

Food, Home & Entertaining, Lifestyle

Celebrity Chef Rene Johnson Wants You to Cook Up Plant-Based Versions of Holiday Favorites

By LeAura Luciano | December 17, 2021



Image: courtesy of Chef Rene Johnson

Chef Rene Johnson is a one-woman healthy soul food revolution. She's known for cooking vegan southern-style soul food, inspired by her cultural roots and for her grandmother's made-from-scratch-cooking, but without those unhealthy fats. Her vegan spin on soul food staples are often enjoyed by some of the world's biggest celebrities, including Vice President Kamala Harris, Dr. Cornel West, Danny Glover, and H.E.R.

With her yummy new cookbook, *From My Heart to Your Table*, she wants everyone to test and savor her unique twist on healthy southern-inspired comfort foods right at home. EBONY got the lowdown from the vegan culinary wiz on the favorite dishes of her celebrity clientele, her recommended easy-to follow soul food recipes, and why we shouldn't have to sacrifice flavor when going vegan.

EBONY: Who inspired you to cook?

Chef Rene Johnson: I've always loved experiences around food. My grandmother gave me this great appreciation for food. She was incredible in the kitchen, and she always cooked everything fresh and from scratch. The peach cobbler was made from peaches from our trees. Her blackberry dishes and jams were made with blackberry picked from the garden bush, and the grandkids would gather them for her. We always ended up with purple fingers! Everything was done with care and love. I got her gift for cooking, but I didn't embrace it professionally until later on when I started as a [private chef and caterer](#).

When did you start creating plant-based soul food?

Years ago my catering company, [Blackberry Soul](#), had an event in San Francisco for a few hundred people, and we had a small order for vegan meals, and the majority were traditional meals. What happened was that everyone enjoyed the vegan meals, and no one missed the meat. It was a game-changer. I wanted everyone I cook for, no matter how big the event, to be able to eat everything. The dishes that I create are so flavorful and delicious; you won't miss the meat and dairy or the excess fat.

How do you embrace soul food with health in mind?

I wanted to make southern soul food favorites more heart-healthy. My grandmother's red beans and rice is made the same way but without the pork. My collard greens don't have pork or turkey either. Unless I am specifically making a piece of protein, I recreate vegan and vegetarian versions of all the classic soul favorites, maintaining their style, flavor, and essence.

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Can you spill the sweet tea on some of the VIP's you've fed?

[Vice President Kamala Harris](#) might have a bit of a sweet tooth. The Veep's favorites were the desserts I made for her event, like my mini sweet potato pies, mini cupcakes, and mini homemade cookies. Danny Glover is mindful of what he eats and is vegan. He gravitated towards my vegan beans and rice. That was his favorite by far. Dr. Cornell West enjoyed the mini mac and cheese bites, and vegan red beans and rice. For dessert, he got into my blackberry jam cupcakes. He expressed just how much he enjoyed all of my food.

Can you share some of your signature dishes that we can recreate at home?

I've filled *From My Heart to Your Table* with easy-to-follow recipes. The favorites are the more traditional recipes like hot water cornbread, sticky barbecue wings, big ol' pot of gumbo, grandmother's fried chicken, off-the-hook ox-tails, the "mac attack" mac and cheese, salmon croquettes, stewed salmon, and grits. I also have many of these recipes on my [YouTube channel](#) so that you can cook along with me. The great part is that you can choose to mix and match both traditional and plant-based dishes during the holiday season.

FROM MY HEART TO YOUR TABLE

VEGAN AND TRADITIONAL SOUL FOOD COOKBOOK



FROM MY HEART TO YOUR TABLE: VEGAN AND TRADITIONAL SOUL FOOD COOKBOOK, CHEF RENE JOHNSON, \$30, [AMAZON.COM](#)

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