



Photo by Stella Lorence

Head Chef Dawn Perry is a self-taught cook who has the residents of St. Germain Manor raving about her food – cooked hot and fresh and made from scratch ingredients.

SOUL FOOD

For St. Germain's head chef Dawn Perry, the way to the heart is through the kitchen

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WOONSOCKET – Wednesday was fish & chips day at St. Germain Manor, and every basket was fried to order and served hot and fresh.

Head Chef Dawn Perry wouldn't have it any other way.

"I refuse to make it ahead of time because it's got to be hot," she said.

The residents, most of whom have lived in Woonsocket their whole lives, tell Perry her fish & chips rivals that of Ye Olde English on Main Street. The Providence native understands that this is high praise.

In the six years she's led the kitchen for the assisted living resi-

dents at St. Germain, Perry has implemented breakfast to order, started making everything from scratch, brought local high schoolers on as employees and established relationships with local vendors, all in services of her beloved residents.

"All these residents – I love every one of them," she said. "We take the people other people don't care to take care of."

To hear the compliments Perry receives for her cooking, or to see the way she runs the kitchen like a restaurant, it may be surprising to learn that she has no formal culinary training. Instead, it was her Italian grandmother's home kitchen that served as her classroom.

Perry grew up in the Providence housing projects, raised by her

Grandma Anna. On Sundays, her grandmother would simmer a big pot of sauce all day long. When Perry ran in from playing outside and asked if it was ready yet, her grandmother would give her a fresh slice of Italian bread smothered in the sauce to tide her over until it was. Over the years, Perry began to pick up the recipes herself.

"My grandmother was strong," Perry said. "I'm grateful she raised me. I believe she gave me an old soul."

Perry's son was born when she was 17, and she raised him as a single parent while taking "any job" to support them. It was in one of these early jobs that she first met

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David Rankin, now the administrator at St. Germain Manor; the two have been friends for decades.

While Perry was working a laundry job for an assisted living facility, a friend told her about a program where she could earn her food safety certificate, which would allow her to get a job in a commercial kitchen. Perry figured since she always loved to cook, she'd pursue it.

Perry began to cook meals for the local youth organizations through a partnership with the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. When Rankin found out, he offered her a job in the kitchen at Tockwotton on the Waterfront, an assisted living facility in East Providence that was close to Perry's home. She started working one day per week, learning how to cook for 200 people.

"I burnt fish for a whole year," she remembered. Rankin told her another way to cook it with peppers and other fixings, and



Photo by Stella Lorence

Perry has continued to expand her culinary horizons, especially when it comes to baking.

"from that day on, fish is the easiest thing to make for me."

Eventually, Perry was brought on full-time at Tockwotton, but she wasn't happy and felt like there was no room for upward mobility. By then, Rankin had left to take a job as administrator at St. Germain, and he suggested she come take a look and try making a meal.

"The red floor is what

got me," she said, describing the moment she first laid eyes on the kitchen.

Her meal went over well and she accepted the job. Then Grandma Anna died a few days before Perry's first day at St. Germain. Instead of going out to eat with everyone after the funeral mass, Perry put on a uniform and went to St. Germain.

"I knew she knew how much I loved her, but I felt

a responsibility," she said. "My grandmother was so smart. She had the biggest heart in the world, but don't ever mess with her family. She had these words: 'Listen, you!' That's all she had to say."

Right away, she set to work improving the quality of residents' food at St. Germain.

"They had a lot of processed foods," she said. "Frozen everything."

After about two years, she implemented breakfast to order and a four-week rotating menu that cycles with the seasons. She buys meat from Butcher Brothers, and bought seafood from Wilfred's when it was still open. Her younger sister and Rankin's daughter both work with her in the kitchen, and Perry said the atmosphere during shifts is light and fun. Perry has passed along everything she knows to those who work with her, and she said she's always open to hearing their new ideas.

"If you think you want to put your spin on it, go for it," she said. "You might make something better than me. I want them to be strong. I

want them to be happy. It's a happy kitchen."

Perry expanded her team by calling up Woonsocket High School and asking if there were any particularly responsible students who might want to take a job in the kitchen. She ended up with two 17-year-olds whom the residents love, she said.

"These residents are very happy," she said. "You can take to any of them, they love the kitchen."

Even with the demand for favorite, familiar recipes, Perry has continued to expand her culinary horizons, especially when it comes to baking. She made hundreds of zeppola for St. Joseph's Day and will be making cupcakes decorated with Peeps marshmallows for Easter. Residents look forward all year to her homemade Thanksgiving stuffing, and in the summer, the kitchen hosts cook outs and the annual clambake, a tradition she and Rankin brought over the Tockwotton. She tries to work every holiday, and her brother makes special guest appearances as a DJ for big events.

"We don't stay stagnant.

We like to switch things up," she said. "Assisted living is beautiful, how it changed."

Perry still commutes to St. Germain from East Providence. She considered moving closer, she said, but then she'd really never leave work. She's told residents she'll move to St. Germain when she retires, but until then, she gets home from work and cooks for herself.

"I can never get tired of cooking," she said. "I love my job so very much. This job is everything for me."

Perry said she tries to do right by everybody. When her son died as a young adult, Perry questioned her Catholic upbringing and raged against God before deciding she needed to stop and do her best to get into heaven.

"I want to be known as someone who... really loved it, who wasn't here for the money," she said. "When I drive home, I know I did a good job for people. I know their bellies are full."

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