

Chef needs votes to reach national stage**Slug:** LANNWS-07-12-23 LANCASTER CHEF**Print depth:** 22.28 (3319 characters)**Start date/time:** Jun 27, 2023 06:13 PM**Section tags:** nc-lan
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Vershawn Gray, owner of Southern Dish 101 culinary center, has the chance to cook with celebrity chef Carla Hall with your vote.

She is currently ranked second out of 10 in “Carla Hall presents: Favorite Chef,” with multiple rounds of voting still under way. The top five will be determined Thursday, July 13.

Gray has owned and operated Southern Dish 101 in Lancaster for the last two years, after graduating in 2016 from Johnson and Wales culinary school in Charlotte.

Before she put on her chef’s hat, Gray worked as a paralegal for 12 years, but ultimately left the legal scene after having her second child.

“My son, who was about 6 or 7 at the time, said, ‘You should do what you love, Mommy,’ and I was like, ‘What is that, Carter?’ and he said, ‘You should cook,’ ” Gray said.

While in culinary school, she got to work with hospitality company Delaware North to provide catered meals to the Carolina Panthers. She did this all while raising her daughter and son on her own.

Gray said that if she wins the competition, she will also get \$25,000, which she would invest right back into her storefront on Lancaster’s Main Street.

“This city has really embraced me and my vision,” Gray said. “If I was to win that \$25,000, I would put it back into this business to help with the revitalization of Lancaster. I’m making money, but I’m putting it back into the business to grow the business, and growth to me looks like bringing folks here.”

Gray said winning would mean so much to her, because it would show the community — specifically other single mothers and African-American mothers — that they can succeed and follow their dreams, no matter how impractical they seem.

“I’m following a dream,” she said. “I’m believing in a higher thing, and I have my children that are watching me. I want them to know that they can do anything they put their minds to.”

Gray shared that while she was in culinary school, she relied on her community to support her. Due to her class schedule, she had to quit her job and rely on her family to help her financially until she could succeed. She said all of the obstacles she endured were necessary in the pursuit of her dream.

If Gray wins, she would also get a two-page advertisement in Taste of Home magazine, which has a circulation of over 2 million.

“If I win, I’m going to cook my Creole lasagna to be in the magazine,” Gray said. “It’s a flip on Italian lasagna. Instead of using Italian sausage, I’ll be using andouille sausage. I will still use mozzarella, but I will add pepper jack cheese to give it a little kick. I will also add blackened Creole seasonings instead of regular Italian seasonings. Then, I would finish that off with a little bit of mozzarella.”

Gray said the dish is one of her best sellers. In addition to making lasagna and competing in national competitions, Gray offers cooking classes and event catering. Customers can also rent out the front half of her store for events, which she will cater.

There are two ways to cast a vote, by visiting <https://favchef.com/2023/vershawn-gray>. Once there, supporters can cast a “champion vote,” which includes a donation, or through a daily free vote. The daily free vote requires authentication through Facebook.

All donations are tax-deductible and go to the James Beard Foundation, a nonprofit culinary arts organization.

Child images

LANNWS-07-08-23 LANCASTER CHEF 1





LANNWS-07-08-23 LANCASTER CHEF MUG





LANNWS-07-08-23 LANCASTER CHEF 2



LANNWS-07-08-23 LANCASTER CHEF 3

