



Marisa Blackwell:
**PLAYING
 WITH FOOD**

By Diane Alter

Given a once-in-a-lifetime chance, Marisa Blackwell made the most of it. In 2008, eager and enthusiastic, Blackwell took over a Portuguese barbecue restaurant in downtown Newark. Drawing on her extensive culinary background—which included managing food services on the VIP floor at New York Presbyterian Hospital and for the tony Windows on the Hudson restaurant and banquet hall in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.—she drew a steady and loyal following. It wasn't long before requests flooded in for Blackwell to cater career nights and conferences in and around Newark.

Transforming her restaurant into a catering business wasn't too great a challenge. What proved difficult, however, was securing the money needed for such an undertaking. But with funding from the Profeta Urban Investment Foundation, Blackwell was able in 2010 to morph her restaurant into Cravings: A Caterer.

Fast-forward to 2014. Blackwell's newly renovated and expanded establishment is now a bustling gourmet catering/eat-in/take-out spot at 87 Halsey Street, on Newark's burgeoning restaurant row. Guests come from near and far for her signature curried eggplant soup and chicken teriyaki dumplings. Moreover, Cravings has become the preferred caterer for the Rutgers Executive MBA program, located a few blocks away. Blackwell relied on



Photography by Daryl Stone

the Foundation for not only financial assistance but also mentoring and networking; Cravings was able to establish a presence in the Blue Cross Blue Shield cafeteria, in addition to establishing catering relationships with most of the large law firms in Newark for lunches and dinners.

“I am so thankful for all the support I have received,” Blackwell says. “There is absolutely no way I would have gotten my business off the ground without this help. It’s been a challenge, but it’s been wonderful. And while I am thanking people, I can’t forget my two wonderful children. They have sacrificed a lot. I often work 20 hours a day. But I’ve shown them where hard work and perseverance gets you.”



MY CITY

Indeed, thanks to Blackwell's hard work and Cravings' imaginative menu, the company has been catering a steadily increasing number of high-profile events. Blackwell recently provided a gourmet spread for Newark Library's 150th anniversary. She also wowed guests with a magnificent menu for the 80th birthday party of famed Newark born novelist Philip Roth.

Blackwell describes herself as "hard-core foodie" who best likes to play with spices, textures and combinations. Her menus are diverse, she explains, reflecting Newark's diversity.

"Some days," Blackwell says, "the focus is on Brazilian dishes. Other days it might be Indian. And good old burger nights at Rutgers are always popular. Using fresh fixings is key. About 95 percent of the ingredients I use are fresh.

That's so important with a very notable shift towards vegan and vegetarian appetizers, sides and entrées. Local ingredients enhance flavor with innovative elements that always surprise diners."

During the next year, the plan for Cravings is to expand its offerings and reach, catering more formal occasions, including weddings and social gatherings in Newark and in the nearby bedroom communities of Essex County. If history is any indication, Blackwell and her customers will savor every step of that process.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Profeta Urban Investment Foundation was formed to provide funding, resources and business expertise aimed at attracting minority-owned businesses and entrepreneurs, like Marisa Blackwell, to Newark. The goal is to create a destination that encourages people to visit, revisit and ultimately put down roots in Brick City. 

