

From The Boot to one of the ‘Best New Chefs of 2021’: Tyler Henry (B ’12)

December 8, 2021

|

Mary-Elizabeth Lough mlough@tulane.edu

[View PDF](#)



Tyler Henry (B ’12) was recently named one of the best new chefs of 2021 by Food & Wine en Espanol for his Mexico City Thai restaurant Choza. His road to culinary success has certainly been a journey, though not a traditional one.

Henry, a native of Washington, DC, graduated from Tulane with a finance degree, and bartended at The Boot on the side. Upon graduation, he took a job as a bond trader in New York City at a boutique investment firm. He specialized in illiquid structured credit products and by 25 years old, was one of the firm’s top producers.

But he realized that he was losing passion for his day job, while his lifelong love of

cooking continued to call to him. “I’ve cooked my



whole life, and I had always considered cooking as a possibility, even before Tulane,” Henry said. So, he started attending the prestigious French Culinary Institute after work for a year and a half – getting into the office at 7 a.m., working until 5:30 p.m., then attending the institute from 6 to 11. On the day he finished the culinary institute, he left the finance world.

The very next day, he approached his favorite restaurant in New York, Llama Inn, a Peruvian restaurant, and started working there for free. He worked his way up, then became the head chef at their new restaurant, Llamita in the West Village. Before he took over there, the restaurant sent him to Lima, Peru, to cook for a couple months. That was an early trip in which would be an odyssey across the world cooking in different kitchens, learning his craft. After Lima, he spent time cooking in Norway and Istanbul and California, before coming back to open Llamita.

“I was head chef and general manager, and I was on the line cooking for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, which is not standard, but I thought it was an amazing opportunity. I was very ambitious.”

In addition to cooking at restaurants across the world, Henry ran pop-up restaurants in California, New York City and Mexico City. In pop-up restaurants, chefs take over another restaurant or space with their own cooking.

Then, he worked in three top kitchens in Mexico City. From there, he had plans to head to Tokyo to continue his culinary education but changed his mind. “I stayed

here and really fell in love with the culture and the pace of life here. The energy in Mexico is really compelling.”

He turned down a couple of head chef jobs, because instead of cooking someone else’s recipes, he was ready to leave his own culinary mark. It was a trip to Thailand, and an experience cooking with Thai culinary legend, Hanuman Aspler in his farm kitchen in the jungle, that pointed him in the direction of home.

“It was like a “boom-spark” moment, and all of a sudden I had 500 ideas for new dishes that were mine, that were Thai but with Peruvian and Mexican funk, maybe some New Orleans flair in there or New York flair, and when I mean ‘flair,’ I mean unabashed deliciousness. It’s like a po’ boy dripping in gravy.”

He was honing his recipes by running pop ups, and planning how to open his own space, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

He started selling curry kits for people to make at home. Those began selling out, and then he started cooking on his apartment’s balcony for the people who would buy the take-home kits. Soon after, he opened Choza in Mexico City’s hip Roma neighborhood.



Described as a Peruvian-inspired Thai restaurant, Choza features spicy food to eat with your hands and pair with a beer – or a daiquiri, Henry said.

“I wanted to give a nod to New Orleans, so I bought a daiquiri machine from the

States,” he said.

New Orleans has influenced his cooking massively, in part by sparking his interest in exploring a mesh of cultures through food, Henry said: “New Orleans is a celebration of life and art and food and music, and of deliciousness. Other cities don’t have that celebratory approach to food.”

As much as food, Choza is also a bastion of music. “Every Sunday we have someone spinning their vinyl collection,” Henry said. “I try to cook with a musical approach. I don’t see much difference in the way a musician approaches an improvisational jazz piece than I approach my menu.”

Traveling the world to learn to cook in different kitchens has influenced how he runs his own. “I’ve cooked in kitchens that are absolutely dead silent. You can’t even speak, let alone play music. And that’s not cool to me. And that’s not a celebration of food and life. I actually want you to listen to music and let it inspire the way you’re cooking.”

In addition to cooking to music, his team at Choza has family meals and exercises and meditates together.

“I traveled and cooked in probably 20 different kitchens across the world and many of them very top restaurants, and I realized that all the best kitchens, they were run from a place of love and passion.”

Henry’s three pieces of advice for aspiring chefs:

- “Cooking is a multi-sensory action. ...That is when you can really escalate your talents as a chef – when all of your sense are working at the same level.”
- Don’t let cooking be your only passion: “Pursue other passions on the side, and it will make you a better cook.”
- Do follow what you’re passionate about. “You put in many, many, many years of many hard-working days, peeling garlic ‘til your fingers are bloody before you’re going to get to that level, so you better love it.”

