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A Look Behind the Loaf with Shala Irby: A Baker Determined to Pass on the Craft

Q: Tell us about who you are - Your background, how and why you got into this profession and what you are working on/where you are working today?

A: *My name is Shāla Irby and I am a professional baker specializing in artisan bread baking. I grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana with my mother and my two brothers. After spending a lot of time in the kitchen with my grandmother, I realized that cooking and baking is something that brings me joy and it became my platform for self expression. My brothers and I were enrolled at a vocational high school. It was there that I began my journey starting with a basic nutrition course then graduating to the 2-year Culinary Arts and Hospitality program which includes a student run restaurant. Through this program I was able to learn skills required for running a full service restaurant from cooking to serving, industry certification, and opportunity to compete for scholarships.*

After completing my junior and senior years, I earned scholarships for and learned about Johnson and Wales University of Providence, RI. One year after enrolling in the four year Bachelor of Science program, I found myself in my first artisan bread class and quickly fell in love with the craft. I have a tendency to be motherly, which is great since bread baking requires one to nurture with patience and a gentle hand. It was clear that bread baking was my true calling.

While earning my degree, I gained experience through the award-winning venture, Gracie's and Ellie's of Providence, and the fast growing enterprise, Bellegarde Bakery of New Orleans. After graduating Class of 2017, I moved my bread baking journey to Boston where I worked for Clear Flour Bread. I recently left my position at Clear Flour Bread to work for Allandale Farm in Chestnut Hill, MA to influence my baking career with knowledge of sustainable farming and

gardening practices. I also just accepted a position with Steel & Rye in Milton, MA at their brand new bakery where I am excited to start a new chapter in my practice.

Q: Tell us about your journey in this industry. What have been some of the highs that have driven your passion for the craft?

A: Bread bakers are some of the most generous and fascinating people I have ever met. I've met former engineers, a costume designer, musicians, and high school and college professors. Though we all took different paths to get here, we all found ourselves and our passion in the bakeshop. My highest highs are getting the opportunity to work with people from every level of experience with their own originality to bring to the bench.

Junior year at JWU, I got my introduction to the Bread Bakers Guild of America as a student assistant in a Guild class led by Melina Kelson, [Bootleg Batard](#), and Richard Miscovich, author of [From the Wood-Fired Oven](#). During which I got to hear and learn from the perspective of amateur, hobbyist, entrepreneur, and working professional bakers; because we all have different goals in learning, we ask many different questions and engage in new ideas and concepts together.

Further into my career I got to work with many successful professionals and business owners at the 2019 Honey Baking Summit where we shared laughs and wisdom backed by years of industry work making for a very comfortable and relaxed learning experience. Of course I cannot forget learning from founding members of the BBGA, Christy Timon and Abe Faber, Clear Flour Bread. Clear Flour was the most eye opening experience of valuable exposure that gave me much more to aspire to.

Q: On the flipside, what are some of the challenges you have overcome to be where you are today?

A: The only thing missing from the lineup of extraordinary people I've learned from are faces representative of my own. If you are a white person reading this, imagine being the only white person in a bakeshop or classroom setting. Would you not feel somehow out of place or even unwelcome? Yeah, that's exactly what I'm talking about. One of the toughest challenges of my career is the constant feeling of being alone in a crowded room. On very few occasions have I gotten the chance to work closely with other people of color in the industry, however, I have never gotten to learn from a person of color in an executive position.

Q: What is the next career milestone you hope to reach?

A: My next objective is to go back to school for teaching. I hope to be the exact role model for aspiring bakers of color that I wanted while in school. Spreading the knowledge and ritual of bread baking is something I live for and that I'd be proud to continue in an executive position.

Q: Who or what do you look to for inspiration? Is there a specific source you recommend?

A: *I have always taken inspiration from the bakers that taught me everything I know at JWU through reading their literature and following their work. I am inspired by the journeys and success of all the phenomenal women that encouraged me through my own. Most importantly I gain inspiration through learning from other passionate bread bakers. My favorite book right now is *New World Sourdough* by [Bryan Ford](#).*

Q: Based on your personal experiences, what advice would you offer to other BIPOC bakers entering this industry?

A: *Try not to be discouraged by the lack of representation of bakers of color along your journey, rather take comfort in knowing your journey will be a catalyst for the change you seek.*

Q: What would you like to see happen in the industry in the next few years as it relates to diversifying representation and creating an inclusive environment?

A: *I hope to see bakers of color that are already in the industry empowered by the movement. I want to see Black teachers in classrooms, Black bakers at WheatStalk, Black faces and authors on the pages of Bread Lines. I want more role models for myself and others where they can be seen, heard, and strongly represented for inspiration to aspiring youth. Black students will have more fulfilling mentorships when being led by someone who understands their personal experience in life.*

Q: What can the BBGA do to help better foster that change?

A: *Amplify the voices, stories, and journeys of the bakers of color in back of the house and make them visible to the baking community.*

Q: And the most important question of all, what's your favorite bread to eat or make at the moment?

A: *My favorite bread to eat and make has always been whole grain country sourdough. Best crumb, crust, and complexity.*

Stay in touch with Shala via instagram: [@shalaaaaah](#)

About Shala Irby:

Alumni of Johnson & Wales University, Shāla graduated with a BS in baking and pastry arts in 2017. She later took her passion for bread baking to Clear Flour Bread in Brookline, MA to continue her education and develop new recipes. Shāla now works for Steel & Rye at their brand

new bakery in Milton, MA.