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A GAGGLE OF TEENAGERS GATHER AT A NEIGHBOUR'S HOME FOR A CULINARY COMPETITION. Among the entries, including one by the neighbour's son, a chicken and rice dish — the rice neatly turned out of a ramekin — takes first place, much to his ire. "I don't think he [her son] liked it at all," recalls Samantha V. Chizanga amusingly. The winning dish was rudimentary, admits the Toronto chef cum digital entrepreneur. Nevertheless, it marked the moment Chizanga, then 16, discovered a latent skill, one that would later shape her career.

In the decade since this fortuitous culinary coup, Chizanga has worked in several kitchens and apprenticed under some of Canada's best chefs, including Adam MacKay of Mediterranean restaurant Paradiso and star restaurateur Susur Lee. During those formative years, the George Brown College graduate steadily worked her way up, first as a garde manger, and eventually creating menus and leading in-house cooking classes. Though Chizanga is versed in everything from New American to fusion cuisine, she does not lay claim to any one style. "I have no specialties. I just enjoy food and its complexities and simplicity. Saying I have a specialty would box me in."

However, as a black female chef in an industry that, despite many advances, remains predominantly white and male, persistent racism and sexism did just that. Frustrated with the lack of diversity and advancement within the industry, Chizanga left restaurant kitchens and, last January, launched Blackculinarian.com, a digital platform featuring interviews with emerging chefs, tutorials, workshops and more, whose goal is twofold: lend a voice to those who do not have one and push the envelope creatively. "Here in Toronto, there are not a lot of opportunities to do what I want to do in the culinary world and there isn't a lot of representation, so I decided to bring the two ideas together," says Chizanga.

"I want to teach about food in any capacity I can but on the creative [side], so that includes food styling, photography, recipe and product development and culinary content creation, but to people of colour. A lot of people think [that] because it is [called] Blackculinarian.com, I want to exclude all other races, but in reality, I want to give a platform and an opportunity to those who wouldn't [otherwise] have had one because of who they are. The black in the name obviously [refers] to me but it's also [for] the black sheep, the odd chefs out and the ones who just don't fit the classic narrative, and "culinarian" is encompassing of everyone who loves food. A culinarian is the evolved foodie."



Additionally, with sweet potato gnocchi, Oreo-stuffed pancakes, banana bagels and other such recipes, Chizanga hopes to reach a wider audience with restaurant-style fare, made simple. "The idea is to make what's [available] in restaurants accessible to the [everyday] consumer. To teach people basic skills, so they can also create beautiful meals without [feeling] intimidated."

While Blackculinarian.com gains momentum in the digital sphere, in the future Chizanga envisions a facility all her own where she could work closely with young culinarians. As for industry kitchens? As more chefs are beginning to speak out against the machismo, misogyny and racism rampant within these culinary spaces, she, like many of her peers both male and female, agrees that kitchens are in serious need of an overhaul.

"Don't get me wrong, not all kitchens are a shady mess, just a lot of them," says Chizanga. "The treatment of line cooks has to be better. There needs to be some sort of checks and balances for the hospitality industry, someone to hold them accountable for their ways." ✦