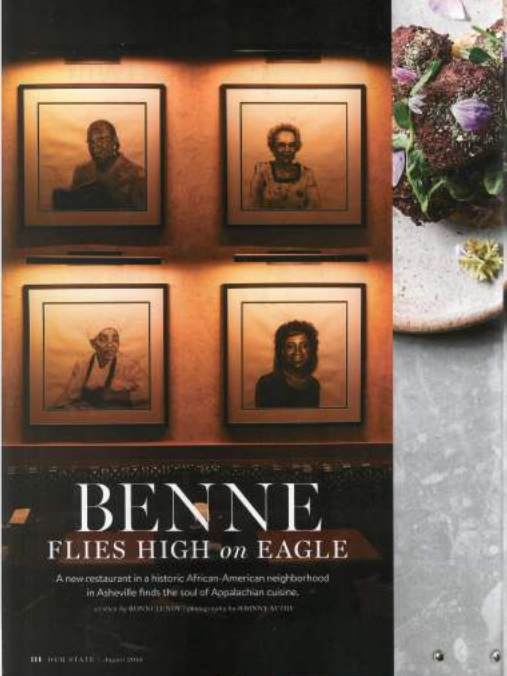


PLUS! NC'S MOST MYSTERIOUS LAKES

BRINGING BACK the Sunday SUPPER

Companionship is the secret ingredient.



BENNE FLIES HIGH on EAGLE

A new restaurant in a historic African-American neighborhood in Asheville finds the soul of Appalachian cuisine.

BY JANE BARNETT/STAFF WRITER FOR OUR STATE

WHEN HANAN SHARIFI accepted Chef John Harri's invitation to host a Sunday supper at Benne restaurant in Asheville four and a half years ago, neither suspected it would be the start of a beautiful friendship and the foundation for a brand new restaurant, Benne on Eagle, that has the culinary world abuzz. What Shaban knew — and what she shared with Harri, his crew, and his guests, King, Dr. King — was the history of The Block, a small downtown neighborhood that was once the epicenter of Asheville's African-American community. That momentary and residential area in the city's downtown is where Shaban, now 70, grew up and learned the ritual of her own Sunday suppers in her grandmother's kitchen and in the restaurants that now fill The Block with the enticing aromas of food for the soul.



"It's been pretty much a love affair since we met," Harri says. "Hanan has been teaching me as much about the life of this community." But The Block, like much of Asheville's downtown, is no longer what it was, having been gentrified into a commercial area geared toward tourists and dislodged by the construction of new hotels. The parties held at The Rowland Hotel, situated at Eagle and Main streets, over the years of The Block, appeared to have faded away. Harri wanted to share a light on a corner area of the largely unknown corners of African-American Asheville life.



Harri (left) with Shari (right) at Benne restaurant.



Legendary supper of The Block... Benne on Eagle...



The bar at Benne is the gathering place for locals and visitors... Benne restaurant...

The southern Appalachian region has a complex history and a tenacious mythology.

remnants of Appalachia, West African, and locally originated flavors — appears on the table like this: Okra-baked pork chops in a citrusy pepper-orange sauce and served with homemade biscuits — a crunchy, tender roll on traditional Appalachian leather butter (from green beans) — fried sausage, usually cooked over open heat to sear up the sides. A couple slices of chive-fritted french fries made from black-eyed peas with sautéed scallion and mushroom omelette. A bread-side cabbage potato, whose potatoes name doesn't begin to describe the three-dotted-diced-diced-splashed with sausage, radishes, dillseed, sprouted feta peas, and a creamy drizzle of smoky honey called sauté potatoes.

"That you — you've been my teacher," Shaban says. "I have learned so much from you — about your roots from Africa, and about Appalachia from you and Harri. We've all been learning here."

The southern Appalachian region has a complex history and a tenacious mythology. Some of those myths are celebratory and others are derogatory. Some are based in local fact, and others are, as we like to say in these parts, just fiction. One of the most persistent and best is the story that African-Americans have had little to no presence in the region. Contemporary studies of the antebellum period, such as John Bracey's *Mountains Beyond Myriam* and the *Sojourner Truth* in *Black North Carolina* or *William Dawson's Slavery in the American South*, effectively dispel that history. A look at *Footprints in the region* confirms the deep culture of black culture in the area.

cook for wealthier families in the mountains only on special occasions. But as a single mother, she runs a successful bakery and florist business in Cherokee Mountain, until her husband's death during the Civil War forced her to flee to the North.

Or consider the Drives Road, a dusty stretch of asphalt, catfish, ducks, and turkeys transported to the plantations of South Carolina for sale. It occurred through the hills of Kentucky, Tennessee, and western North Carolina, right down what is now Broadway Street in Asheville. Many owners for these birds were young enslaved black men. The animals needed food, water, and rest about every 10 miles, so did their riders, so food had to be simple and easy to carry. Black and white men and women worked together to raise and transport the animals. Many owners for these birds were young enslaved black men. The animals needed food, water, and rest about every 10 miles, so did their riders, so food had to be simple and easy to carry. Black and white men and women worked together to raise and transport the animals. Many owners for these birds were young enslaved black men.



Benne's Sunday Supper, which has been a tradition for decades, was a highlight of the Asheville community.



"I got to see the power in telling stories with food, in sharing your identity on the plate."

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"I didn't even think about being Appalachian until we started this."

Shaban, 70, at the Asheville restaurant. "And anyone I had the chance, I'd feed the soul," she says.

The lesson she learned from her mother and in her grandmother's Asheville kitchen — how to wash greens, how to steam them and use them, how to stretch a piece of meat to feed a family; how to make cornbread — she took to the New York kitchens that she helped run, which fed anyone in the black community who was hungry. There, she learned new dishes, new techniques. "I had 10 learned 100 different ways to cook okra," she says. "And all kinds of things to make with okra, and that's what I learned to make my best."

Filled with a spiced paste of cooled yams and tasting similar to but more delicate than sweet potato pie, Harri has become Shaban's specialty when she returned to Asheville. She served them at Shaban's Soul Food, which she and her husband and brothers owned and operated on The Block in the early 2010s, and at the bakery where she worked after that. Her signature apple slices were legendary in town, too. Shaban was known to stop by a kitchen to feed people just about anywhere — for a wedding or an event, or she says, "just stop by in park or anywhere you'd normally be."

In 2011, she became a teacher in Asheville's Great Opportunities Kitchen Ready Program. The program gives at-risk students training in culinary skills while providing free lunches for people in the community. It was while she was working there that Shaban met Harri, who had recently opened Benne. There would be a recipe for her dream menu, one reflecting her story: a loaf of spiced

West Africa, where her ancestors came from, alongside fresh-squeezed lemon and Harri's bread. She had a small container her grandmother would cook and eat at her home on the Dan River. It had her love of the mountains, and of the block.

"When she met Harri, I showed him my menu, and he brought out the one he'd been working on for Benne, and they had so many conversations," she says. "It was a monumental moment. She was like, 'I've been looking up to it, it was the first time I had a dog named Harri.' — pronounced like Harri, Harri's not the mountain, and of the block."

Shaban jumps to say that it's not a one-way street. "She knows about the food of Appalachia — the history of the beans, the foraging. I didn't even think about being Appalachian until we started this," Shaban says.

The result of this collaboration can be tasted in Benne's fish rolls, simple fried rolls, but served with a chunky tartar sauce and on a bed of kale (and the traditional greens of the mountains South) applied with grape oil. And in the traditionally thick-of-the-stove fried rabbit, cooked in onion and served with Shaban's apple fritter, which is a little more savory than her original treat.

There is the food of collaboration that springs from a family built on the rich traditions of the old region, the restoration of favorite dishes. "I call her my grandmother," Shaban says. "Because she's, quite frankly, my mother."

Benne is the award-winning author of *Vintage Asheville* and *Appalachian Journey with Harri*.

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