

Providence Entrepreneurs with Visions of a More Equitable Food Industry

Mentorship programs begin to close the gap for BIPOC restaurateurs



Aiyah Josiah-Faeduwor, founder of nonprofit dismantl

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BINTIMANI

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By Abbie Lahmers

Come spring of this year, 326 Westminster (where Tom's Bao Bao used to be) in downtown Providence will be outfitted in an Afro-futurist style to pay homage to the West African cuisine – from cassava leaves to hearty stews and plantain salad – that assistant manager Aiyah Josiah-Faeduwor and his Boston-transplant family grew up eating and making for their Roxbury community.

Nearing completion of his MBA from MIT and with a background in social impact work, Josiah-Faeduwor is not only looking at reopening his family's West African restaurant Bintimani here in Providence, but also paving the way for other BIPOC-owned businesses to do the same with his nonprofit dismantl.

“Getting engaged with my family's situation is really what kind of started to point me in the direction of thinking about how to do this long term, and how to think bigger picture,” says Josiah-Faeduwor, referencing the Roxbury outpost of Bintimani being evicted by the landlord after 11 years in business. He began asking questions like “How do I help my family?” but also, “How can businesses help each other?”

Josiah-Faeduwor isn't alone in this thinking. As recent years have seen a dramatic rise in new business applications via the Secretary of State office, the process of testing and developing recipes, licensing, and the time and funds required can present barriers to entrepreneurs without the connections or mentorship to get started.

“When I was trying to develop recipes and considering starting my business, there was nowhere for me to go,” recalls Black Beans PVD owner, known on her pop-up circuit simply as “Bean,” who specializes in soul food and chocolate work (including a Valentine's menu of hand pies, cookies, and more on the docket this month). In the spirit of “collective and cooperative economics” – a tenet of the Kwanzaa principle Ujamaa – Bean invites potential entrepreneurs, especially BIPOC cooks and bakers, to come to her with their ideas.

Offering help with recipes, scaling, and packaging, along with space to produce items and test their marketability, Bean explains, “It's a chance to see if that small dream can have legs and grow, all alongside licensed bakers and chefs, gaining experience-based advice and personal contacts we've made along the way. It's about building the community and supports I couldn't find in the beginning.”

Josiah-Faeduwor envisions dismantl serving as a hub of resources that connects the dots of opening a restaurant, filling in gaps when needed. “As someone who has been navigating this myself, there are these resources and commerces, specific firms and agencies that work with businesses that are all kind of separate, but there's really not one place or resource where you can go if you don't know anything at all about this or don't have established networks.”

A holistic program, dismantl begins with helping businesses get the certifications and licenses they need and overcoming the learning curves that can come with that process. “Many times, even as someone with an MBA, I would fill out these

documents and send them in,” says Josiah-Faeduwor, only to be told it wasn’t filled out correctly, “and that would be the end of it.”

Dismantl will ultimately serve as a launching point to help prospective business owners with assembling a business model, accessing capital and funds, and gaining a following by showcasing their talents in Bintimani’s kitchen space.

Josiah-Faeduwor recently defended his Master’s thesis, which looks at the power structures in place allowing some businesses to succeed and others not to, and the outcomes of capitalism promoting competition, “but the competition isn’t fair if some people are starting at a different place than others,” he explains.

For solutions, he looks to pre-capitalist and pre-colonial Indigenous systems, including a West African community banking practice known as Osusu, which promote more collective approaches to economic development. Programs like dismantl and the work of Black Beans PVD begin to balance the scales, and Josiah-Faeduwor is optimistic that when more equitable practices follow, such programming won’t be necessary at all. “Hopefully dismantl works itself out of a need by connecting this ecosystem that no longer needs an intermediary.”