

CHEF PROFILE

Soul Food Superstar

Ten years after the debut of her wildly successful Brown Sugar Kitchen, acclaimed Oakland chef Tanya Holland soars to new heights.

BY ALEJANDRA SARAGOZA

At 9:30 a.m. on a Tuesday, the sidewalks and streets of Oakland’s Mandela Parkway are quiet and empty, save for the occasional big rig or delivery truck barreling down the road. But as soon as you pull up to the corner of 26th Street, you’ll find a different scene: a steady stream of people heading into an unassuming chocolate-colored building, where Brown Sugar Kitchen bustles with activity. Waiters hurriedly walk by carrying piping hot mugs of coffee and plates of barbecue shrimp and grits; eggs and bacon sizzle on stovetops in the open kitchen; and cooks quickly ladle batter into irons to make fluffy cornmeal waffles topped with brown sugar butter and pieces of golden buttermilk-fried chicken.

Overseeing it all is chef-owner Tanya Holland, who watches her culinary domain like a hawk and steps in to help, stopping only to ask the hostess to close the windows “just half an inch” and a busboy to steady a

slightly wobbly table. Holland’s high standards and close attention to every detail have helped her turn the humble Brown Sugar into a dining destination for breakfast and lunch in Oakland—attracting the likes of rapper Drake, Academy Award-winning actress Lupita Nyong’o, Golden State Warriors star Steph Curry, acclaimed writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, and San Francisco 49ers legend Joe Montana. The contemporary soul food eatery also serves as a convivial community-gathering place, where on any given day you can find local artists, business owners, and construction

workers, along with students, families, and young professionals from across the Bay Area. “It continues to amaze me how so many people from all over hear about my restaurant,” says Holland, 52. “And it’s always so busy during the week! I’m always thinking, *What do these people do?* On the weekends, it’s even crazier. Still—after 10 years.”

The success and popularity of Brown Sugar have not gone unnoticed. Since the restaurant’s debut in January 2008, Holland has won numerous awards and accolades, and even has a



Fried chicken and waffles, oyster po-boys, and black-eyed pea salad are offered at Brown Sugar Kitchen.

day named in her honor: The city of Oakland declared June 5, 2012, as Tanya Holland Day for her “significant role in creating community and establishing Oakland as a culinary center.” She has also made guest appearances on the *Today* show, *The Wayne Brady Show*, and *The Chew*, among other TV programs. Most recently, Holland competed on *Top Chef* and served as a judge on *Iron Chef America*.

And she’s not finished yet. Holland is now building an empire: She launched Brown Sugar Kitchen Hospitality Group earlier this year, after teaming up with Salt Partners Group. Under the umbrella of her new company, she’ll expand Brown Sugar to the Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco by the end of summer, and to the former Picán space in Uptown Oakland soon after—and there may be even more locations to come.

BUILDING HER CRAFT

Considering all of her success, it’s a little surprising that Holland didn’t always aspire to become a chef and restaurateur. Raised in Rochester, New York, by Southern-born parents, she was exposed to an array of cultures and cuisines early on. Aside from fried chicken and gumbo, her parents made everything from paella to matzo ball soup as part of a gourmet cooking club they created with five other couples.

“They were very into food and entertaining and hospitality, making people feel comfortable,” says Holland. “That had a big impact on me because I like creating a special environment for people.”

She brought her appreciation of food to the University of Virginia, hosting dinner parties and cooking for friends. Holland also started working part-time as a server in a restaurant, but at the time, she says, “I wasn’t thinking about cooking as an occupation. I didn’t have ambitions to become a chef.”

In fact, Holland entered college as an engineering major, then eventually switched to art history and Russian language and literature. (She’s still conversational in Russian.) “I didn’t really know what I wanted to be,” she admits. After graduating in 1987, she worked in advertising for several years and supplemented her income with various restaurant jobs. It wasn’t until she landed a gig as an office manager for a catering company that she started to seriously consider working in the restaurant industry.

“That was the transition that changed everything,” says Holland. “We did big, lavish events all around [New York City]. . . . They were very impressive, and food writers from all the major magazines would come in and interview my boss. The experience totally changed my whole view of the industry. I started to see these endless possibilities.”

Armed with her newfound passion and drive, Holland applied and was accepted to the acclaimed École de Cuisine La Varenne in Burgundy, France, and later trained under chefs in restaurants across France. She further sharpened her culinary skills during a stint at celebrity chef Bobby Flay’s Mesa Grill in New York, where she worked as a line cook and met many of his rising-star cohorts, including Mario Batali.

“[Batali] once told me, ‘You can learn just as much working for yourself as you can for other people,’ and that was a really significant line,” says Holland. “It’s definitely a harder, more expensive lesson when you’re learning from yourself, but I thought it was really cool that he said that, and it’s true.”

After that seed was planted, Holland began to think about opening her own place and pursuing a career as a restaurateur, becoming more inspired as she worked alongside Flay. “I thought, *OK, if this punk can do it, I can do it,*” she says, laughing.



Chef Tanya Holland of Brown Sugar Kitchen has earned much acclaim for her contemporary soul food.

SMEETA MAHANTI

LARA HATA



Tanya Tells All

Get to know Oakland’s beloved celebrity chef.

1. What are your favorite comfort foods? Spaghetti with red sauce, chocolate, and chocolate chip cookies. I’m a cookie monster—I love cookies so much.

2. What do you do for fun? I hardly have time for hobbies, but I love going to spas. If I could go to a spa every weekend, I’d be happy. I also love riding my bike.

3. What’s your pump-up song? “Survivor” by Destiny’s Child.

4. Who is your celebrity crush? Ooh, Tony Goldwyn!

5. Who are your culinary icons? Emily Luchetti, a pastry chef I met when I first moved [to the Bay Area]. She’s been such an inspiration, and even though I’m not a pastry chef, I think she’s amazing. Also, Leah Chase in New Orleans, who’s still cooking in her nineties! I have a photo of her up on the wall [in Brown Sugar Kitchen]. And Edna Lewis and Julia Child, of course.

6. Which people, living or dead, would you invite to dinner? It’d be so fun to have dinner with Amy Poehler. I met her once, and she was super gracious, and she would definitely make one laugh. Also, Justin Timberlake—so we could dance.

7. What’s something people would be surprised to learn about you? I have a crazy shoe collection. I’m obsessed with Jimmy Choo. I have seven pairs!

8. What’s your favorite part of being a chef? All the people I get to meet from around the world.

9. What’s your go-to dining spot in Oakland? Swan’s Market. I like the choices there, and it’s just so easy and low-key.

10. What do you love most about Oakland? The diversity.

What she didn’t count on, however, was the number of obstacles she would face as a woman of color. She tried opening restaurants in New York, Boston, and on Martha’s Vineyard, but she couldn’t raise capital and had trouble finding men who wanted to work for her—discrimination she had confronted in countless kitchens before.

“As I started getting really good at my craft and getting stronger, I could see that I was a threat to a lot of my male counterparts,” says Holland. “They were threatened by my college education and formal training, so they would undermine me, withhold information, not teach me the same skills they would a young man, encourage me to take the ‘easier’ job. But if I wanted the easier route, I would have stayed in engineering school. I wanted to push myself and challenge myself.

“I kept trying to find environments where I could feel empowered,” she adds. “But it didn’t really happen until I created my own environment.”

INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

In 2000, Holland got a gig cohosting *Melting Pot*, a Food Network show that highlighted ethnic cuisines from around the world. (Chefs Aarón Sánchez, Cat Cora, and Padma Lakshmi were also hosts.) The exposure helped launch Holland into the national spotlight, and her first cookbook, *New Soul Cooking: Updating a Cuisine Rich in Flavor and Tradition*, was published in 2003.

But Holland missed serving customers, so shortly after moving to Oakland in 2003, she renewed her search for a restaurant space. While she originally wanted to open a spot in Jack London Square or Old Oakland, she once again had issues with landlords who refused to rent to her.

“They would say, ‘You’re not a proven entity. You’ve never owned a restaurant before,’ ” says Holland. “Meanwhile, I had been in the business for 20 years; I had tons of experience, I had written a cookbook, I had been on TV. . . . I knew I could fill the seats, and I knew I could build a business—I just needed a chance. That was really frustrating.”

When a tiny diner became available merely five blocks from her then-home in West Oakland, she decided to take the lease—realizing her dream of opening her own soul food restaurant and serving her signature cuisine in a way that matched her vision.

“I always wanted to elevate the food somewhat,” says Holland, “and when I saw this space in this location, I knew I had to have something really accessible and user-friendly to the neighborhood, so I came up with Brown Sugar Kitchen.”



Holland is expanding her soul food empire to San Francisco and Uptown Oakland.

THE LITTLE RESTAURANT THAT COULD

In retrospect, it must have been meant to be. Despite its location along an industrial stretch of gritty West Oakland, Brown Sugar has been pulling in crowds for a decade. “Our opening day we served around 50 customers, and then somehow the word got out, and they started coming in droves,” says Holland. “About a month after [the opening], people were just rushing the doors.”

Today, customers still line up and wait for Holland’s innovative, flavorful soul food—including her famous fried chicken and waffles, fluffy beignets, smoked chicken and shrimp gumbo, pineapple-glazed barbecue baby back ribs, and blackened catfish. Her 50-seat, full-service eatery serves around 1,800 people each week. “I call it the little restaurant that could,” she says, laughing.

Now, Holland is in the midst of expanding her small-but-mighty business. While the new locations will feature the same high-quality fare and amiable atmosphere that made her flagship restaurant so beloved, there will be some differences. The Ferry Building space will have an abbreviated menu while the Uptown Oakland spot will offer dinner options as well as a full bar with signature cocktails.



Tanya’s Tips for Perfect Fried Chicken

Follow these simple rules to get that crispy, golden crust every time.

1. Use high-quality chicken and the appropriate cooking oil (canola, vegetable, or peanut).
2. Brine the chicken in a mixture of buttermilk, spices (try salt, pepper, and paprika), and fresh herbs (such as rosemary or thyme), and chill for at least four hours before frying.
3. Don’t bread the chicken straight from the fridge. Instead, let the ingredients sit at room temperature for 15 to 30 minutes.
4. Make sure there aren’t any lumps in the flour before breading the chicken.
5. Keep the oil’s temperature around 375°F. To maintain a steady heat level, don’t crowd the pan with too much chicken.



Holland’s famous fried chicken is a Brown Sugar fave.

TOP TO BOTTOM: SWEETA MAHANTI, LARA HATA

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Holland is also in talks to open more Brown Sugar outposts at the Oakland and San Francisco airports, and hopes to set up shop in the Warriors’ new Chase Center arena and in the Oakland A’s planned stadium. In addition, she’s hungry for a spot in Levi’s Stadium and in downtown Napa, as well as a potential Tokyo partnership.

“My vision is to be the Shake Shack of soul food,” says Holland. “I want Brown Sugar to be everywhere.”

Holland may be well on her way toward fulfilling her dream of building an empire, but there’s much more she wants to accomplish, including launching her own TV show—something she’s aspired to do since traveling to Kazakhstan in 2016. Holland visited the country as part of a two-week culinary diplomacy trip, where she commemorated the emancipation of slaves and showed the Kazakhs the food culture of African Americans. “It was such an amazing experience,” she says, “and I realized, *I want to do more of this in my life.*”

She hopes to eventually host a TV series where she travels around the world and connects with people over a meal. “I love bringing people together and finding the common denominator,” she explains. “That’s why I envision a show where food serves . . . to break down cultural barriers.” She likens the concept to Anthony Bourdain’s or Andrew Zimmern’s shows—but with one major difference.

“There needs to be a woman’s perspective out there,” she says. “There aren’t many prominent women in the travel space—or in the restaurant industry, for that matter—and it’s partly because we aren’t in charge. Until more



The pineapple-glazed barbecue baby back ribs and jerk chicken at Brown Sugar Kitchen.

women are given leadership roles in our industry or organizations . . . that Me Too stuff is not going to change. We need a woman president!”

Holland is all about female empowerment and giving back to the community, which is why she donates her time to charities and continually offers wisdom and encouragement to motivated women who seek her advice. In March, she was one of 15 chefs selected from across the country to participate in the James Beard Foundation Chefs Boot Camp for Policy and Change, where she learned advocacy skills and explored her potential power to effect change in the local community.

“My goal is to inspire a new generation of chefs, especially because I didn’t really have that,” says Holland. “There aren’t a lot of examples of people who look like me doing what I’ve done. I feel like I really need to be a role model for women—and especially women of color. I want that to be part of my legacy.”



Holland aims to inspire and empower a new generation of chefs.



Brown Sugar Kitchen’s Smoked Pork Hash

Serves 4

- 1 pound Yukon gold potatoes, cut into ½-inch dice
- Kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 yellow onion, cut into ¼-inch slices
- ¼ cup diced red bell pepper
- ¼ cup diced yellow bell pepper
- 1 pound spinach, stemmed, washed, and cut into ¼-inch strips
- 2 green onions, white and green parts, chopped
- 9 ounces cooked smoked pork, diced
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley, plus more for garnish
- Freshly ground pepper
- 3 tablespoons heavy cream
- Hot sauce (optional)
- 8 eggs, poached

In a large pot, cover potatoes with cold water. Season the water generously with salt and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer and cook until potatoes are slightly softened, about 5 minutes. Drain.

In a medium sauté pan, heat oil over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook until tender and translucent, about 5 minutes. Add bell peppers, spinach, and green onions. Cook the mixture, stirring occasionally, until bell peppers are softened, about 5 minutes. Add potatoes, pork, and parsley, and season with salt and pepper. Stir in cream and hot sauce to taste. Increase to medium-high heat, and allow vegetables to caramelize, stirring occasionally, until the hash is well-browned and crisp in places, about 10 minutes.

To serve, sprinkle with parsley and top with poached eggs.

(To make ahead, refrigerate the cooked hash in an airtight container for up to 3 days. Reheat in a sauté pan over medium heat with 1 tablespoon vegetable oil.)