**WORCESTER REGIONAL FOOD HUB** - Unique Café Just Opened and Still Has Big Plans

By David Sullivan

**WORCESTER** - Looking for the best Jamaican food in town? Unique Café is the one you’re looking for. As the founder and owner of Unique Café, a Jamaican restaurant at 79 Millbury St, Nadine James has impressively grown her business from a fledgling startup to a brick-and-mortar business over the course of the pandemic.

Ms. James, who was born in Jamaica as the youngest of 12 siblings, says that she started to cook at nine years old as a way to help others. “The thing that inspired me about food is that I see the importance of feeding people in drawing people together,” says Ms. James. “When my mom used to cook, all her friends would come and they would talk about life... I’ve always wanted to cook because of that.”

As a participant of the Launching Diaspora Food Entrepreneurs in Worcester program that the Worcester Regional Food Hub hosted in summer 2019, Ms. James took her passion and turned it into a startup business. After the summer-long program, she partnered with the Food Hub to run pop-up events that helped her get the revenue to buy a restaurant. (Johan Rainford, director of the Food Hub, had no doubt or positive words for his former mentees. “Nadine had a vision from the first day, and now it has come to reality. I could not be more proud of her tenacity and hard work,” he says. “It was blown away by her food crack, both the taste and presentation. Her fried chicken is top-notch as are her signature juicy. Once the word is out, she is sure to have a very successful business primarily due to her drive, but also with the support provided by the Food Hub, Chamber, and the city’s Office of Economic Development.”)

“Helped tremendously,” said Ms. James when asked how the Food Hub helped her start Unique Café. “Shon brought in people to explain taxes and finances, to teach you how to make your menu, every little thing I needed them.”

While the pandemic stopped Unique Café from doing pop-up events hosted by the Food Hub, which it normally does for its member businesses, that was not going to stop Ms. James from pursuing her dream and helping others.

As the start of the pandemic, she joined CoGoCA (Connect, Care, Share), a company founded by a Harvard student that pays minority women business owners for teaching culturally-minded cooking classes online.

Ms. James used the pay from her instructor work to save up for buying a space to house Unique Café. She also volunteered as a manager for a friend who owns Akra Eatery & Juice Bar, a West African restaurant that operates out of the Worcester Public Market in Kelley Square. “This passion of mine was not going away,” she says.

This instructor and volunteer experience were essential for Ms. James in preparing to start her business. “All of our patience paid off in February when Unique Café had its soft opening at the place at 79 Millbury St. “You can come here and get smoothie, get freshly squeezed juice, and most Jamaican restaurants don’t do those,” says Ms. James. Combining this Jamaican juice bar experience with traditional Jamaican entrees such as oxtail, goat, curry chicken, plantains, jerk chicken salad and more is what makes Unique Café so unique.

“I definitely get my fruits and vegetables from the Food Hub,” she notes, also saying that she prioritizes buying products from neighborhoods stores and that she is in the process of trying to source her meat from local farms with the help of the Food Hub. Nadine isn’t satisfied yet, though. She says the plan for Unique Café’s future involves buying another property on the place where she is located and using it to house a classy restaurant adjacent to her current juice bar property. “So while you wait for a seat over there you can still drink your smoothie or juice here and when your number is called, you come and get your nice intimate setting and dine,” Ms. James explains. “The hope is to one day open multiple Unique Café locations like this.”

And next month, she is planning to start a series of livestreams on Instagram where she and guest doctors will explain the benefits of healthy fresh juices and smoothies using a live Q&A format.

“As an entrepreneur and when I see stuff, I see the future and not what I’m going through right now,” she adds, noting the opening of Polar Park a couple blocks away from her restaurant. She says this forward thinking allowed her to persevere during the pandemic and recognize that the ballpark district would create conditions where restaurants like hers could seriously thrive. Ms. James runs Unique Café with her family, and says it has an intimate but safe setting in the restaurant. “It’s a friendly, but safe setting,” she says. “We have had some customers come from a Facebook (Unique Café) and Instagram page (@UniqueCafeMA) and are available for pickup if you call them at 508-340-3381. They are open from Tuesday to Sunday from 10 am to 7 pm. “Just come and check it out!” says Ms. James. Unique Café has healthy, authentic Jamaican food with some American twists.

- David Sullivan is Economic Development Fellow for the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

**LEGAL MATTERS** - Newest Stimulus Bill Helps Small Businesses

Since the inauguration of President Biden, the Small Business Administration and Congress lawmakers have been diligently working on the latest stimulus bill, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. In an effort to deliver financial relief to struggling families and ramp up vaccination distribution across the country, the House of Representatives passed the $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan on the last day of February. The bill is expected to go to the Senate, which will try to move this bill quickly, in part of getting it to the President’s desk before March 14, when the current unemployment programs and states are set to expire.

So, what is in the American Rescue Plan?

The bill, which largely follows the economic stimulus plan President Biden unveiled in January, includes funding for vaccine production and distribution, another round of stimulus payments for many households, an extension of federal unemployment benefits and more.

**Stimulus payments:** The bill provides funding for a third economic impact payment, worth up to $1,400 per individual and dependent.

This time around, individuals earning an adjusted gross income (AGI) up to $75,000 (and married couples earning the same) would qualify for $1,400 each, plus $1,400 for each dependent they claim, up to three dependents. Aggregated payments, adult dependents quality for this round. That means many college students, disabled adults and elderly Americans will receive a check for $2,800.

The payments phase out gradually, hitting $0 for individuals earning an AGI over $100,000 per year and couples earning over $200,000 per year. The payments are based on either 2019 or 2020 income, depending on when a taxpayer files their 2020 tax return.

**Unemployment Assistance:** The bill also extends unemployment programs past their current March 14 expiration date through Aug. 29. The payments are based on either 2019 or 2020 income, depending on when a taxpayer files their 2020 tax return.

**PPF funding:** The program has disbursed more than $662 billion in forgivable loans in three iterations over the past 11 months. It庄村 about half of the $284 billion in current funding available under Paycheck Protection Plan Act appropriate $7.25 billion in additional funding and does not extend PPP’s current application period, which is scheduled to close on March 31.

**Support for restaurants:** Restaurants and bars, other entities eligible for support from the BIF include food stands, food trucks, food carts, caterers, salons, tattoo, Lewis, lounges, brewpubs, tasting rooms, taprooms, and any licensed facility or premise of a beverage alcohol producer where the public may taste, sample, or purchase products, or other similar places of business in which the public is likely to come in contact with food or drink.

The act allows for grants equal to the lesser of the greatest reduction loss of the eligible entity, up to $10 million per entity, or 40% of the firm’s physical location. The grants are calculated by subtracting 2020 revenue from 2019 revenue. Entities are limited to 20 locations. The grant funds may be used to pay for the following eligible expenses: Payroll costs, principal and interest payments on a mortgage, rent payments, utilities, maintenance expenses including construction to accommodate outdoor seating and walls, floods, deck surfaces, furniture, fixtures, and equipment; supplies including personal protective equipment and cleaning materials, food and beverage expenses, covered supplier costs; operational expenses; paid sick leave, and any other expenses the SBA determines to be essential to maintaining the eligible entity.

During the first 21 days of the grants, the SBA will prioritize applications from restaurants and bars that were owned and operated by women, veteran, and socially or economically disadvantaged individuals.

While this is a 30,000 feet overview of the bill as it sits just a few days

Alex Guardiola

after being passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, it seems as if there is a proverbial light at the end of this economic and health crisis tunnel. Our businesses are slowly reopening, our positive COVID case numbers are trending in the right direction, and the vaccines are being rolled out at a steady pace and will accelerate as we begin to add a third vaccine to the distribution. While this bill does not have unanimous support in either the House or the Senate, it seems imminent and will help our most vulnerable survive this crisis. It is time to get back to some sort of normality.

- Alex Guardiola is Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy at the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

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**Legal Matters - Newest Stimulus Bill Helps Small Businesses**

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