Fusing Southern food with African roots: Piri brings responsible food to Durham

Courtney Smith, left, and her sister, Erika Smith-Punches, are the founders of Piri, a food catering business that creates dishes with African roots (Staff photo by Zayrha Rodriguez).

By: Zayrha Rodriguez

After taking a break from the food industry, Courtney Smith knew that she wanted to start her own food business, but this time she wanted to have her family involved.

After talking with her sister Erika Smith-Punches and their mother Camryn Lawrence Smith, they founded Piri – a food catering business that creates a bridge between Southern food and African food.

Sources of inspiration

"We wanted a name that reflected the fact that we were born in the States and the varied and diverse history that all of us shared across the diaspora," Smith said.

The piri-piri sauce used as inspiration for the name of the company is made from the piri-piri pepper that was taken to Portugal during the colonization period and transported around the world through the African diaspora.

Their African roots are very important to them. A family member even found the name of the ship that arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, bringing their ancestors to America, Smith-Punches said.

Most of the family has stayed in the North Carolina, creating a strong sense of homestead not many African Americans around the country have, Smith said.

Their African roots have translated to their food. Most recipes come from their great-grandmother, Camilla Lawrence, who left some recipes cards. Yet most recipes were directly passed down to them when they used to go to their great-grandmother's house during the summer or from their mother.

Smith also draws inspiration from the internet to come up with different dishes.

"I follow a lot of different chefs on social media," said Smith. "I would get ideas from them, or I would do research on different countries or different regions and see what sticks out to me."

Local success

Since they launched in November 2016, the response has been positive and exceeding the sisters' expectations.

"I think when we originally first started we thought 'Okay in about two years we would look at leaving our jobs a do just Piri full time,'" said Smith-Punches.

The pair is currently investing all of their energy and time in Piri, attempting to create a presence in the Durham community.

"Eventually we want to have a brick-and-mortar," Smith said. "We want to have a shop that people can come to."

Even though they currently live in West Durham, the dream area for Piri's first establishment is in the Downtown Durham area close to Parrish Street, which is known as the Black Wall Street.

Responsible mission

While the menu doesn't currently have an item cheaper than $10, the sisters say this price point is necessary to satisfy the mission of the company.

"Because of all the hard work and our values, sourcing locally and paying a living wage means a higher price point," said Smith-Punches.

They have partnerships with different organizations in order to get locally-sourced produce from black and brown farmers.

After working many years in different parts of the food industry, the sisters know the importance of paying a living wage to their employees.

"They need to know that after working a shift that they got a decent amount of money for their time," Smith said.

NEXT EVENT

Date: April 28
Time: 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Location: Pour Taproom 202 N. Corcoran St.