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## COOKHOUSE: DANIELLE SAUNDERS

## SOHO HOUSE NEW YORK

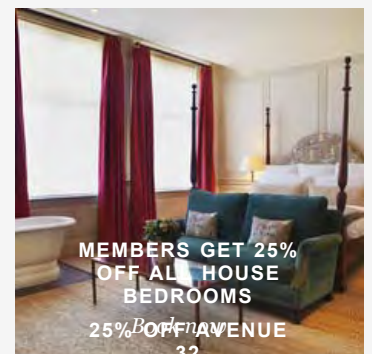
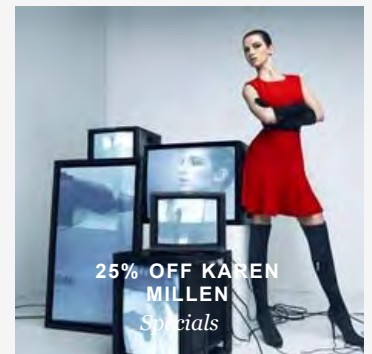
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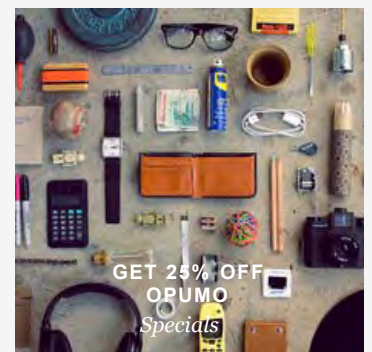
Take one bite of crispy fried chicken or smoky, fatback-laced collard greens and you'll understand soul food's power to transform you from head to toe. That includes, of course, your waistline—and the results aren't often pretty. So Chef Danielle Saunders has set out to upgrade traditional African-American cuisine for a more sophisticated, calorie-conscious generation.

This New Jersey native and former private chef for Sean “Diddy” Combs specializes in soul fusion, which ditches the empty fats and sugars in comfort food without sacrificing any home-style flavor. Having cooked for A-listers like Oprah Winfrey and Tom Hanks, Saunders went on to wow the judges of Food Network's

### ELSEWHERE



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"Chopped" last year, becoming the first female African-American winner in its history and the first woman to win its championship chef competition.

Her talents were on display for another set of VIPs at Soho House New York's Cookhouse event. The crowd (which included her parents) sampled guilt-free twists on Southern favorites like zesty shrimp gumbo with brown rice and duck bacon and velvety lobster and shrimp grits with gluten-free cheddar and andouille sausage. Also on the menu were braised barbecue short ribs with root beer reduction on panko-crusted heirloom tomatoes and tomatillos, plus a heavenly sweet potato pecan/praline bread pudding. House Seven caught up with Saunders after the event to chat about the secrets to healthier cooking, what it's like working for Diddy, and plans to bring her soul fusion to a white tablecloth near you.

**The dishes you made at the Cookhouse event were so good I never would have known you replaced lard and white flour with healthy ingredients like chickpea flour, coconut oil, and quinoa flour. How did discover that these substitutions would work in soul food?**

I came about them just from trial and error, wanting to get more protein from things you don't even realize are in the food. When you're able to create a dish that has all the same accoutrements of soul food but you use other ingredients to enhance them, it's actually a lot harder than creating another healthy dish entirely. But I still want my cooking to remind you of what a home-style dish is like.

**What made you want to elevate soul food as a cuisine?**

Well, there are usually a lot of negative connotations that go along with soul food. It's fatty, full of pork, all that kind of stuff. But after working with my private client base, everyone from Jann Wenner who owns Rolling Stone to the likes of P. Diddy, I started learning how to make other foods healthier based on the client's needs. P. Diddy, for example, was seeing a raw nutritionist counselor and life extension specialist by the name of Oz Garcia when I started working for him, and I'm now the resident chef for his clients. Learning from him made me want to get back to the soul food I grew up with and change up a few things that really weren't needed but not adulterate the taste or the look. Also, I wasn't at the peak of my health at the time, so over the last 2 1/2 years I've been able to lose and keep off over 50 pounds by making healthy changes. My other goal was to help soul food get the same respect level that other ethnic foods get.

**It seems like soul food and jazz have a lot in common in that way. Both were the first styles of food and music born in the U.S., but their fans have had to fight for them to be taken seriously.**

Absolutely. I think that soul food is important because it's a bridge for a lot of different types of cuisines. I've been enriched by it my entire life. My dad is from New Orleans and my mom is from Charleston, South Carolina, two big spots for food. And my grandfather was a chef for about 35 years.

**Sunday dinner must have been fantastic in your house when you were a kid.**

Oh my goodness, Sunday dinner is still a staple in my house nearly every week. If



we don't feed 20-25 people every Sunday, we don't have it—it's too boring. We have friends that call up like, 'Hey, are you doing Sunday dinner?' Seriously, you're invited.

**Don't extend that invite because I will show up.**

No, you're more than welcome! It's like Soul Food the movie, literally every single Sunday. It may not be super healthy because I'm not always cooking, but we have everything: Short ribs with the vegetables and the mirepoix, collard greens with smoked turkey, stuffed Cornish hen, yellow rice, oxtail stew with okra, macaroni and cheese...

**Your mom told me she has a killer mac and cheese recipe that she's never going to give out.**

You know what, can I tell you? I do it better than her, even though she doesn't think I do. But yes, she has a killer mac and cheese recipe. The secret is that we don't use typical elbow macaroni. We do a no-yolk egg noodle, it's almost like a dumpling noodle. It gives you a lighter version of the dish.

**A trademark of your cooking is that you can prep and cook a meal in under 40 minutes. What's one stand-out dish that's easy to make at home?**

One of my favorite dishes is a candied salmon. I don't find too many people who don't like salmon, but when I do come across them, they're blown away by this preparation. What you do is you take your salmon filet or steak, sprinkle it with a little Kosher salt and a little cracked black pepper. Then you mix together a really simple sauce that's a combination of apricot preserves, horseradish cream, which you can find at any delicatessen, and either a Creole mustard or some sort of grain mustard. You baste the fish with the sauce, put it in the oven for fifteen minutes, cook it through, then put the oven on broil for the last three minutes. It candies the apricot preserves over the salmon. I'm telling you, people who don't even eat salmon are like, "What did you do to this?!" It's fool-proof.

**In addition to being a private chef, you also own a natural convenience store and juice bar in New Jersey. What's your go-to juice if you need energy?**

It would be a green juice with kale, collard greens, celery, a lemon or a lime, and green apple. It's full of super foods, it clears up your skin, gives you a ton of energy and it has a multitude of other health benefits and advantages. Sometimes I'll put a little pineapple to brighten it up or you can change the greens and put in spinach.

**What's the biggest unsung hero in the kitchen that people should be using more of?**

I can think of two: Kale and sweet potatoes. There are so many things you can do to these two ingredients raw or cooked, like braise them with other vegetables and have them as a side or salad, or even make chips out of them. They're really, really versatile and they don't get the recognition they deserve.

**How has working with celeb clients influenced your cooking?**

Well, to work with someone like Mr. Combs, it's a high stress type of environment 24/7. I mean, he would call at 3 or 4 in the morning and tell me to get breakfast ready for 60 people in an hour. I learned how to calculate quantities in my head and be prepared at any given time for anything. It made being on "Chopped"

actually pretty easy because I work well under pressure.

**What's next in your career? I hear you're writing a book based on your grandfather's recipes.**

The book is my next important move. It's time to document his work and give some validity to what I've been doing this whole time. I also want to do TV full time and share my love of cooking. But eventually I want to have four walls to create food in my own restaurant. I'm working hard at it every single day. I hope that someone sees me and goes "Oh! Let's get that girl a restaurant." That's my ultimate dream.

Saunders' cookbook will be released in summer 2013, with a TV show to follow in the fall and restaurant in the spring of 2014. For more information, [visit about.me/Daniellethechef](http://visit.about.me/Daniellethechef) or follow Saunders on Twitter at @DanielleTheCHEF.

