

MS EARLYN

More than just serving delicious Caribbean food, Earlyn Francis, founder of Ms Earlyn's is a pillar of the community in Gravesend.



"Morning Auntie," says the postman. "Morning Auntie," call office workers walking through the old Gravesend Borough Market. Earlyn Francis, known locally as Ms Earlyn and more affectionately as Auntie, settles for her interview. Alyshia, one of her four employees, pops out with coffee. "We have to ensure Auntie drinks," she says, beaming.

It was growing up with her grandmother in Stamford Hill, London, that Earlyn's passion for cooking began. Grandmother had emigrated from Guyana, in South America, and cooked everything from scratch in the traditional way.

LEARNING TO COOK

Aged eight, Earlyn arrived home from school hungry. Grandmother was not home, so she fried some saltfish left on the side. It was tough and chewy. Hearing Grandmother return, she ran to bed and pretended to be sleeping.

Instead of anger, Grandmother told her she was proud and that she had only forgotten to scale the fish. From that moment, Earlyn helped prepare every meal.

Baking became another passion until rheumatoid arthritis meant she had to hand it over to the team.

EARLY YEARS

When moving to Gravesend from London, Earlyn noticed there were no Caribbean food shops. "Unlike London where there is one on every corner."



From left: Alyshia Lane and Ms Earlyn's son, Stefan Sinclair

Opening her first place in 2017 was a huge step, not even knowing if there was a local black community. The Perry Street shop in Northfleet worked, but licensing rules meant no cooking on site; all food had to be brought in.

Thirteen months later, she moved to a restaurant on Windmill Street near the Invicta Bar. It became popular. For many English customers, the food brought back memories of holidays in the West Indies. But the stress of running a restaurant became too much, and it closed.

SCHOOLCHILDREN PRESSURE

Soon after, a food delivery company got in touch. A pupil from St John's School had messaged them saying they could not find Caribbean food and wanted Ms Earlyn's back.

Local young people had named the restaurant "The Spot." That message prompted her to reopen in the Borough Market



Earlyn Francis

in 2000. Around sixty children came for food on day one, more than the market had ever seen. Earlyn never looked back.

TRADING PRESSURES

"Trading is tough," Earlyn says. "Margins are tight, I have had to reduce staff, and it is hard to cope. People have little money, and since Covid, input costs have risen."

She still travels for ingredients, heading to London and Dartford to source what she needs. "Caribbeans, Africans and Thai all use similar herbs and spices, but many I use, they don't," meaning the local African stores do not always stock what gives Caribbean food its distinctive flavour.

With technology, Instagram helps encourage people to try new things. "We do well with Uber Eats, although they take a big cut, so I don't put everything online to encourage people to visit us."

Alyshia Lane, 29, works at Ms Earlyn's and explains how Auntie adapts to her autism and is helping her develop skills to open her own business.

"I was born in Trinidad and Tobago, my roots, yet I could not even cook rice," Alyshia shines. "Eighteen months ago, I asked Aunty to help cook for my mum's birthday party. That's when I started here and fell in love with cooking."

Alyshia is autistic and can struggle to understand. "Sometimes, I cannot register words." Aunty always helps me with the patience of a saint.

"I love coming to work. It's a second family, and now even my five-year-old tries everything I cook. Every day is an experience."

With Aunty's help, Alyshia cooked for a family occasion of 200 and is now thinking of opening a side business in food prepping. "Food brings people together," Alyshia beams. "I even take food to my neighbours."



HONOURING CULTURE

Honouring the culture and keeping the food authentic is sacrosanct. "I cook the way my grandmother cooked. The old way. I use herbs and spices," she smiles

"I always feel so appreciated in Gravesend. People really respect me" she says softly, smiling. "In five years', my dream is for it to give me an easier life, maybe a one-day week. I have been working since I was 13."

More interruptions follow, with people from all backgrounds stopping to greet Auntie. It is clear Ms Earlyn's is more than a food business; it's a bond that binds a community together.

@msearlyns

MsEarlyns