

WORCESTER REGIONAL FOOD HUB - Unique Café Just Opened and Still Has Big Plans

By David Sullivan

WORCESTER - Looking for the best Jamaican food in town? Unique Café is the one you're looking for. As the founder and owner of Unique Café, a Jamaican restaurant at 79 Millbury St., Nadine James has impressively grown her business from a fledgling startup to a brick-and-mortar business over the course of the pandemic.

Ms. James, who was born in Jamaica as the youngest of 12 siblings, says that she started to cook at nine years old as a way to help others. "The thing that inspired me about food is that I see the importance of food in drawing people together," says Ms. James. "When my mom used to cook, all her friends would come and they would talk about life...I've always wanted to cook because of that."

As a participant of the Launching Diverse Food Entrepreneurs in Worcester program that the Worcester Regional Food Hub hosted in summer 2019, Ms. James took her passion and turned it into a startup business. After the summer-long program, she partnered with the Food Hub to run pop-up events that helped her get the revenue to buy a restaurant.

Shon Rainford, director of the Food Hub, had nothing but positive words for his former mentee. "Nadine had a vision from the first day, and now



Nadine James (left) and her two daughters who help her run the business, Khaaliyah Watson (middle) and Kayanna James (right).



it has come to reality. I could not be more proud of her tenacity and hard work," he says. "I was blown away by her fried crab, both the taste and presentation. Her fried chicken is top notch as are her signature juices. Once the word is out, she is sure to

have a very successful business primarily due to her drive, but also with the support provided by the Food Hub, Chamber, and the city's Office of Economic Development."

"It helped tremendously," said Ms. James when asked how the Food Hub helped her start Unique Café. "Shon brought in people to explain taxes and finances, to teach you how to make your menu, every little thing I needed then."

While the pandemic stopped Unique Café from doing pop-up events hosted by the Food Hub, which it normally does for its member businesses, that was not going to stop Ms. James from pursuing her dream and helping others.

At the start of the pandemic, she joined CoCaSha (Connect, Care, Share), a company founded by a Harvard graduate that pays minority women business owners for teaching culturally-minded cooking classes online.

Ms. James used the pay from her instructor work to save up for buying a space to house Unique Café.

She also volunteered as a manager for a friend who owns Akra Eatery & Juice Bar, a West African restaurant that operates out of the Worcester Public Market in Kelley Square. "This passion of mine was not going away," she says.

This instructor and volunteer experience were essential for Ms. James in preparing to start her business.

All of her patience paid off in February when Unique Café had its soft opening at the plaza at 79 Millbury St.

"You can come here and get a smoothie, get freshly squeezed juice, and most Jamaican restaurants don't do those," says Ms. James. Combining this American juice bar experience with traditional Jamaican entrees such as oxtail, goat, curry chicken, plantains, jerk chicken salad and more is what makes Unique Café so...unique.

"I of course get my fruits and vegetables from the Food Hub," she notes,

also saying that she prioritizes buying products from neighborhood stores and that she is in the process of trying to source her meat from local farms with the help of the Food Hub.

Nadine isn't satisfied yet, though. She says the plan for Unique Café's future involves buying another property on the plaza where she is located and using it to house a classy restaurant adjacent to her current juice bar property. "So while you wait for a seat over there you can still drink your smoothie or juice here and when your number is called, you come and get your nice intimate wine and dine," Ms. James explains. The hope is to one day open multiple Unique Café locations like this.

And next month, she is planning to start a series of livestreams on Instagram where she and guest doctors will explain the benefits of healthy fresh juices and smoothies using a live Q+A format.

"I'm an entrepreneur and when I see stuff, I see the future and not what I'm going through right now," she adds, noting the opening of Polar Park a couple blocks away from her restaurant. She says this forward thinking allowed her to persevere during the pandemic and recognize that the ballpark district would create conditions where restaurants like hers could seriously thrive.

Ms. James runs Unique Café with her family, and says it is an intimate but safe setting in the restaurant. They currently have a Facebook (@UniqueCafe) and Instagram page (@UniqueCafeMA) and are available for pickup if you call them at 508-340-3381. They are open from Tuesday to Saturday, 10 am to 7 pm. "Just come and check it out!" says Ms. James.

Unique Café has healthy, authentic Jamaican food with some American twists.

- David Sullivan is Economic Development Fellow for the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce