

BLACK RESTAURATEURS

Chicago chefs have mixed emotions, still focused

Pain behind protest not lost as reopening plans uncertain



Williams

BY ADAM LUKACH

After Mayor Lori Lightfoot cut off access to Chicago's downtown last weekend, protests over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis — and resulting civil unrest —

spilled into neighborhoods, including many predominantly black neighborhoods on the city's South Side.

At Virtue in Hyde Park, chef/owner Erick Williams posted a sign in the restaurant's window: "PLEASE DON'T, BLACK OWNED" read the most visible text.

Williams said the events of this past weekend "totally affected" Virtue's plans to reopen outdoor dining with the rest of the city Wednesday, after Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced the go-ahead Tuesday morning, but not because of any property damage. Williams is concerned about his team.

"Our staff is predominantly African American, and it would be irresponsible for me to have young men and women who are emotionally wired come into the building with the expectation of providing service, and risking their safety to get them here, because now it's even more difficult to get to and from (work)," he said.

Having to make such a consideration underscores the same dangers of being black as the killings of Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other police brutality victims. As Chicago continued to clean up from the fallout of Floyd's killing, black chefs and restaurant owners spoke about the need to manage not only their operations, but also the safety of their staffs and their communities.

"One thing we know that we can't repair or replace is life, so my concern is that people aren't harmed, both on my team, in my family and in my community. That's a really huge concern right now," Williams said. "(Floyd's killing) is not the first incident where someone has used the law to protect them as they murdered someone."

Williams, who grew up in Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood and is one of the city's most renowned chefs, said he is experiencing a series of mixed emotions following the protests and civil unrest of the past several days. Everyone he has talked to has similar feelings.

"People are angry. People think that some of the things that we're seeing are sad. People are anxious. People are concerned about their safety and the safety of others around them," he said.

Still, Williams said, he and others recognize the importance of the protests.

He doesn't need to give any credence or condemnation to rioting, he said, and referred to a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that reads, in part, "But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. ... I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard."

Chicago chef and restaurateur Lamar Moore has experienced racism on his walk home from work. During a past stint at a restaurant in San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square, police confronted him on the sidewalk and took him to the ground, Moore said.

"I had an AK-47 in the back of my head and a knee to my neck. So you remember those things, and the reasons we choose to kneel and the reasons why we fight," said Moore, previously the chef at Swill Inn and now preparing to open a restaurant in Las Vegas, after winning that opportunity on Food Network's "Vegas Chef Prizefight." "But, you know, you try to find other ways and other avenues to try to do it peacefully."

Moore said he understands and shares the frustration toward the looting behind the rioting, but that the messages behind the protests are clear to him.

"Communities drive what we do (as restaurant owners)," he said. "It's just a different feeling when you can go in the community and see these people are hurting. (Passing out meals) the other day, I heard an older lady say, 'My goodness, I could feed my family for two weeks.' ... To see someone who reminds me of my mom or my grandmother say they could feed their family for two weeks that, that's heartbreaking. Heartbreaking."

Despite the circumstances of the pandemic shutdown or this past weekend's unrest, black chefs and restaurant owners have continued to feed communities and front-line workers.

At the start of the pandemic shutdown, Virtue pivoted to local takeout, then to feeding front-line workers at hospitals. Moore, along with Fifty/50 Hospitality, has been passing out meals for weeks.

Chef Maya-Camille Broussard, owner of Justice of the Pies in East Garfield Park, has been providing meals for hospital workers as well. Following property damage in South Side neighborhoods last weekend, she extended the offer to affected businesses and those who were working to clean up those communities.

"It is the act of gratitude, so I wanted to carry that same act to the businesses' owners, since minority- and women-owned businesses are disproportionately in a different position than other businesses, especially big-box businesses," she said. "Target is gonna be fine. Walmart is gonna be really fine."

Broussard said she doesn't feel unsafe right now, more unsure.

"That's the only way I can explain it. Like, when can I leave? I mean, I want to support them. I want the cause to be visible. I want to see change enacted," she said. "And I want 2020 to just kind of be over."

On Sunday, at the well-trafficked stretch of 47th Street between Kenwood and Bronzeville, the Rev. William E. Hall rallied community members to protect the black-

owned businesses along that stretch, including Uncle Remus; Two Fish Crab Shack; Simply Soup, Salad and Sandwiches; and Smarty Pants Early Learning Center.

A clergyman at St. James Community Church in Chatham, Hall put out a call on social media for black men to come out and protect businesses after he heard reports of “arsonists” — “Let’s call them what they are,” he said — on his way back from a trip to meet with protesters and politicians in Minneapolis.

More than 20 people showed up, allowing Hall’s group to look after businesses on 43rd Street as well, while larger businesses like a nearby McDonald’s were looted. He said without those community efforts, these smaller, black-owned businesses would have also been affected — another scenario that reveals larger, systematic concern.

“When those downtown bridges went up, that was a statement. Don’t come down here. It was the unspoken invitation. I firmly believe that the businesses were not protected, and these businesses are now on the verge of not being rebuilt, because these businesses in this part of the city were not the priority,” he said. “Community was burdened, community was hit hard, and community is suffering hard, while downtown is straight, and it’s set to open up tomorrow. This is sad.”

Like Hall, Williams also spoke about concern for his community right now.

“There are businesses here that were on the brink of closing before COVID happened, there are businesses here that were on the brink of closing before we had riots. So people are in a state of panic, and they’re responding as such,” he said.

“Our precious asset right now is our health and our life,” he said.

Broussard, Moore and Williams all said they’ve had emotional conversations during the last week, and have often encountered the question “What can we do?” — from all different people.

Broussard implored people to examine overt and hidden racism, and Moore said non-black colleagues had reached out to offer support and understanding. Williams encouraged people to use their voices, “verbal or written,” to contact legislators and prosecutors about the systemic injustices that have catalyzed the events of the last few days.

Despite his admitted mixed emotions following the tumult and unrest, he offered this before hanging up the phone:

“Much of this unrest is due to the idea that people of color are losing their lives at the hands of men and women who are protected by a shield. It’s senseless. It’s as senseless as the destruction that is happening in each of these cities,” he said. “But our focus, for some strange reason, continues to be on the destruction of the businesses and the places, and there is something wrong with that — something awfully wrong with that.”

