

Business in Black: Vonda McPherson Healthy Eating, Giving Back, and the Power of Culture and Community.

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NJ Urban News interviewed Vonda McPherson, the proud and successful owner of Vonda's Kitchen and Vonda K's Catering and Events.

After bidding farewell to corporate America, McPherson entered the food industry, developing delicious and healthy recipes that placed her on the culinary map. The New Jersey native's first restaurant was a barbecue joint in Elizabeth, New Jersey, she later established a quaint eatery in Newark, New Jersey, affectionately known by the locals as Vonda's Kitchen.

The esteemed chef, restauranter, and visionary offers homecooked, fresh southern-style comfort food and cuisine that's bursting with flavor and love. Her soul food has been a staple in the neighborhood for over a decade, with celebrities, politicians, and notable public figures patronizing the beloved establishment and hot spot, such as Senator Cory Booker, Shaquille O'Neal, Tina Knowles, Sherri Shepherd, and Queen Latifah (McPherson catered the food for the repast of Queen Latifah's mother, Rita Owens), just to name a few.

McPherson has also used her previous corporate ties to secure multiple lucrative catering contracts with clients in the tri-state area, and one as far as Florida. Vonda's Kitchen has won numerous accolades and awards, and made several television appearances, including being highlighted on the Food Channel as one of the top Black-owned restaurants in New Jersey in 2022. We spoke with her

about her phenomenal accomplishments in the food industry, healthy eating, giving back, and the power of culture and community.

NJ Urban News: “What prompted or inspired you to start your restaurant business? Why soul food?”

Vonda McPherson: “Initially, my dad had a hall in Florida with a restaurant attached to it. He used to do events, and I saw him do that. He also used to cook for my family my whole life, so that was my interest.”

“But I went to corporate America after college, and I used to sell coronary stents to cardiologists. In doing so, I used to work in New York and sell to all the major hospitals, and I use to teach them how to use [the stents] because, at that time, that technology had just come out. I did this for so many years, and I enjoyed it greatly. I was like, ‘you know what, I’m going to start my own business,’ because I had the funds.”

“With that in mind, I just saw an opportunity. I always wanted to have a restaurant and talked about it as a young person. I’ve always known how to cook, but I became a much better chef after my father introduced me to a lady. She was an excellent southern cook and worked with me for six years. I learned everything from her regarding catering and cooking down-home types of soul food.”

“There are so many levels of soul food, and that impressed me, and I just soaked it all in. Then I said myself, ‘You know what? I’m going start a catering company.’ She taught me how to cater and told me how I needed to price it. For catering, I used to decorate for people, even if they didn’t ask me; I just wanted my food to be presented differently and inviting.”

NJ Urban News: “You noted that when you started the business, you needed help finding a soul food restaurant in

the metro area that served salads or other healthy meals besides the typical soul food menu. Do you continue that business plan and strategy, and do your customers take advantage of and enjoy it?”

Vonda McPherson: “Yes! let me give it to you how I set it up. This is the thing, if you want to come in with your friend, and your friend is trying to cut down and be on a diet, but you wanted soul food, I would say to your friend something like this, ‘all of our vegetables are natural, there is no fat, we cook food clean and fresh.’ Those are the vegetables, if they wanted to have fish, I would offer to bake it with olive oil, or if they want fried fish, I could give them that. I always offer a selection of things, for example, fried catfish, baked catfish, or blackened catfish, or if it’s chicken, fried chicken, baked chicken, or barbecue chicken.”

“We would do meatloaf and a lot of vegetable platters for our customers. We still do that to this day... I also have a variety of salads.”

“We would have many specials; for example, if you wanted turkey wings, we bake them before we put them in gravy. Somebody might want turkey wings, but they don’t want them dry, so we could make a tomato sauce for them. People don’t understand that it’s not like a pasta sauce; it’s fresh tomatoes and lemon, and it’s just as good on turkey meat as it is on chicken, so you could put garlic in it.”

“It’s just the heritage from our culture is to cook it with gravy, but there are several ways to cook it... Everything we can fry; we can do in a pan as well.”

NJ Urban News: “Why is the initiative to serve healthy menu items and specials important to you?”

Vonda McPherson: “Because of our community, that’s the bottom line... The reason we’re so popular, and people love our food is because we cook fresh food. We really focus on that.”

“I have a lot of customers that come in for lunch, and they’ll say to me, ‘what kind of fish do you have?’ They know I do a lot of catering, so I’ll say, ‘I have salmon today, or I have a branzino,’ I just tell them what I have available in my kitchen; it’s not something that might be on the menu, and I’ll cook it for them. We cook fresh string beans sauteed on the grill, and they’re one of our biggest sellers. If someone’s a vegetarian, we do fresh baby spinach with garlic. We do as naturally as we can. Someone can come into my restaurant and say, ‘I want a cobb salad; I don’t want any meat.’ [Another person could say], ‘I want a Cobb salad with turkey bacon’ [or] ‘I want a Cobb salad with shrimp and turkey bacon,’ all of those things, avocado, the whole thing is there.”

“For me, I like fresh food, and I like healthy food. I think our community suffers from obesity, unhealthy eating, and things of that nature. We just always give them an option. Whether you’re doing keto, have a regular diet, or just want a regular salad or some great oatmeal, we have options.”

NJ Urban News: “*What defines a great entrepreneur and leader?*”

Vonda McPherson: “It’s hard work; being an entrepreneur is life-changing in a sense because you came to (say, for example, if you’re me), enjoy your craft of cooking, but then there’s the other side of the business that is the payroll, hiring and training people, and all of those different avenues.”

“Then I have a catering business along with that. You have a customer you’ve never met who’s in another venue that’s trying to make sure

that you understand their vision to make sure that their day is so spectacular for them.”

“There are a lot of things to hold on to and take on. Still, you have strong people around you, like I have two assistants and management in place. Still, it all comes back to me when decisions about how we will take on different situations have to be made.”

“I think that as an entrepreneur, you grow into that role because, in the beginning, you’re struggling. You’re trying to make ends meet, and you’re just trying to get good people to work with you. You’re trying to figure out your whole vision, and sometimes that might take years, but when you stick to it, it becomes second nature to you because you’ve seen it all, and you’ve done it all.”

“I just love the fact that now I’m very much comfortable in my space from top to bottom. I don’t get nervous about an event, no matter who it’s for because I believe in me. I believe in my staff, and I know the work we can do and how quickly we can do it.”

NJ Urban News: *“Could you offer any advice to entrepreneurs, with a particular focus on African Americans and business owners of color?”*

Vonda McPherson: “First thing, I love and support several different small businesses, and when I support, it might’ve been because they needed funding in some kind of way. My whole thing is for African Americans, we need as much entrepreneurship in our communities as possible, and we have to support every one of them.”

“We are in a mindset of thinking that, if there’s one, that’s great. No, it doesn’t work like that. We need 50 restaurants. Every other culture might have 10 Chinese restaurants in one community, and they’re all successful. We must stop feeling like we can only have one or two, and

then they must compete. That is not how it should operate because the mentality is, ‘how did they do that, and how do I do that?’”

“We have to bring each other forward, and we have to encourage each other. Whether it’s someone down the street from you or a Black-owned business, it’s wonderful for you to stop in and encourage them to buy something and tell a friend about them.”

“Create a positive environment of comfort where you feel great about what you do. Still, you also feel great about other things that other African Americans are doing to develop our community. Just don’t hold all the information to yourself. It’s not normal for a lot of African Americans to get an opportunity the way other communities do. When you see another African American business, cheer them on.”

“In my community, I’ve worked with all of the restaurant owners and I’m friends with all of them in some capacity, we talk amongst each other, we support each other, we borrow from each other, we use each other if we need additional help. That’s the way it has to be because we’re building.”

NJ Urban News: *“How do you pay it forward in your community?”*

Vonda McPherson: “Anything that anyone asks me to do that’s not a payable opportunity, I do it. For example, someone called me from the city and said, ‘Vonda, they had a bomb over at this particular housing [unit], and we need to feed so many people, can we pick up some food?’ Absolutely! That’s just how it has to be, that’s how we support our community, or someone [may ask] me to go and do a free project or teach at Central High School in the Culinary Department, I do all of that, that’s a part of the blessing and the process. Even someone who may say to me, ‘my family member passed away, I really don’t have a lot of money, but I would love for you to cater,’ I’m open to that, you tell me what you can do, and I’ll tell you what I can do. Because there

might be something that's left over from catering or I have something else because the farms come to me too and drop off food, 'let me make this for you, how can I help?'"

"You can't be successful and not give back. That's not even an option for me. You should give more than you get, because you learn more when you do that. I believe in quality and I believe in never cheating customers out of things that they deserve. You will find that I don't care what catering event, I'm going to ensure that I'm going to have more than enough food. And the reason for that is I would never want to be short, and someone didn't get it."

NJ Urban News: *"What do you want your legacy to be?"*

Vonda McPherson: "That I was a good person, that I did my very best, and I tried to help the infrastructure of having a Black business that the community could be proud of."

"I think kindness is great as well. I love the people; I have a love for Newark. People come by just to see us; a lot of the local celebrities that are in the neighborhood come to see us."

"I love to cook, but I love the community."