

New School Flavor

How a crew of friends
from the Bronx
is capitalizing on the
word of the street.

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Coat PUBLIC SCHOOL, Shirt CALVIN KLEIN.



Early on during the taping of his episode of the Food Network's competitive cooking show *Chopped*, Lester Walker knew he was going to win. At the time he was a 30-year-old executive chef with a young child to feed, and he had made up his mind that the money was his. "Once I got past the first round, I was like, 'Yo I'mma win this shit, get this ten racks, let's get it,'" he says. "That competitive edge, that wolf came out of me, and I said, 'Aight, it's time to get this bread.'"

He worked the judges (after his reference to a rough childhood played well with them, he made sure to mention it again), and disarmed another contestant with an awkward flirtation. Most importantly, though, he was creative, coming up with clever combinations for odd ingredients and freestyling a cute name for a dish on the spot: "The Quickle," a thin cucumber slice quickly soaked in a pickle brine. He indeed "got it," taking home the \$10,000 prize. But before they brought the final contestants out for the results, the judges and host joke on camera about stealing Walker's Quickle idea while he's in the waiting room. It might have been funny—if that sort of thing didn't actually happen all the time. After all, white men have been making money from black creativity for at least as long as America has existed.

But Walker and his friends Jon Gray, Pierre Serrao, and Malcolm Livingston II decidedly resist this narrative. Their culinary collective, *Ghetto Gastro*, uses food to channel the culture of their community into dollars, and eventually, they hope, systemic change. The brand is built around producing immersive "experiences" for other brands and organizations with deep pockets, which makes them part creative consultant, part wavy caterer. The pop-up events they produce, like "the South Bronx in the South of France" dinner they did at a hilltop villa in Cannes for Microsoft, bring in cash and connections. Their clever recipes, set design, and use of wordplay have them in high demand among event planners looking for ways to stand out. At that Microsoft party in the French Riviera, they slung sneakers over wires and used 40-ounce malt liquor bottles for water carafes, serving a multi-course menu with *loup de mer* cured in Lipton iced tea. They've built their business around bringing the bodega to the bourgeoisie. And business has been good.

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LESTER WALKER

Jon Gray, Ghetto Gastro's creative director, says they hope to use the capital from those events and their ever-increasing platform to educate and elevate their community. He's scheming ways to get the food that comes through the Bronx—the borough is one of the largest food distribution hubs in the world—into the Bronx's actual neighborhoods. Ironically, despite the fact that the city's finest restaurants get their food from the Bronx, the borough is a food desert, where people have to travel far from their homes just to find fresh produce or unprocessed food. Ghetto Gastro is in talks with world-famous chef Massimo Bottura of Modena, Italy's Osteria Francescana to develop a soup kitchen in the Bronx. They're a case on how creative kids in the ghetto can leverage their own culture for personal and communal gain, and they're very much a product of the borough that bore them.

“I've always been a hustler,” Gray says. As a teen he ran drugs, and desperately tried to turn it around after he got popped at age 20. “I got into the fashion business to stay out of jail,” he says. “I caught a case and I was facing 10 to life ... 10 years ago, exactly.” So he sent himself to Manhattan's Fashion Institute of Technology and spent all his money on a fashion venture, but he couldn't motivate himself to do the administrative tasks that come with starting an apparel line. Realizing that good food, and the pursuit of it, was at the center of his fondest memories, he decided to point his hustle in a new direction.

Lester Walker attended four different high schools, but it was an omelette-making contest at the last one, Park West in Hell's Kitchen, that set him on his current path. He cobbled together tuition for culinary school at Johnson & Wales University in Miami from grants, loans, and the contest's third-place prize money. He worked in hotels as he put himself through school, then moved back home and walked right into the kitchen at Jean-Georges with his resume, asking to see the chef. They wisely hired him. He later followed his tastebuds to Zak Pelaccio's Fatty Crab, and studied in the school of Danny Meyer at Tabla and Eleven Madison Park.

Pierre Serrao is the newest member of the collective. He was Gray's neighbor when Ghetto Gastro was based out of an apartment in Long Island City, at one point dubbed “The Hash House.” A former athlete, he organizes the group's fitness regimen, coordinates recipe development, and chops it up in the kitchen, too—after culinary school, he worked in kitchens in Italy and then Barbados before coming to New York.

Malcolm Livingston II is Ghetto Gastro's celebrity—he parlayed a celebrated run as the pastry chef at Wylie Dufresne's molecular gastronomy lab wd-50, on the Lower East Side, into a job at Noma. René Redzepi's Copenhagen institution. He studied at the culinary program of the Art Institute of New York City, but was a bit lost after graduation. He was working at a Foot Locker in Times Square when he saw an ad for a job at Le Cirque that gave him the push he needed. A precocious teen, he got the job and worked his way up and out to the likes of Thomas Keller's temple of haute cuisine, Per Se. But it was at wd-50, under Dufresne's watchful eye, that he honed his ability to think outside the box, deconstructing the idea of what makes a dessert, and using that freedom to create unprecedented works of art. It's a concept that applies to more than just pastries—it helps define Ghetto Gastro, the people

who pulled it out of the ether, and the place from which they hail.

The foursome is relatively young, but Gray and Walker have known each other for more than 20 years. They grew up together in the Baychester neighborhood of the Bronx, in a complex called Co-op City. They rep the infamous Section 5, the roughest of the complex's five sections, divided from the rest of Co-op City by the Hutchinson River Parkway. While Serrao hails from Connecticut, Livingston is also from the North Bronx. Gray didn't know him growing up, but says, “We've been connected our whole lives. His best friend growing up is the father to my cousin's daughter, and my older cousin Chester is one of his childhood friends. We just never crossed paths. We were doing very different things.”

They may have been doing different things, but they were all doing it the same way: sturdy. When we meet half the crew at their new home kitchen in the Bronx, we hear them say the word quite a lot. Walker, for example, on his single mother: “My mom was very sturdy. I can't say straight, but sturdy. She taught us a lot of things as a kid, helping me raise my brother. A lot of domestic things: Do your own laundry, wash the dishes. And I would just cook.”

Their context clues lead us to imagine “sturdy” as a common adjective in the Bronx, representative of the borough, even—its heritage, history, and ethos. Stay sturdy, because you have to. Stay sturdy, or else you'll crumble.

“‘Stay sturdy’ means everything to our team,” Serrao says, “because you are only as strong as your foundation. Can't be caught slipping out here in the streets, or in the kitchen. When you speak, be knowledgeable and spit facts, or else someone will call you out. Leave less room for error, and keep your bearings together. That means everything in the BX ... it's the most sturdy borough of them all.”

Via email from Denmark, Livingston agrees. “It's basically to be on point, a strong foundation,” he writes. “I'm from the Bronx, and I been sturdy my whole life.” But he's quick to admit it's not always so serious, and they never get too attached to any one word. “Really, it's just lingo,” he says. “Right now it's lit, but next year you might not even hear us say it.”

Maybe that's why Walker isn't mad—even after watching the *Chopped* broadcast—that the judges joked about stealing his idea. It's just another way of staying sturdy. Because he knows the most tried-and-true defense against the swagger jack: If someone bites your style, just switch it up and come up with something new. Part of staying sturdy is having the confidence you'll be able to make something even better.

This is what makes Ghetto Gastro so dope: they have the chops in the kitchen, but their hustle is what keeps it moving, their creativity what sustains them. Their slang is their art. When they assemble a pop-up “experience,” the menu always starts with some wordplay—something witty, something provocative, or both. They're heavily influenced by hip-hop, their borough's most famous export. For Walker, it's '90s hip-hop, specifically, the stuff he grew up on. “The Wu [Tang Clan], Mobb Deep, Nas, Rakim, of course,” his list begins, “really intellectual rappers talkin' about different shit.” He says the crew probably compares themselves most to the Wu-Tang Clan, with its diverse ensemble of creatively developed characters, such as the RZA, Method Man, Ghostface Killah, and Raekwon “The



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MALCOLM LIVINGSTON II



Chef. “Everybody has their own different type of style, everyone brings their own different expertise to the platform, but when we all get together, we create magic,” Walker says. “[We’re] whippin’ up in the kitchen, listening to Ghostface and Rae, talkin’ bout whippin’ shit up in Pyrex ...”

Their drug references are clever and go over well at fancy parties, even if they are rooted in actual hustling born of systemic oppression. It might seem a bit garish to serve a dish like the “Whiteout” they offered at an Art Basel Miami Beach party—coconut three ways, plated on handheld mirrors, looking very much like a hastily cut line of cocaine—yet should an Art Basel party at a Palm Island mansion be anything but? While many of their dishes are fun (their “Swerve and Turf” is beef tenderloin and lobster cooked in saffron butter, their “Triple Cs” crab, caviar, and cornbread), they can also get real.

“We did one that was a little bit morbid,” Gray recalls. “It was called ‘Black Bodies,’ so we did a body in chalk, the whole Black Lives Matter [movement]. It was an outline in chalk, and we plated the dessert in the outline. It was jarring ... it made people uncomfortable.”

This exchange with the people that eat their food is fundamental to the Ghetto Gastro experience, and it’s all born out of their informal cipher, shooting the shit and bouncing ideas off each other. “Slick talk definitely plays a part in our creativity,” Gray admits. “We’ll think about a dish and what it’s gonna be called, and not always, but it’s like, what’s the slick jargon? How can we add entendre and layers, not only to the flavor, but also when we’re explaining the dish? What’s the story behind it?”

“I could go on all day,” Walker says, the rhythm of his speech slipping into the pocket. “I’ll throw a couple of slick soliloquies out, like ‘Oh, that shit sound wavy right there,’ and next thing you know, we doin’ salads called ‘Greenbacks,’ you know what I mean?”

The idea for Ghetto Gastro came to Gray in a dream, during a nap. He had been scheming on a food business partnership with Walker, and when the words came to him, he recognized the beauty of their juxtaposition—the ghetto, which had shaped so much of his past, merged with the gastro, the pursuit of culinary excellence that would come to define his future.

Walker breaks it down succinctly: “It’s an ode to the ghetto where we grew up. The gastro part is just creating beautiful cuisine. It’s like a botanical garden in the hood ... There’s trap houses and murders goin’ on around here. So it’s just that oxymoron, that lowbrow and that highbrow coming together and creating something beautiful.”

But Ghetto Gastro didn’t fully take shape until Gray met Livingston. A friend suggested he try a new restaurant making waves called wd-50. Doing his “due diligence,” Gray scoped it out online, and saw the bios of the staff, complete with photos. He saw Livingston, the pastry chef, that “he’s a brother,” and was intrigued. “Then I read his bio and was like, ‘Oh, this n-----s from the Bronx? Oh shit, it’s lit!’” He went for dinner, and was blown away by the food. In true Bronx fashion, he “ran down on him” in the kitchen to give his compliments—and to tell him about Ghetto Gastro, at this point still just a fledgling idea. “I’m like, ‘Yo, we workin’ on this thing called Ghetto Gastro, be the BX, we gon’ fuck this food shit up,’” Gray says. The moment Livingston signed on, their possibilities expanded exponentially; just news of his new job spurred international press coverage, with thousands of eyeballs

now trained on them. After Gray recruited Serrao, the cipher was complete.

Early on, they wanted to focus on content, making a website and promoting it. But the production company they approached didn’t think the name would work. So they passed, and started doing branded events to raise capital for the real mission of Ghetto Gastro—which they hadn’t quite figured out yet.

In the meantime, the name served as a litmus test for new clients: If they were cool with it, they’d probably be the kind of client open to their ideas. But it’s more than that—the name is a symbol of what their brand represents to them. “We like to say ‘Our clients cater to us,’” Gray says. “They know when they call us, they’re calling us for our expertise, for our creativity. One of the benefits of having a name like Ghetto Gastro is you’re already attracting people that are quite curious, thinking outside of the box, so having that polarizing moat around the castle is good. That’s dope.”

After years of working in whatever space was available—“We been trappin’ out of bandas for different events every time, no stability,” Gray says—their current project is solidifying their new home kitchen. “I’ve been working on the build out for it, but everything is still in the preliminary stages,” Livingston says.

The spacious kitchen is in the South Bronx’s Andrew Freedman Home, a massive mansion situated along the Grand Concourse at East 166th Street. It shares the ground floor with grand halls and parlors, while the home’s upper floors are in various states of disrepair, housing both artists- and wildlife-in-residence. Gray has described their ideas for the kitchen as “something like a flexible lab space” with an “urban gardening” component—something Livingston is well-qualified to supervise, as he’s currently helping Redzepi with the next iteration of Noma, incorporating urban farming in addition to the foraging for which they are renowned around the world.

From their new home base, Livingston says the plan is to “bring the Bronx to the world and the world to the Bronx.” He plans to launch an ice cream line, 36 Brix, a perfect example of their layered wordplay at work. The name is a play on Wu-Tang’s 36 Chambers of Shaolin, but also “bricks” of cocaine. There are also 36 ounces in a kilo, and “brix” is a unit of measurement for sugar content in liquid—quite appropriate for ice cream. It’s clever as hell; that it will likely be delicious certainly won’t hurt.

So what, exactly, does the future hold for Ghetto Gastro? They’ve always been about taking ownership of their creativity, using their own talents, honed for years on the Bronx’s cracked pavement, to explore the world and bring it back. It’s still a nascent enterprise, so there are more ideas than plans when it comes to community organizing and programming. They already serve as quite the example to young people of color in the Bronx, and as their successes continue, expect them to keep their eyes focused sharply on their home base—with the intention of bringing every part of the world they see back home with them.

There are certainly moves to be made, with food deserts to eliminate, the soup kitchen project with Bottura, and plans for multimedia arts programs for kids, even if—like Gray—their talents don’t necessarily lie in the kitchen. At the end of the day, by bringing the Gastro to the Ghetto, they’re reaching back through the doors they kicked down. It’s an example of an alternative avenue to success from the trap, rap, or a sneaker contract. It represents the best of the Bronx—and the Bronx tastes good.



Sweatshirt RUSSELL ATHLETIC.





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JON GRAY



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