

# The Stylist's Secret Sauce

*How Gocha Hawkins went from styling celebrities' hair to building a restaurant portfolio.*

BY NICOLE DUNCAN



For Gocha Hawkins, the secret to success is in the sauce—quite literally. And for the time being, the owner and chef of Gocha's Breakfast Bar is keeping that sauce recipe under lock and key.

"I make all my sauces from scratch and the problem is, the more that I grow, the harder it's becoming for me to make all the sauces for the restaurants," Hawkins says. "The only part I struggle with is trying to find the balance of not having to be in the restaurant all the time."

It's a common sentiment among ambitious restaurateurs who, while eager to grow their concept, also want to protect what makes it special. But given Hawkins' entrepreneurial track record, there's little doubt she'll find a solution as her Atlanta-area portfolio, currently comprising two breakfast bar locations and a forthcoming tapas restaurant, continues to expand.

Prior to entering foodservice, Hawkins spent three decades in the beauty world. She established and grew her own salon business to the point her client list included such A-list celebrities as Nicki Minaj, Beyonce, Drake, Serena Williams, and "The Real Housewives" star and fellow Atlanta restaurateur, Kandi Burruss.

Although her career as a hair styl-



GOCHA HAWKINS SPENT THREE DECADES IN THE BEAUTY WORLD BEFORE GETTING INTO RESTAURANTS.



ist was thriving, Hawkins had long nursed another professional dream: to open her own restaurant. In fact, she'd even intended to move forward with a soul food restaurant in South Florida 15 years ago. Because of the economic crash, those plans were put on hold—though hardly forgotten. In late December 2018, Gocha's Breakfast Bar made its debut just outside Atlanta's Interstate 285 Perimeter. The reasoning behind the shift from soul food to breakfast, as well as the restaurant's location, exemplifies Hawkins' business acumen.

"There were no restaurants over here. ... And it's an affluent area where

I live; the mayor lives here, a lot of celebrities live over here, and I'm like, we have to drive at least 30 minutes back into the city to get good food," she says. "I love breakfast, and the fact there wasn't a breakfast restaurant over here, I just thought it would be perfect."

Gocha's Breakfast Bar's signature take on elevated Southern breakfast was an instant hit. The menu includes hearty options like the Salmon Grit Cake, Shrimp and Grits, and Grilled Steak Skillet, as well as sweeter items like Gocha's Krunch-tastic French Toast and the Georgia Peach Stack. The restaurant, which stays open until 3 P.M., also serves more lunch-leaning

fare, like Impossible Sweet Potato Nachos, Chicken BLT Sandwich, Black Bean Energy Bowl, and Crabcake Sliders.

For Hawkins, developing these dishes is an organic, free-flowing process that can be traced back to her childhood.

“My grandmothers on both sides cooked, so that’s just inside of me,” she says. “I think that creativity comes naturally because I love cooking. I have always cooked for my family. Anytime I had people come over, this is what I did; I cooked for everybody.”

On the more analytical side, Hawkins’ experience as a business owner served her well in starting and operating another company. When it comes to core values, running a restaurant isn’t so different from running a salon.

“Business is business. You still have to treat people with respect. And if you say you’re going to do something, do it,” she says. “You’ve still got bills, you still have to be responsible, you still have people to be reliable for.”

The biggest difference is the number of people whom she is responsible for, she says, adding that it requires more structure and discipline. When juggling both the salon and fledgling restaurant became unsustainable, Hawkins sold the salon, freeing up time to grow her footprint—even in the midst of a global pandemic. In January 2021, a second, much larger breakfast bar opened in Fayetteville, Georgia, a small city about half an hour from the first location.

But even before that debut, Hawkins developed a new arm to the business, one she’d been reluctant to embrace before COVID. Like many operators, she didn’t like the idea of ceding the quality control and visual presentation that comes with a dine-in experience, but at the time, to-go represented a much-needed liferaft.

Off-premises demand was strong from the get-go and has remained so even after guests returned to the dining room (Hawkins estimates those orders account for 20 percent of sales). Nevertheless, the increased volumes began to overwhelm the front and back of the house at the original restaurant.

“We couldn’t give a great, five-star experience with the dining room because we had just way too many to-go [orders],” she says. Expanding the restaurant wasn’t an option because it was bookended by an AT&T on one side and a beauty supply store on the other. So instead, Hawkins decided to incorporate another quick-service element into her operation.

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**▲ HAWKINS HAS BEGUN LOOKING INTO FRANCHISING HER BREAKFAST BAR CONCEPT.**

“The only option at that point was to get a food truck, and that food truck relieves a lot of stress off of our dining room,” she says. “It was actually the best thing that could’ve happened to Gocha’s Breakfast Bar because it’s [all about] the dining experience; we’ve been able to give them a five-star experience again.”

The food truck is parked outside the restaurant and operates Friday, Saturday, and Sunday when demand is at the highest. While some to-go programs offer a pared-down menu, the food truck is equipped to serve the full menu, save for desserts like Gocha’s Fried Pie and the Strawberry Shortcake, which require a freezer.

Although the food truck has become a vital extension of the Atlanta location, Hawkins says it won’t be a standard add-on for her restaurants. The Fayetteville unit is large enough to balance on-site and off-premises orders, and future stores will be, too.

Hawkins isn’t in a huge hurry to expand Gocha’s Breakfast Bar, but she recently bought a downtown building, which will one day house a new location. In the meantime, the entrepreneur is laser-focused on another project, Gocha’s Tapas Bar, which has been mired in delays.

“It normally takes me about 4–6 months to open up, and I’ve been working on this for over a year now,” she says. “Once I get it open, everything will be great.”

Just a 15-minute drive from the original breakfast bar, the new concept was supposed to open last August, but supply chain delays have continued to push back the schedule. At press time, she was expecting the AC unit to be delivered by the end of January—seven months after the targeted date.

These headaches aside, Hawkins is excited to introduce her neighborhood to a fresh concept. The menu won’t stick to Spanish cuisine, but rather celebrate the small plate format, with headliner dishes fried green tomatoes with crab salad, cauliflower tacos, lobster rolls, ceviche, and Mexican corn.

On top of all this, Hawkins is also starting to franchise Gocha’s Breakfast Bar, which, she admits, will compound her secret sauce conundrum. It’s going to be a busy and demanding road ahead, but for the hair stylist-turned-chef/restaurateur, the effort is always worth the end result.

“You’ve got to have passion for this industry. I tell people, this is hard work—no lie,” she says, “but the gratification is seeing your guests happy and seeing great reviews and things like that.”

LEMON: ADOBE STOCK / PIXELSHOT; GOCHA’S BREAKFAST BAR (3)