

The BEAT

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Starting over from ground zero

By CAROLYN K CORREIA

It is said that entrepreneurs aren't born, they are made. Today we feature one chef's journey from Tobago to Antigua and back home again to start her life over.

CURLYN JOHN'S personality is warm and embracing. It makes for good business. She shares that her recipe for attracting repeat customers is her commitment to outstanding customer service, packaging and most of all her tasty eclectic meals.

Judging from her youthful speaking

voice, you would think she's not a day over 16, but this dynamo is a single mom with children ages 31, 18 and nine.

Born and bred in Tobago, John got her start in the culinary industry with the School Feeding Programme in Mason Hall. Here she worked as a cook for a year before pursuing a diploma in Chef Training at the Trinidad and Tobago Hospitality and Tourism Institute (TTHTI). This was just the beginning of her incredible journey in the culinary industry.

After graduating, John along with a few of her classmates offered to showcase their culinary skills aboard a cruise ship which was dry-docked in Chaguaramas.

"There were no passengers, so we cooked for the crew and were soon hired to work on different ships... we went to all the Caribbean islands, with the exception of Barbados, Jamaica and Cuba, but reaching as far as the Bahamas and Cayman Islands... however, it was Palm island that I found most breathtaking, which was a private island off the coast of St Vincent and the Grenadines."

The ship was based in Antigua and John soon found a boyfriend and decided to make this island her new home. It was an easy transition and everyone made her feel welcomed. She worked at Trade Winds Hotel as a Chef de Partie as well as the Grand Royal Antigua, Jolly Beach Resort and Jimmy's Beach Grill and Bar to name a few. She admits that working for people was not enough for her as there was a lack of promotional opportunities. Without too much thought, she quit after working for 11



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years and opened her own restaurant called "Trini Delights" which soon became a hit with the locals. It was a gamble that paid off.

She served take-away lunches and breakfast, opening her doors at 6 am Monday to Saturday. But, many times her neighbours and other customers would come knocking at any time of the day or night. John remembers gleefully, "They would say to me: you must have some kind of food or a cup with ice and a cold drink in your freezer!" She says this was the only drawback of working from home, but she loved cooking for her patrons.

She served a new special each day, but maintained her regular menu giving customers a choice. Her top sellers were the specials such

as roti, which she made from scratch and her Tuesday pepperpot which is an Antiguan soup made of spinach, okras, dumplings and various kinds of peas. She mastered all the local dishes and on Thursdays she served salt fish with ducuna (similar to what we call paimé in Trinidad and Tobago, but made with sweet potato). Fungi was also popular (similar to coo coo, but made of a softer consistency and served piping hot).

Chef John explains that she paired this dish with stewed fish and chop chop (callaloo made with spinach). Listening to her describe these mouth-watering delights made me realise that her business really lived up to its name, as I remembered visiting her one Sunday for the Tobago Jazz Festival and asking for seconds!

She served a plethora of dishes for breakfast and most times, the same customers were seen coming back for lunch. She was doing so well that she was able to fund her eldest daughter's undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Applied and Forensic Sciences at the University of the West Indies, Mona Jamaica, without taking a loan.

Business was booming until the recession hit. When things started to get slow, John decided to move back home at the

end of 2012. She had to start all over again but admits that "home will always be home."

She still maintained old friendships and will never forget the tremendous support she received during the transition. John says re-adjusting to Tobago life was hard and chuckles as she remembers mentally converting the currency whenever she went to the supermarket. She missed the affordable prices, quality and wide variety of food items, as well as the availability of private taxis at every corner of Antigua.

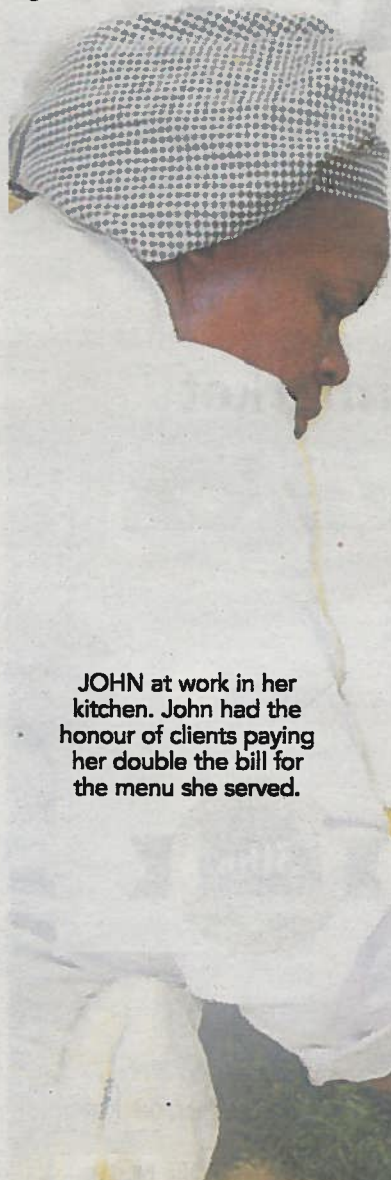
She did not have the funds to start her own business and decided to work for at least two years before venturing into entrepreneurship again. She soon got a job as chef/lecturer at the (TTHTI) and was especially grateful for the experiences she had mentoring the students and helping them host their memorable Student Dinners. John later got her Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ) and toyed with the idea of teaching, but her dream is to open her own fine dining restaurant.

She says, "I want to serve tasty food with superb service that wouldn't cost a pound and a crown." In order to achieve this goal, she does private catering at home and sells lunches on the weekends. She keeps the momentum going with her private and corporate clients, as well as referrals from friends and former colleagues.

When asked about her proudest moments, she replies with a smile: "While working in Antigua: two different groups (foreign and local) asked to see the chef after their meal, the first was so impressed that they ended up paying double the bill and the second group of about 100 people who filled the restaurant, all stood on their feet and applauded when I entered the room! I will never forget that for as long as I live; I think I floated a few feet off the ground!"

Of her determination to persevere, John says, "No one can ever break my stride because of my faith in God, everything I do is for Him and my children; they are my world and continue to make me so proud."

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JOHN at work in her kitchen. John had the honour of clients paying her double the bill for the menu she served.