

## *Chef Jonny Rhodes built a revered Houston restaurant. His next mission: Fighting ‘food apartheid.’*

By Victoria Marin | July 2, 2020

By most accounts, Houston chef Jonathan “Jonny” Rhodes has already achieved tremendous success. Just a few years removed from culinary school, he has worked in several Michelin-starred kitchens and is running his own celebrated restaurant. Nonetheless, he says, everything in his career has brought him to this moment, confronting food justice against the backdrop of what is perhaps the biggest movement against anti-blackness and police violence in history.

“We talk about that stuff all the time in the neighborhood, honestly, because our community is constantly harassed by the police,” says Rhodes, 29. “I see it every night when we’re closing up shop at 11 o’clock. Nobody would have called the police, there would have been no incidents,” and yet six police cars pull into the neighborhood. “It’s like they’re hunting.” Police violence is one of the many ways black Americans are denied freedom, Rhodes says. Freedom here, he laments, is conditional. “We’re literally treated like tenants. The second we step out of line, it’s like, ‘Well go back to ...’ or, ‘This is my country...’ ”

That’s why a restaurant, even a revered one, has never been enough for Rhodes, who says the pathway to real freedom is through the security and sustainability that comes with land ownership. He has been laying the groundwork since he opened his neo-soul food restaurant, Indigo, by building out a market of preserved and canned pantry items supplemented by produce from the modest garden next door. His intention: to eventually open a full-service grocery store and, further down the line, start a farm to supply the store.

Rhodes decided to open Indigo in Houston’s Northline neighborhood, just outside of where he grew up, in part because he wanted to prove that fine dining belonged there, even if local law enforcement — and some Yelp reviewers — may have thought otherwise. But he has long had bigger aspirations for the project he undertook two years ago: He wants the world to see what’s possible without the chains of an oppressive history, by “showing people what we’re capable of and letting them follow us through the examples of what we’re doing outside. It makes them curious. And as it makes them curious, they create, they start asking questions. And when they start asking questions, they create their own ideas, and ideas are dangerous to the establishment — so instead of telling people to stay safe, we tell them to stay dangerous.”

What constitutes “staying dangerous” in Rhodes’s mind? It starts with Indigo’s unconventional, barrier-breaking premise: The five-course soul food menu is made up of dishes designed as much to convey flavor and beauty as to elicit dialogue about the food history of the African diaspora, with such names as Violence of Hunger; Hijabs, Hoodies & Afros; and Descendants of Igbo. Everything that’s cooked is prepared over a wood-fired grill because it’s historically accurate and because Rhodes and his team — including his wife, Chana Rhodes, and longtime locals such as Edwin

“Slim” Williams, who built most of the restaurant’s garden himself — couldn’t afford the \$10,000 necessary to install a gas kitchen when they opened. Once or twice during the meal, Rhodes steps into the dining room, surrounded by African art, books about slave foodways and posters emblazoned with revolutionary quotes, and presents a deft treatise on the inspiration behind each dish, encouraging guests to consider the intersections between past and present, in addition to their own roles in the sociopolitical issues he touches on. The 13-seat restaurant, which offers only

two seatings per night, four nights per week, has become one of the most coveted reservations going.

But reviews and awards have never been Rhodes’s goal. And neither is just conversation, though conversation is a big part of the Indigo experience, where questions about the impact of centuries of oppression on the foodways of the diaspora are commonplace. That’s because Rhodes says that “creating awareness [alone] is just kind of whack, but actually taking steps and strides to get natural resources” is where the real work and impact happens.

For Rhodes, who served in the Marines before starting a family, going to culinary school and then getting a degree in history, the war for natural resources has long been an apt metaphor for the black American experience. “African Americans have been subdued because we don’t control any natural resources,” he says, pointing out that black Americans have consistently been denied access to land ownership throughout U.S. history, first through slavery, then tenant farming, then redlining. The impact of these systems remains clear to Rhodes, a century after black farmers were massacred in Elaine, Ark., and as residents of Flint, Mich., still don’t have reliable access to clean water, 50 years after redlining was officially banned. “They dropped bombs on our farmland: That’s why we got liquor stores on every corner. That’s why we got convenience stores on every corner. Those are the nuclear bombs on all of our communities.”

The communities Rhodes describes are commonly called “food deserts,” usually densely populated neighborhoods marked by a severe lack of fresh produce coupled with an often devastating abundance of alcohol and processed food. But Rhodes and other food justice advocates around the country consider the term a misnomer. A more accurate phrase, they say, is “food apartheid,” because while a desert implies an organic state of bareness, an apartheid is the result of deliberate, systemic racism.

According to Karen Washington, co-founder of New York City's Rise and Root Farm, calling it apartheid allows us to "look at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith and economics. You say 'food apartheid,' and you get to the root cause of some of the problems around the food system. It brings in hunger and poverty."

Liz Abunaw named her Chicago-area food equity start-up Forty Acres Fresh Market with food apartheid in mind: "It's an homage to the unfulfilled promise to African Americans of 40 acres and a mule. ... The issue of not having access to healthy food where we live particularly hits our communities hard. And I find it to be a cruel irony that the people that basically built this country, who were our country's first farmers, who were so tied to the land, now live on land where they can get nothing from the land."

Covid-19 has disproportionately laid siege on black Americans, something Rhodes sees as inseparable from food apartheid because of the interconnectedness between urban blight, food insecurity and health-care inaccessibility. The pandemic expedited his team's plans. When states started shutting down in March, Indigo closed for a few weeks and then, like many other restaurants across the country, pivoted to groceries when it reopened. Unlike most other restaurants, though, Broham Fine Soul Food and Groceries isn't a temporary endeavor. Rhodes is seizing this opportunity to do his part to dismantle food apartheid, through a sustainable, community-oriented, black-centered soul food market.

For now, Broham resides in the same 819-square-foot space that houses Indigo, where many of the familiar ingredients from the restaurant's menu are available, though now at a more affordable price point, which is important to Rhodes, since Indigo's \$125-per-person dinner price has been a barrier for many locals. With Broham, he says, "you can deconstruct the experience and still get the quality." And despite the change in name and setup, the educational mission remains the same: to offer insight into the history that brought us to this moment, by letting the food tell as much of the story as possible.

Among the 375-plus items you'll find at Broham is the "vegetable ham" featured in Ten Toes Down — a dish on Indigo's Herbivore menu — which is made from turnips or rutabagas that have been cured, hung, smoked and pickled to evoke the flavor and texture of meaty smoked ham. For Rhodes, the product provides an opportunity to offer both a vegan option and a history lesson: Preservation was a big part of the ancestors' food traditions, because slaveholders and farm owners tightly monitored enslaved people's and sharecroppers' access to food. The only food black folks were allowed was typically the spoiled or otherwise unwanted remains — so they had to find ways to improve flavor and to make what they had last. If you're lucky, another product you might find at Broham is clabbered milk ice cream, a subversive interpretation of the spoiled leftover milk that

black people were limited to during slavery. To fill the gaps of what they don't produce on-site, Broham uses its space to amplify local, black-owned purveyors such as Me & the Bees Lemonade, which features a photo of the brand's young founder, Mikaila Ulmer, on the label. "Imagine walking into a grocery store in your own community with people on the containers who look like you... Now a possibility," says the caption on an Instagram post showcasing the lemonade's shelf in the store.

For Rhodes, this moment is ripe with possibility: Earlier this year, he and his team purchased six acres of land just outside the city so they can start farming on a larger scale. (Always resourceful, they're repurposing the wood they're clearing for cooking, building fencing and growing mushrooms.).



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