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## HARLEM'S CULINARY RENAISSANCE

BY CHRISTIE GROTHEIM

HARLEM HAS BEEN RENOWNED for serving up plentiful portions of savory soul food for the last century, luring locals uptown and attracting visitors from around the globe. As Harlem becomes more gentrified, it is seen as more approachable, and it has evolved into a destination for foodies.





Madiba Harlem's Tristan da Cunha lobster tail

**... it is a cuisine born of survival and resourcefulness and introduced as early as the 16th century with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.**

Within the last few years the neighborhood has seen an explosion of new restaurants. Diverse cuisines including classic French, Italian, Ethiopian, West African, as well as Southern revival cooking and farm-to-fork fare are showcased in neighborhood venues from historical Lenox Avenue to trendy Frederick Douglass Boulevard. Some chefs offer variety while others reinterpret and expand on soul food, holding tight to Harlem's heritage.

Soul food is basic, down-home cooking with roots in the rural South; it is a cuisine born of survival and resourcefulness and introduced as early as the 16th century with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Slaves combined ingredients familiar to them from their motherland such as okra, rice and guinea corn with whatever scraps slave masters would give them: cuts of meat such as pig feet, chicken gizzards and pork fat. Ham hocks, herbs and onions were used to flavor beans and collards, turnips and cabbage.

The term soul food became common in the 1960s when many African Americans sought to reclaim their part of American culture. In fact, the moniker is believed to have first been used by civil rights activist and poet Amiri Baraka in 1962, the same year that Sylvia Woods opened Sylvia's, the now world-famous Harlem restaurant.

Originally a small luncheonette consisting of a counter and a few booths,

Sylvia's has expanded over the years, and the business now includes Sylvia's Restaurant, the catering company Sylvia's Also, cookbooks and a line of food products. Currently taking up almost an entire block in one of the hottest locations in Harlem, Sylvia's still rivals the new stylish eateries that have sprung up around it in popularity. Specialties include soul food staples such as short ribs, collard greens and fried chicken.

Amy Ruth's is another essential for classic soul food and is famous for what is said to be the best fried chicken and waffles in the city. Other soul food favorites include Jacob Restaurant and Spoonbread. Yet the neighborhood's epicurean evolution also involves a plethora of new restaurants serving soulful dishes with a twist.

In January 2013, New York businessman Richard Parsons and noted restaurateur and chef Alexander Smalls reopened Minton's, which breathed new life into one of New York City's most famous jazz clubs. Smalls defines his menu as Southern revival cooking with Lowcountry notes, inspired by the traditional cuisine of coastal South Carolina. His cooking incorporates the multiethnic influences in the area, including African, Native American, French, Spanish and Asian traditions. A dress code reminiscent of an earlier era recommends that gentlemen "dress sharp" and wear jackets, which adds to the swanky, upscale ambiance.

Nine months later, the duo opened a sister restaurant, The Cecil, just next door. An even more ambitious venture on the quiet block, the expansive eatery seats 140 guests at a lengthy bar and in the spacious back dining room. The Cecil is New York City's first Afro-Asian-American brasserie showcasing the influence of the African diaspora on the cuisines of the world. With its dark wood, black ceiling, lush upholstery and large-scale oil paintings, The Cecil has been receiving outstanding reviews both for its romantic atmosphere and the phenomenal food, keeping most of the seats full—yet another testament to the changes taking place in Harlem.

Last March, the former Boulevard Bistro was renamed BLVD—and



Zoma

YUEN CHIN/HARLEM ONE STOP

PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CHEZ LUCIENNE, CHÉRI, THE GRANGE, CLAYTON COTTERELL, ZOMA, CHÉRI  
THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT: MADIBA HARLEM



Guy Grieve, Director - The Ethical Shellfish Company,  
Isle of Mull, Inner Hebrides



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CHÉRI

Chéri's poisson du jour

**Beyond soul food,  
Harlem is known for  
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revitalizations include décor, new branding and a new menu. Mississippi-born chef Carlos Swepson and his sister and business partner Joi replaced existing dishes with crafted American soul food, emphasizing well-sourced ingredients in a fusion of Creole, Southern and classic French cooking. High-quality meats come from respected local butcher Harlem Shambles, perhaps contributing to the tender Cajun rib eye steak, the succulent, slow-cooked St. Louis-style ribs, and wood-smoked, free-range chicken that falls off the bone. An intimate, narrow space with 36 indoor seats, including cozy booths and 12 outdoor tables in a sunken sidewalk terrace, make this a real charmer.

Celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson's wildly popular Red Rooster cannot be overlooked, especially since even just four years ago he was one of the pioneers in Harlem's foodie revolution. Decorated with colorful art by local artists and handdrawn chalkboard murals,

the Red Rooster unarguably did more to energize the area than any other establishment. When it comes to reinterpreting soul food, Samuelsson is a master thanks to his Ethiopian roots, Swedish background, European apprenticeships and knack for Southern cooking. The inventive menu includes blackened catfish with curried black eyed peas, red chili cauliflower, fried yardbird with white mace gravy, meatballs served with green cabbage, and shrimp and grits with salsa verde. The Red Rooster is still the place to see and be seen. Always bustling and always festive, if sometimes loud, it's become a neighborhood institution.

Beyond soul food, Harlem is known for its African cuisine, and there is no lack of choices. Mom-and-pop joints thrive in Le Petit Senegal along 116th Street, while all the way up on 150th Street, West African-influenced Farafina is usually hopping with live events including drum circles, blues



JULIENNE SCHAEER



The Grange



Chéri

and jazz, salsa nights and open mics. On Frederick Douglass Boulevard, Zoma serves authentic, high-quality Ethiopian food. Its minimal décor feels as light and fresh as the food, which is less heavy than traditional Ethiopian. But come hungry; the portions are generous.

Based on the concept of a shebeen—the quintessential beer and social halls of townships in South Africa—Madiba Harlem is the latest African restaurant to emerge. Executive Chef Mark Henegan, who opened the original and successful Madiba restaurant 15 years ago in Fort Greene, has now created a larger version in Harlem that stays true to endemic South African seasonings.

French fare is also abundant above 110th Street. While Chez Lucienne was the first authentic French Harlem restaurant to offer a little piece of Paris, many new French bistros have arrived. Cedric on 119th offers traditional entrées as well as more global main courses such as Jamaican-style jerk chicken and roasted leg of lamb with couscous. Barowine, the popular wine bar and bistro, is where fashionistas can be seen dining on the sunny front patio, while the beautifully designed Maison Harlem, chic yet rustic, is an excellent, authentic choice for brunch or dinner.

Paris-born chef and owner Alain Eoche opened restaurant Chéri in the bottom of his brownstone on Lenox Avenue, which is becoming the new restaurant row. He succeeds in creating a dinner-party ambiance—or table d'hôte as the French say—offering only one two-course menu that changes each evening. With just 45 seats, the intimate

space includes a baby grand piano, a cowhide rug, comfy modern furniture and a heated garden in the back. Eoche takes the time to greet each guest himself and even shares recipe secrets.

Several Italian restaurants have recently materialized, including Vinateria, which serves a creative menu

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of French and Spanish tapas and plates. Painted black inside and out, the space is warmed by church pew banquettes, milk-glass pendant lights and a collection of glass pitchers. Lido, just across the street on Frederick Douglass Boulevard, is the newest venture of well-known Executive Chef Serena Bass, who revamped the Italian menu to focus on Northern Italian specialties and rich comfort foods. Sunday brunch includes all-you-can-drink mimosas.

The farm-to-fork trend can be found all over Harlem. Two welcome additions in Hamilton Heights are Harlem Public, known for craft beers and the freshest pub grub, and The Grange, with down-home décor and artisanal food. On Lenox, La Bodega 47 sources its Caribbean-influenced menu locally but also stocks more than 100 varieties of rum from around the world.

*(continued on p. 70)*



CHEZ LUCIENNE

Chez Lucienne's poulet grand mere



## NEW MEMBERS

The following is a list of organizations that joined NTA recently. To access complete information on each of these new members, including a company description, log on to [NTAonline.com](http://NTAonline.com) and go to the member searches.

### ASSOCIATE

#### Global Marketing & Sales Inc.

Joe Docal  
Sunrise, FL 33323 USA  
[lgms.com](http://lgms.com)

### DMOs

#### Carbon County Visitors Council

Leslie Jefferson  
Rawlins, WY 82301 USA  
[wyomingcarboncounty.com](http://wyomingcarboncounty.com)

#### Harlem One Stop Inc.

Yuien Chin  
New York, NY 10031-6163 USA  
[harlemonestop.com](http://harlemonestop.com)

#### Visit French Lick West Baden

Misty Weisensteiner  
French Lick, IN 47432-9377 USA  
[visitfrenchlickwestbaden.com](http://visitfrenchlickwestbaden.com)

### TOUR OPERATORS

#### American Stage Tours

Vickie Cole  
Concord, CA 94518 USA  
[americanstage.com](http://americanstage.com)

#### America's Hub World Tours

David Penilton  
Portland, OR 97239 USA  
[americashubworldtours.com](http://americashubworldtours.com)

#### Appleseed Expeditions

Sheryl Moore  
Santa Rosa Beach, FL 32459 USA  
[appleseedexpeditions.com](http://appleseedexpeditions.com)

#### Arizona China Travel & Tours

Wei Chen  
Phoenix, AZ 85032 USA  
[arizonachinatravel.com](http://arizonachinatravel.com)

#### Belize Nature Getaway

Jacqueline Sean Paul  
San Ignacio, Cayo, Belize  
[belizenaturegetaway.com](http://belizenaturegetaway.com)

#### Irro Reisen Coach Charter Germany/ Europe Inc.

Jessica Irro  
Luechow (Lower Saxony), 29439 Germany  
[coach-charter-germany.com](http://coach-charter-germany.com)

#### Lotto Global Service (USA) LLC

Xin Sui  
Seattle, WA 98188 USA  
[uslgs.com](http://uslgs.com)

#### Mag Vacations International

Tao Wang  
Chicago, IL 60616 USA  
[magvacations.net](http://magvacations.net)

#### Quinn Associates Int'l LLC

Yvonne Quinn  
Mansfield, MA 02048 USA  
[q-affiliates.com](http://q-affiliates.com)

#### Shenandoah Tours Inc.

Steve Everidge  
Staunton, VA 24401 USA  
[shenandoahtours.com](http://shenandoahtours.com)

#### Viajes Meca

Raynald Paquet  
Mexico D.F., 11590 Mexico  
[viajesmeca.com](http://viajesmeca.com)

#### Zamag Tours & Safaris

Daphne Lindsay  
Lusaka, Zambia  
[zamagsafaris.com](http://zamagsafaris.com)

### TOUR SUPPLIERS

#### Bayou Rum Distillery

Lisa Cortese  
Lacassine, LA 70650 USA  
[bayourum.com](http://bayourum.com)

#### Oak Alley Plantation

Hillary Loeber  
Vacherie, LA 70090-7079 USA  
[oakalleyplantation.com](http://oakalleyplantation.com)

#### Shoney's

Jordan Hatton  
Nashville, TN 37210 USA  
[www.shoneys.com](http://www.shoneys.com)

#### Urgo Hotels and Resorts

Janae Gier  
Bethesda, MD 20817 USA  
[urgohotels.com](http://urgohotels.com)

## Served with Soul

(continued from p. 27)

Beyond the influx of new restaurant choices, perhaps the most exciting new development is The Union Food Lab, a food incubator and culinary institute in West Harlem, which ensures that a crop of new chefs will be cultivated.

Run by the Union Theological Seminary with Alexander Smalls on the advisory board, this commercial kitchen has many ambitious projects on the horizon, including culinary arts training, nutrition education and artisanal food classes. This, in addition to HarlemEatUp!, the 2015 Harlem food festival sponsored by Marcus Samuelsson and Bill Clinton that's

planned for the weekend of May 14-17, should ensure that Harlem's gastronomic growth is here to stay.

*Christie Grotheim is a copywriter for Harlem One Stop. For more information on Harlem's food scene and to explore other travel product in the neighborhood, visit [harlemonestop.com](http://harlemonestop.com). The new NTA member is a cultural tourism initiative of the Hamilton Heights West Harlem Community Preservation Organization, which seeks to establish a one-stop network for Upper Manhattan/Harlem-based tourism through alliances and strategic partnerships. The CPO partners with various arts and cultural organizations, retailers and restaurants to create a series of Harlem-is-Home tour packages. The CPO is a non-profit, volunteer, community organization, active in the preservation of Harlem's architectural and cultural treasures. Contact Executive Director Yuien Chin at [info@harlemonestop.org](mailto:info@harlemonestop.org).*

