionate about plant-based living. Drawing inspiration from her Black American, Jamaican, and British roots, she crafts plant-forward dishes, viewing food as a healing modality. As the current chef in residence at Moko Tottenham, she introduces Black American soul food with a Jamaican twist.

Lorraine Copes, Food & Drink Editor, talks to Safiya Robinson about her journey into veganism, culture and community.

When did you realise that you wanted to become a chef?

On some level, I've always wanted to be a chef, rooted in my deep interest and joy in food. My godmother, a chef in her own restaurant, partly fuelled this passion. However, my journey was marred by impostor syndrome, influenced by societal perceptions. The representation also wasn't there; every other chef I knew, apart from my godmother, was a white man. I didn't know how to add to the space and who would pay for my food when they could get their aunty to cook.

Despite this, my perceptions shifted when I embraced veganism. Hosting meat-free Mondays at university and adapting my traditional dishes to vegan dishes marked a turning point, where other students paid me for food. I recognised my true calling by sharing my vegan creations and delving into the purpose of food. I realised that my future lay in food, whether in cooking

or other facets of the food world.

What inspired your journey into veganism?

I embraced veganism almost a decade ago, sparked during my gap year in South America. Experiencing diverse foods led me to ponder the disconnect in how we discuss and consume meat. The term "meat" felt detached from the visceral reality of flesh, prompting a reflection on the reasons behind our carnivorous habits. Consuming guinea pigs in Peru, a pet I was accustomed to, heightened my awareness. At university, I used Tumblr to follow the perspectives of a creator, "Young Black and Vegan," social justice leaders like Angela Davis have also spoken loudly about veganism, so my interest grew. Being a pescatarian from 13 to 20, I transitioned to veganism in university, inspired by a flatmate and the practicality of affordable, shared meals. This initial choice evolved into a lasting commitment.

In what ways has your cultural background influenced your career choice?

My cultural background significantly shaped my career path, guiding how I structured and built my brand. Rooted in my African American, Jamaican, and British heritage, my culinary choices reflect the nourishment these foods have provided to my communities for generations. I aim to highlight the contributions of Black women, often overlooked, in shaping our culture and culinary traditions. My work seeks to give credit and appreciation to these contributions, fostering a sense of safety, care, and love.

This commitment emerged through my journey in veganism and food, where I encountered and learned from remarkable Black women, inspiring me to amplify their messages and contributions.

Were there any industry myths you found accurate when you entered the sector?

Many myths about the hospitality industry held true, especially concerning the underrepresentation of females and Black individuals in kitchens. Despite encountering hierarchical dynamics in previous kitchen roles, the creation of Sister Woman Vegan aimed to foster welcoming, caring environments that address industry challenges. While industry myths persist, I've found a supportive community.

Although safety and protection weren't initially apparent, I have intentionally collaborated with Black people, Black chefs, and female chefs, so my experience has differed from what I was told about.

What do you most enjoy cooking and why?

I particularly enjoy cooking Jamaican food, a sentimental choice tied to nostalgic feelings of the beach or carnival. Growing up in Ladbrook Grove, memories of eating sugar cane and jerk chicken resonate deeply. Playing with beloved ingredients like plantain, okra, and pumpkin allows me to create new, enjoyable dishes while celebrating the rich flavour base of thyme, allspice, ginger, and scotch bonnet - a simple yet deeply flavourful combination.

Reflecting on your career, what is the most valuable lesson you have learned and continue to carry forward?

The most valuable lesson I carry forward revolves around networking and cultivating a supportive community in the professional space. I've been fortunate to encounter individuals who truly grasp my aspirations and have been instrumental in propelling my progress. I have accessed so many opportunities because of my network.

Tell us about your residency at Moko Tottenham.

The Moko residency originated from my idea for a supper club at Jumbi in Peckham, which I approached the owners about. However, they proposed setting up shop in their new space in Tottenham instead. Although it became a more significant project than anticipated, I embraced the opportunity to test concepts and carve out a space.

The feedback has been incredible, alleviating imposter syndrome, and I have received recognition from Bloomberg and Timeout. This journey taught me to seize opportunities and say yes. There are so many barriers that Black chefs face in getting into a restaurant; this residency has eliminated many of those challenges, allowing me to enjoy the process.

What will Sister Woman Vegan be doing in 5 years?

In the next five years, I envision a brick and mortar space, allowing me to incorporate wellness, food, community justice, and food justice. Yard Art House in Birmingham is close to what I envision. Additionally, there's a desire to launch a product - perhaps a marinade or sauce mix - tapping into the growing demand for vegan convenience food. As my brand expands, there's an interest in branching into the media space, potentially with a cooking show or another visual platform, aiming to share engaging stories, journeys, and histories behind the food. Despite the ambition to establish a physical space, the focus remains on

championing Black food and contributing to the evolving landscape of vegan food.

Finish the sentence: the future of hospitality is...

The future of hospitality is unequivocally centred on sustainability. Recognising the value of food, the focus must shift toward minimising waste and overconsumption. How can we marry sustainability with growth and move forward to evolve and develop business?

Although strides have been made in sustainability, I would like to see a more inclusive representation of Black people.

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