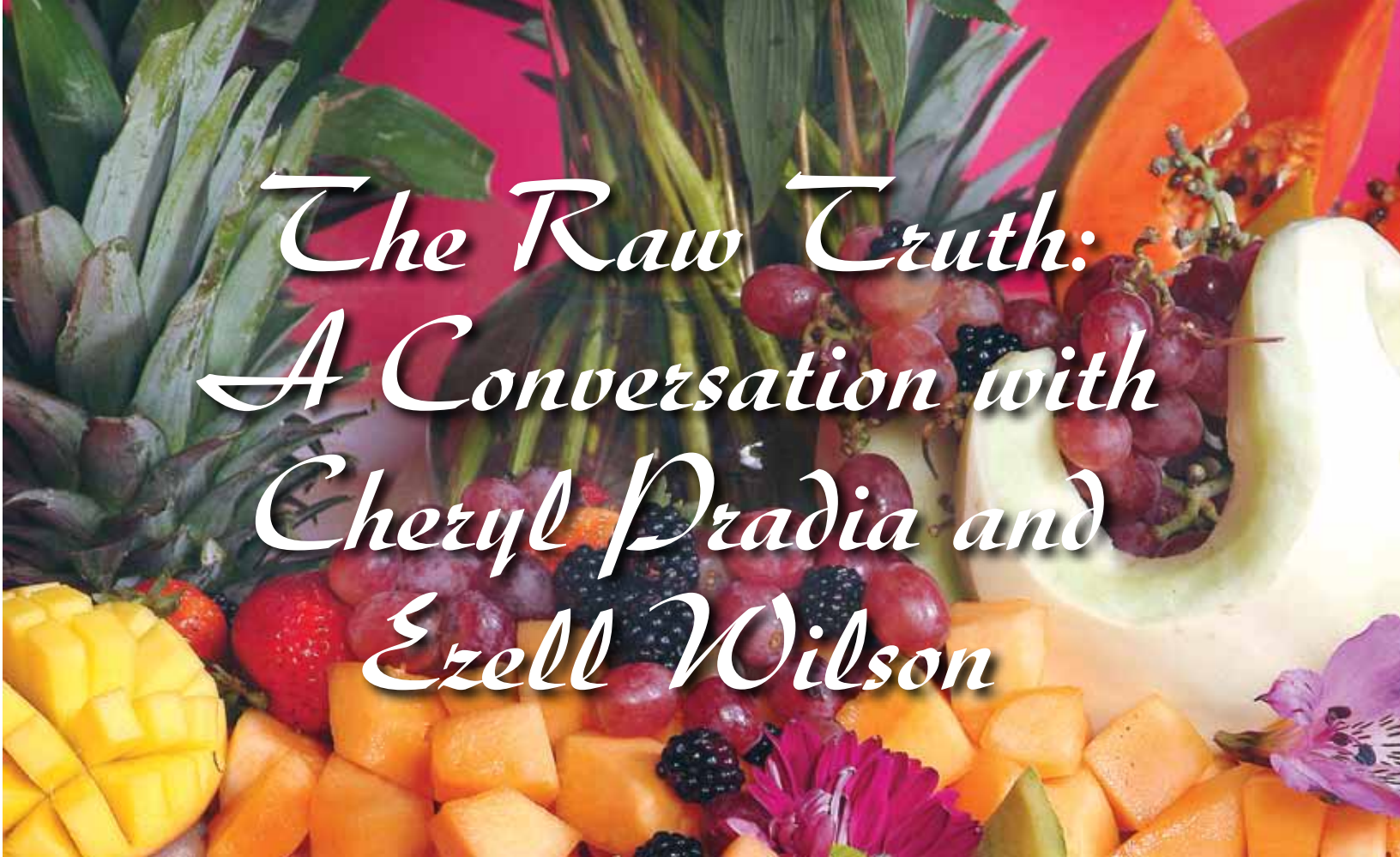


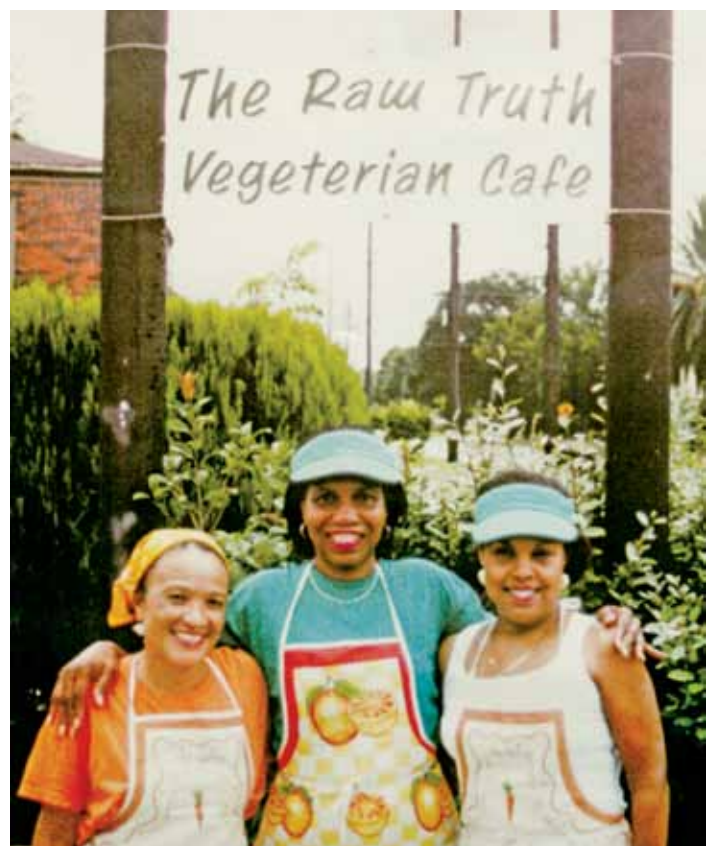
# *The Raw Truth: A Conversation with Cheryl Pradia and Ezell Wilson*



*Colorful assorted fruit tray.*

Photo courtesy of Al-Fin Photography.

For a few years in the mid-2000s, S.H.A.P.E. Community Center in Houston's Third Ward was the home to The Raw Truth Vegetarian Restaurant and Vegan Café, a local eatery that served both cooked and raw food meals to a varied clientele. One of the restaurant's defining and unique characteristics was its raw food preparations. While the practice of following a raw food diet is quite varied in its forms—including Paleo dieters who advocate eating raw meat along with other uncooked foods; vegetarian versions that adhere to Natural Hygiene principles that eschew processed foods, condiments, and other dietary and physiological stimulants; and other paradigms—what they all typically agree on is that foods should not be heated over approximately 115 degrees Fahrenheit. To do so is believed to damage the food's nutrient content. Though Houston has a number of grocers and eateries dedicated to the promotion of healthier eating and lifestyles, the Raw Truth was one of the few restaurants in the city with raw food preparations on its menu. This devotion to a growing culinary niche captured the attention of PETA, which recognized The Raw Truth with its Best Veggie Burger in North America award in 2005. The restaurant was run by a partnership of women that included Chef Cheryl Pradia. A native of Houston, Pradia has been involved in the culinary world for many years. She has worked for another Houston Mexican dining institution, Ninfa's, and has received certification in raw food preparation from renowned raw food chef Alissa Cohen. The Raw Truth itself often served as the meeting place for a number of social and political organizations both internal and external to S.H.A.P.E. Pradia's own journey on the path to the raw food diet and her tenure as head of The Raw Truth was a long one that started early on. Though The Raw Truth is no longer open, Cheryl Pradia remains active, working as a caterer and sharing the discoveries she has made about diet and health with others in workshops.



*Barbara Miller, Vivian Richardson, and Cheryl Pradia outside of S.H.A.P.E. Community Center, home to The Raw Truth Vegetarian Restaurant and Vegan Cafe.*

Photo courtesy of S.H.A.P.E. Community Center.

**EZELL WILSON (EW):** What was your early relationship with food like, growing up?

**CHERYL PRADIA (CP):** My paternal and maternal grandparents grew up in Louisiana—in south Louisiana, so my experience with food early on was Creole food, gumbo, etouffe, crab, shrimp, you name it, but mainly seafood. We had soul food, but it was mainly seafood, and, so I was always interested in food—in the flavors and all, so I would sit in the kitchen on a stool and watch my grandparents cook. My mother was born in St. Martinsville, Louisiana, and she is an excellent cook as well.

**EW:** How did you begin your journey? How did you find out about raw food and the raw food movement?

**CP:** I really started about twenty-five years ago reading a book called *Fit for Life*. I was on my way out of town for the Fourth of July weekend, and I was in the airport and bought this book because it was talking about food combining and how meat just sits in your stomach for days before it's digested. And by the time I landed, I just said, "no more meat for me." And so that next week when I got back home, I bought a juicer, and I started juicing, and the flavors of the live food were just awesome. I burned up the juicer within the week. So I bought about five juicers before I decided to buy a commercial juicer.

One day I went into Ye Seekers, which is now Whole Foods on Bellaire, and a lady named Olivia Franklin was in there, and she was talking about raw foods, and I said, "raw foods? You're talking about, you know, cucumbers and tomatoes and lettuce" and she said, "Well, there's more to it than that." She was demoing raw ice cream, and I say, "raw ice cream?" She said, "Yes, it's made with nuts and bananas and its non-dairy." So I stood there, while she made raw ice cream. I stood there for four hours, talking with her and eating the raw ice cream, and we exchanged numbers. She grew up in New Orleans, a vegetarian all of her life, and she decided to become raw. I was interested in knowing more about it, but I said, "Never, never will I give up my shrimp, my crawfish, my gumbo—I'll never do that." She said, "Well, never say never." So we exchanged numbers, and then I kept calling her. She wouldn't call me back, so, about two weeks later, she said, "Are you serious?" And I said, "Yes."

She was also a hair stylist, and so I went to her house, and she was making all of these raw dishes, and everything was good—except the seaweed. We would go to a restaurant called, Rick's: it was inside of the Ye Seekers on Westview, and they had the most wonderful salad bar. And she would make her own dressing and bring it in there. I asked, "Why are you bringing your own dressing to a restaurant?" She said, "Because I don't know what's in the food, so I'm bringing my own. Do you want to be my friend?" she asked. I said, "Yes." And she said, "Well don't question what I'm doing." I was still ordering turkey burgers; I just had not given up the poultry yet—or the seafood. I kept speaking with her about it, and every week she made a different raw dish, and she'd call me to taste it.

At the time, I was working full-time with Ninfa's, in the catering department. I was the event planner and catering director, and I had been there a very long time. I'd started preparing foods there, learning the Mexican cuisine. So I



*Raw food chef Cheryl M. Pradia, former owner/manager of The Raw Truth Vegetarian Restaurant and Vegan Cafe.*

had my Creole background of flavors, and then my great aunt worked for Italians in New Orleans, so she taught us how to make wonderful Italian food. I had those two cultures and then the raw foods, so I was always tasting something and adding something to it because I wanted different flavors. And so she [Olivia] would allow me to, and then would say, "Oh, that's good, that's good." So we were collaborating on raw foods.

One day she said, "I want you to meet someone," so we went to Sunshine's and I met him. And I didn't know about Sunshine—this was in 1989.

"Sunshine" is Vergis Bourgeois, the owner of Sunshine Health Food Store and Vegetarian Deli, which opened in 1983 and is one of the first restaurants in Houston to serve raw food and vegetarian dishes. For many years, Bourgeois has taught classes and held meetings and workshops on a variety of topics related to health and hygiene, including classes on raw food meal preparation. The restaurant is now operated by his daughter, Arga.

I was telling him that I had a few problems with indigestion, so he read my eyes. I thought Sunshine was a fortune teller [laughs]. I had never heard of an iridologist before. He told me all of the surgeries I'd had—just by reading my eyes. You know, I thought that was so amazing and he said, "Well, come to my meeting on Wednesday." So I went to his health meeting and that's how I joined the community of

more people eating raw. And, you know, I started going to all of his workshops every month at S.H.A.P.E. Community Center and got interested in it, and then he wanted someone to take over his deli.

I met some ladies, and they started working in the deli and named it Sunshine Harvest. I would leave Ninfa's and go there for lunch every day. I'd call in my order, and when I got there, it wasn't ready, so I started giving them pointers on organization. Barbara Miller, who was one of the owners of the little Sunshine's Harvest, said, "Why don't you come in and help us?" I said, "Well, I have too much to do and that's not really what I want to do." But something kept drawing me into the movement. Their stay there at Sunshine Harvest wasn't very long, but we would go to S.H.A.P.E. because Aubrey Pierre had a restaurant there where we would go for veggie burgers. He left and the space became available, and Barbara Miller called me and said, "We want to open our own restaurant, we need your help." Again, I said, "I'm busy; I don't really want to do that." She kept on, and I said, "Well, I will help you part time." Well, that part-time became a full-time partnership at S.H.A.P.E. when we opened The Raw Truth Vegetarian and Vegan Café. So, that's how I got started in the movement.

**EW:** You had this raw experience here in the Black community. Oftentimes, when people think of the raw food community, they usually think perhaps young, Caucasian, that sort of thing—so what has been your experience in the raw food movement?

**CP:** It started with someone like Sunshine that was, to me, way before his time with the movement, with Dick Gregory, and a man named Aris LaTham that taught Sunshine. They were into the movement a long time and brought it to the forefront of our Black community. Even though I didn't know anything about raw food, it was still in existence in so many areas and in the Caribbean as well. It's a blessing that we have him in our community to educate our people about it. I feel that, with Raw Truth being in the community and providing the wonderful dishes that we had, expanded the



*Chef Pradia shares a moment with co-owner and friend, the late Vivian Richardson.*

knowledge. We had people coming from all over Houston, from Kingwood and the Woodlands, to eat at Raw Truth. We had put out posters and flyers in *Optimal Health* in Austin and, really, all over with the Vegetarian Society, which was mainly Caucasian. They would have their monthly meetings at Raw Truth. We were a catalyst for the Black community, but expanding knowledge about what we had to offer to everyone.

**EW:** Did you see The Raw Truth as having a political or social kind of vision to it in addition to the eating of natural foods?

**CP:** Yes, I think so. I think that it was a way of bringing people together for social, political, spiritual reasons: just a roundabout, cohesive gathering of communities.

**EW:** When you began to get into raw foods, what was the response of your family and friends now that you were making such a tremendous change in your dietary habits?

**CP:** My mother was very sad. We would always have big dinners like those you would see on the television show *Soul Food* on Sundays, and she was very sad that I was refusing to eat shrimp, okra, and pork roast: all of the really good foods that I once enjoyed. When I first started to do the detox and the wellness cleanse, I dropped about twenty-five pounds, so I had gone from maybe a size ten to size two. So my other family members thought I was in a cult [laughs], and they were really worried. They were talking among themselves and thought that maybe I had HIV or that I was just really sick. But you go through that transition when you're cleansing, to cleanse the body of all of the toxins and then you're able to find your right weight, and I felt so good and so healthy. The very first time I did the New Body cleanse, I really felt like I had a new body; I really did. It's not one of the easiest cleanses to do with the olive oil and CKLS [an herbal formula meant to be beneficial for the colon, kidney, liver, and spleen], but after being up all night, the next day I found I had dropped five pounds overnight. I had so much energy and so much mental clarity, and it was just an awesome feeling that I didn't want to go back to eating those things that caused me to feel sluggish and regain all the weight. I was a Dr. Pepper addict, and my office being right near the restaurant, I was just back and forth, drinking Dr. Pepper. Most of the weight was sodium, and I got rid of all of that. I always had a lot of energy, but with the cleanse, and with the live foods, I just—I was like an Energizer bunny, just always going and helping and just vibrant with lots of energy.

**EW:** What was the experience like running your own restaurant, that is, The Raw Truth Vegetarian Café?

**CP:** It was a great experience. It was a wonderful experience. We started out with three business partners, and after four months, Barbara Miller left to go to California, and it was Vivian Richardson and I. I was still employed full-time at Ninfa's, so I would go in the evenings and prepare the raw dishes for the next day and prepare some of the cooked items, such as the beans or the spaghetti sauce, whatever. And really, basically, Vivian ran the day to day operations, but I was mainly the behind the scenes person, because I had the experience in restaurants and catering. I guess the

challenge there was not enough space, in that area that we had. What was devastating for me was when Vivian died in 2006. That was a real shock to me because she was in remission for thirteen years. She had cancer and no one knew it. That was a testimony within itself how raw foods helped her—you know, after she was diagnosed, and after she became vegan—to have the same quality of life for thirteen years before she finally passed away. But she didn't share that—I didn't know, no one knew. And so that was really hard for me, after she passed, to continue with the restaurant.

**EW:** You've done so many events where you're teaching people how to prepare raw foods and you're getting people to look at their nutrition and health through the concept of raw foods and vegetarian meals. How do you feel working in a realm where you're opening people's eyes to a new perspective on their diet?

**CP:** It is really a blessing because in the beginning I said that I would never become a vegetarian. And so, I just feel that God has moved me in this arena to share the knowledge that has been given to help other people. Because I know that through raw foods, through live foods, that it is so much better, and I feel that it is a mission to share and to



*Chef Pradia's raw food buffet at a Houston Cardiac Association event.*  
Photo courtesy of Al-Fin Photography.




*Guacamole and raw beets with ginger and Fuji apple slices.*  
Photo courtesy of Al-Fin Photography.

help people, especially African Americans, who are dying every day of diabetes and heart problems and hypertension. And, so I just feel that it is a blessing for me to share the knowledge that I have experienced and have been able to be blessed to have been taught.

**EW:** Relying upon your vast experience in food over the years, what is your view of the food culture here in Houston in general and—in the Third Ward in particular?

**CP:** In Houston, we have so many different cultures and food cultures as well, and I feel that the culture—as far as raw foods—it's increasing here in Houston. People are more knowledgeable about raw foods, and I would really like to see more raw and live foods here in Houston. We're a little behind as far as organic and raw food restaurants. But, as far as culture, Houston has a vast culture of so many different ethnic cuisines here. And I don't know if I will open another live food restaurant, but I would love to see, or help someone to—my goal is to maybe have another live food restaurant, maybe in collaboration with someone else.

**EW:** Is there anything else that you would like to point out in moving towards the future?

**CP:** I would like to say that if people in our community would maybe just take the time. They don't have to be vegetarian or vegan—but maybe just take maybe one day a week to fast, or to not eat meat, to just maybe go vegetarian for the day. Maybe take a Wednesday and just be in tune with your body and just start out by maybe just one day a week and just see how well you feel—just from eliminating something that may cause an illness. Because if you don't combine your foods properly, and if you are just staying with the SAD diet, which is the Standard American Diet, then you will not have the energy, you will not have the willpower in order to continue to live, because there's so many different things. It's not just food, it's stress of everyday life. It's the elements, you know, it's the air we breathe. So, if you would just take the time to maybe one day a week and just, maybe, fast and juice, or maybe just eat all fruit, then I think that you would enhance your life—enhance the quality of life while you're on this earth. 

**Ezell Wilson** is a graduate student in history at the University of Houston and a Third Ward resident.