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Chef Franson Nwaeze: How a Nigerian pilot became one of DFW's most celebrated (and probably only) gas station chefs

I got off the phone with the chef and stopped my recording. I sat motionless in front of my computer for a few minutes trying to absorb it all. It was invigorating to spend just 20 scant minutes listening to him passionately describe his culinary standpoint and talk about his life both in Africa and here in the United States, his gentle Nigerian accent crawling over his lips like water laps over rocks.

To say Chef Franson Nwaeze's story is unique is an understatement. He was born in culturally (and culinarily) rich Nigeria, one of 25 children. But don't think for a minute he began learning to cook as a toddler whilst gripping at his mother's apron. In Nigeria, men don't cook. Much as in my grandmother's house, he wasn't even allowed in the kitchen — that's a woman's domain, Mom's turf.

It wasn't until adulthood, after moving to the U.S. to become a pilot, that Nwaeze's love-affair with food really started. Already a working aviator, he'd taken a job as a dishwasher on a bet that he couldn't make it in a restaurant for more than two weeks. It was there that his fire for cooking was ignited.

He didn't just learn to cook, he did a nosedive into the culinary world. He collects kitchen gadgets like most people collect iPhone apps. His first stand mixer was a five-quart commercial job he used to make copious amounts of flavored butter. He never did confess what it was he did with all that butter, but he made one thing clear. He'd found his passion.

Some years later, Nwaeze and Paula, his partner in both business and in life, decided they wanted to open a restaurant. One problem: Having never run a restaurant before, the banks weren't too keen to give them a loan on such a risky business venture. What they *could* get a loan for was a gas station. They told the banker they'd take it. What they didn't tell the banker is that they planned to open a restaurant in it.

Unsurprisingly, everyone thought they were crazy. Not for serving food in a gas station (that's common, at least in Texas), but for serving *his* food in a gas station. His mother (and probably a lot of his family from Africa) still thought men in the kitchen was weird, skeptical about what skills he could possibly have. No one questioned that in the U.S. What they questioned was well-sourced, scratch-made, five-star food and a fill-up. Back in 2003, quirky, overly specific food trucks weren't exactly heating up the food scene and theme restaurants were for tourists.

That's why he called it Chef Point. Because this chef had a point to make.

In 2003, they opened their little four-table gourmet restaurant in the back of the convenience store attached to the Conoco station they'd purchased on a nondescript road in the Fort Worth suburb of Watauga. I've traveled this road many times, and it does get fairly busy during rush hour. I assumed getting people to at least come in and discover them while getting gas would be simple (probably simpler than making them believe you could get high-quality food in a gas station, but that's a different battle). If you build it, they will come, right? Not so much as it turns out.

For the first customer-less week during which he was both chef and clerk, Nwaeze sat, stood, leaned and finally prayed. He told God that if he'd just get someone through those doors, he'd give them the food for free. God answered.

Nwaeze recounted the tale with the detail of someone describing what they'd done an hour previous. He remembers the sole man in the group of four was a vegetarian who'd accidentally ordered a (chicken) Margherita pasta. Despite it being free, he made him a piping-hot dish of pasta primavera instead. He loved it. They all did. Nwaeze even gave them food to take back to coworkers.

Nwaeze never feared failure because he believed in his food. He likely didn't expect the rapidity of his success, though. A week after serving his first customers, he received a call from the Fort Worth Star-Telegram (where it turns out that young man worked). They wanted to write about his quirky, wonderful place and his phantasmagoric food. And that's when the one thing he was nervous about happened. Not long after, there was a line of patiently waiting foodies trailing out the door, eager to be one of the first to try one of his culinary creations.

They've since expanded — twice — reducing the convenience store space and increasing the restaurant seating to a respectable 300 people. But at the so-called "Calamari Conoco," you can still fill up your car while you fill up your stomach (and your soul) with his world-famous bread pudding, better-than-sex fried chicken, lobster mac and cheese and a variety of other dishes, from down-home Southern comfort grub to highfalutin five-star food. He even serves breakfast on Saturdays. What you won't find on the menu is Nigerian food. He still thinks Mom can cook that better.

Despite being an award-winning chef who's been featured in multiple local and national magazines and TV shows, who's caught the attention of Food Network powerhouses like Guy Fieri and Paula Deen, he remains humble, enthusiastic and generous. He even gave an interview to someone who admitted they were doing it for a writing class.* You can give his [world-famous bread pudding](#) a go if you want, too. The recipe's available on his website.

I could wax poetic about his food for pages. It really is that good. But the thing that really makes Nwaeze a hero to cooks, to Texans, to his fellow Nigerians... to anyone who has a dream... is his attitude. "I love to cook, and I'm going to be honest with you," he said while discussing his love of slow-cooked, from-scratch food from fresh ingredients, "I don't know how much money

we make, and I frankly don't care. The thing that I care most about is someone walking in and saying 'This is absolutely great, and I will be back.'"

*It wasn't a graded class, but I got rave reviews during our workshopping session.