LIVING THE DREAM

Heart and Soul
Big Mama proves it’s never too late to do what you love
By ChefSmartCookie

When people kick back for good, Patricia “Big Mama” Barron opened a soul-food restaurant in Omaha, Nebraska—and she still runs its kitchen six days a week.

“Just because you’re over 65 doesn’t mean life has to stop,” she says.

At Big Mama’s Kitchen & Catering, she serves African-American dishes with a side of sass. Her unique style has landed her restaurant to be in—north Omaha, a section of the city with more diversity than anywhere else...in the nation.

Her Grandma Lillie taught her to make cornbread and biscuits with a wood-burning stove when she was just 6 years old. In sixth grade, she coaxed recipes from the school cook and discovered that the neighbor kids would agree to tackle her least favorite chore—washing linoleum floors—in exchange for some of her homemade tea cakes and cinnamon rolls.

For most of her life, dreams of a cooking career were kept on the back burner. She joined the Navy hoping to be a cook and was assigned instead to be a bookkeeper. In the early 1970s, she used the GI Bill to get an associate degree in culinary arts from an Omaha community college. “They teach you all that five-star French cooking,” she says. “I thought it was nasty, all those sauces.”

While in school, she worked full time at Northwestern Bell. She found opportunities to advance there and stayed on, eventually supervising 150 people while raising her family.

When grandchildren arrived, she asked them to call her Big Mama—a common term of respect and affection for African-American grandmothers and matriarchs. “I had a Big Mama,” she says. “A lot of American grandmothers and matriarchs are called Big Mama, and it’s a term of respect and affection for African-American grandmothers and matriarchs.”

For example, ask when she’ll retire. “When I’m 100,” she says back. “Then I’m going to come out of the kitchen and sit out here in the dining room and make sure the waitresses are selling like they should,” she says with a hearty laugh.

Her love of cooking started early. Her Grandma Lillie taught her to make southern cooking on limited means. It dates back to early African-Americans who, as slaves, learned to turn cheap cuts and discardable bits into delicious meals. Big Mama’s grandmother put it this way: “What we had to cook with was so awful, it had to be good for something. It must have been good for the soul.”

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Clearly, they didn’t know Big Mama. “I don’t entertain failing,” she says, wagging her fingers. “You want to do it, you do it. Don’t let someone else define you.”

Through it all, cooking remained her love. She spent weekends catering from her house and a church kitchen. “I’m in my own world when I cook,” she says. “Cooking relaxes me.”

After early retirement from the phone company, she worked a few other jobs and finally, in her 60s, set out to launch a restaurant.

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With no financing prospects, she took advantage of a free program for women and minority entrepreneurs and got out what she wanted a kitchen. The manager of a nonprofit organization housed on an old state-school campus offered the school’s empty cafeteria. She opened Big Mama’s Kitchen there in 2007—the city’s only full-service soul-food restaurant.

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The kitchen is armed with commercial restaurant equipment as well as vintage flour sifters, a motley row of slow cookers, and Big Mama’s personal stand mixers—including the one she bought as a graduation gift to herself back in 1973.

Her menu honors her heritage, long-gone local restaurants, and the African-American struggle. Cornbread, sweet potato pudding, collard greens, and oven-fried chicken are family recipes made from scratch. “I’m going to cook what my mom and grandma taught me,” she says.

Ms. Ethel’s Shrimp in a Bag comes from a local café owner who, with no children to inherit her culinary secrets, shared them with Big Mama instead.

In 2013, she opened a second location, Big Mama’s Sandwich Shop. The sandwiches there feature meats roasted, smoked, or fried in her original restaurant’s kitchen. The cold fried chicken sandwich is a nod to the days...
when African-American families packed meals for road trips because restaurants wouldn’t serve them.

Big Mama blends old-school recipes with modern efficiencies. Grandma Lillie’s biscuit dough no longer gets rolled and cut. Instead, employees scoop balls of dough into cast-iron biscuit molds. “Our food is already labor intensive,” she says. “I had to think of ways to make it easier.”

Much of her staff is family. Key employees include daughter and general manager Gladys Harrison, granddaughter and lead cook Diondria Harrison, and grandson and sandwich-shop manager Elijah Harrison. Those who aren’t related? “They want to be,” Big Mama says. “I feel like they’re my children.”

Thanks in part to the TV shows, the restaurant now gets visitors from around the world, like the Chilean man who crowed about meeting “Grande Ma-MAH” and the Facebook fan from India who gushed, “You inspire me.”

Just in case the bankers who turned her down missed her national appearances, Big Mama mailed them a DVD of the highlights. With it, she included a brief note: “See? I did it without you.”

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Big Mama says she likes to give “the food we ate as poor people” a new twist, as she does here with black-eyed peas. Union soldiers destroying Southern crops during the Civil War supposedly overlooked black-eyed peas, which slaves had brought from Africa, thinking they were cattle feed. But the nutritious legumes helped many survive and became a New Year’s tradition symbolizing good luck. Rather than boiling them with ham hock and serving them with hot pepper sauce, Big Mama turns them into a fresh salad, layering them with crisp vegetables, cheddar cheese, and jazzed-up sour cream.

Big Mama’s Black-Eyed Pea “Parfait”

1 (15-ounce) can black-eyed peas, drained and rinsed
¼ teaspoon Cajun seasoning
½ cup sour cream
¾ teaspoon Beau Monde seasoning
8 (6- to 8-ounce) glasses or half-pint canning jars
1 medium red bell pepper, finely chopped
1 medium green bell pepper, finely chopped
¾ cup shredded cheddar cheese
8 cherry tomatoes, quartered

1. Put beans in a bowl, add Cajun seasoning, and toss gently, so beans remain intact. Mix together sour cream and Beau Monde seasoning in a small bowl.
2. In each glass or jar, layer 3 tablespoons beans, 1 ½ tablespoons red bell pepper, 1 ½ tablespoons green bell pepper, and 1 ½ tablespoons cheese. Top each with a tablespoon of sour cream mixture and a few tomato quarters. Serves 8.