

At long last, 50Kitchen opens in Fields Corner

By [Janelle Nanos](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 21, 2020, 7:11 p.m.



Anthony Caldwell, owner and executive chef at 50Kitchen, plated a chicken and waffle dish. BLAKE NISSEN/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Last September, Anthony Caldwell was frustrated and financially under siege. It had been nearly two years since the chef had [won the opportunity of a lifetime](#): a chance to start his own restaurant, [50Kitchen](#), in Fields Corner. Caldwell had thought he'd need \$230,000 to open, but startup costs were already pushing \$300,000. And now, he'd just learned, he'd need to install an \$8,000 pollution control unit in his kitchen.

"Oh my God," he recalls saying to himself at the time, "where are we going to get all this money from?"

In Boston's pricey, knives-out restaurant landscape, even the best new ventures from deep-pocketed investors shutter every year. But Caldwell, a Black chef who'd learned to cook in prison, had little savings, and no well-funded restaurant group to back him. And although he was a skilled, experienced chef with a distinctive menu — his dishes reflect the palates of the diverse Dorchester neighborhood he grew up in, infusing Asian elements into traditional Southern fare — as an aspiring restaurateur, he was basically starting from scratch.

“He wanted to operate a high-end, African-American-run restaurant, and said, ‘I’m going to risk it with what little resources I’ve got,’ ” said Ismail Samad, a restaurateur advising Caldwell in 50Kitchen’s launch. “It needs to happen. There’s a clear void of successful African-American chefs in the city of Boston. And if he gets noticed for his culinary genius, this would be the beginning of him stepping into that role.”

Caldwell’s path into the city’s culinary scene was unconventional. He grew up in public housing in Dorchester’s Franklin Hill apartments. Dealing drugs landed him in prison as a young man; he battled alcoholism and contemplated suicide. But when he picked up a chef’s knife in a pre-release program, things just seemed to click into place. For a decade, he juggled line cook jobs around Boston, and catered on the side. He found faith, too.

“God said he would give me my own kitchen by age 50,” Caldwell said.

At 49, Caldwell quit his job as a sous chef at Harvard University’s dining services to focus on his small catering business. “My wife looked at me like I had nine heads,” he recalled. “She said: ‘You need a job, sir.’ ”

But 15 days later, in November 2017, he had something even better.

[Caldwell won a small business contest](#) hosted by Travis Lee, a local developer looking to fill a vacant storefront in Fields Corner. Caldwell’s pitch was 50Kitchen, a small sit-down restaurant that could elevate the neighborhood’s dining scene.

The prize was enviable for any small business owner: six months’ free rent, financial support to build out his space, plus legal coaching and marketing advice. But in a city as expensive as Boston, Caldwell, who was living paycheck to paycheck, still had a yawning financial gap to fill.

Lee said he talked with Caldwell about the challenges ahead. “But it was harder and it took longer than anyone thought,” Lee said. “There were a number of times when I thought, ‘This guy is bound to give up.’ ”

But Caldwell had faith, and the backing of a community of “high moral worth,” said Ed Doyle who volunteered the services of his hospitality advisory group, Real Food Consulting. Doyle said that everyone involved was drawn to what Caldwell’s vision could mean for Fields Corner, an area of Dorchester that has not seen the same influx of retail development as its neighboring stops along the Red Line.

“This is about creating change in your community and having a vision to help a person and a community achieve what it’s capable of,” Doyle said.

After sitting down with his financial coaches, Caldwell began searching for the money he’d need to open the restaurant, but he lacked the savings and assets required to secure a major loan. The lenders were “giving me a hard time telling me that I didn’t have any skin in the game,” Caldwell said. “I apologized for working paycheck to paycheck.”

Samad, who advises small food businesses at CommonWealth Kitchen, said there are structural inequities when it comes to securing funding for minority-owned restaurants. Caldwell’s path to restaurateur “goes against the normal ethos of how the culinary game works,” he said.

Most chefs get their start working under industry luminaries, building their resume and the support of a restaurant’s high net worth clientele as a path to their own kitchen. That model “perpetuates what success looks and feels like in the greater landscape of the culinary culture,” Samad said, “which is predominantly white.”

Caldwell did manage to secure funding from several supportive lenders, including Boston Impact Initiative Fund, the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation, and the City of Boston, but there were still major challenges. A contractor he hired took

him for \$30,000. The 114-year-old Lenane Building where the restaurant is situated kept turning up structural engineering problems. When one of the loans that had been approved was deferred, Caldwell turned to Kickstarter to keep his cash coming in.

"I've been promising these people for over a year," Caldwell said last September. "It's really embarrassing."

But in late January, Caldwell cautiously opened the doors to his 17-seat restaurant and began serving the menu that's he's been refining in his mind for months: dishes like honey-fried cornbread, brisket banh mi, and jambalaya egg rolls. "The outpouring of love is incredible" from the neighborhood, he said, but it's been harder than even he realized. He's waking before dawn to restock his supplies, and working 18-hour days as he struggles to keep his staffing in place and contend with early Yelp reviews.

"People only see the food," he said. "You don't see the hell that I'm going through."

He's been operating for several weeks, but 50Kitchen's official grand opening is Sunday. Being a Black-owned restaurant in the neighborhood where he was raised, Caldwell said, "means everything."

"This fight is not the average fight," he said. "This is a big fight, and this is a big win, as long as you keep swinging."

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