

“ A Labor of Love ”

Houston's
Enterprise Catering
Service



The South Carolina Minority Business Enterprise Center is proud to nominate Houston's Enterprise Catering Service as
Minority Service Firm of the Year, 2007.

“Our food speaks for itself.”



Made from Scratch

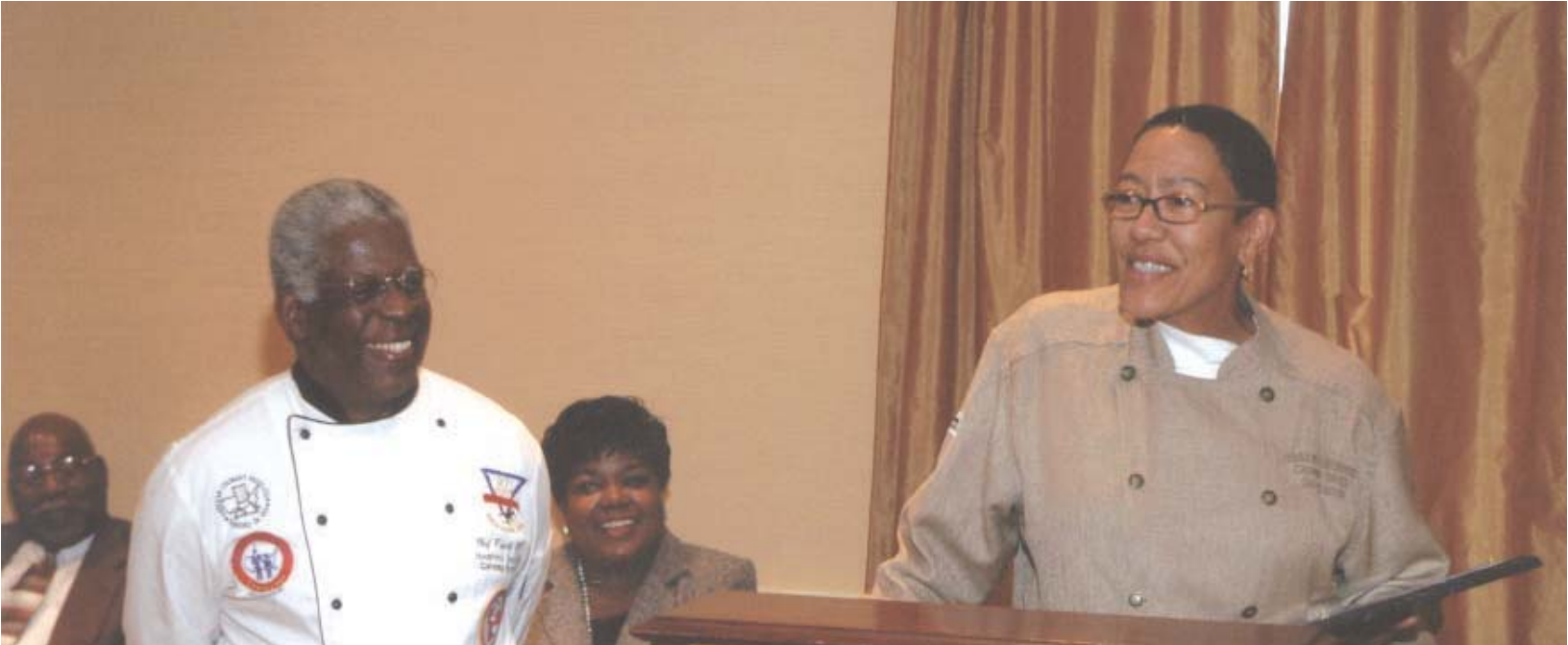
Chef Frank Houston's love of cooking began when he was a child. His mother, Elizabeth Houston, felt the African-American tradition of teaching sons and daughters to cook was an important part of her own heritage, so Frank Houston's hands became her second set in the kitchen. Countless afternoons were spent between the two, cooking and baking the Houston's family specialties: shrimp and grits, homemade butter pound cake, fruitcake, and lima beans with rice, just to name a few. Houston recalls his favorite afternoons were when pound cakes were on the menu, as he got the special job of licking the leftover batter straight off the spoon.



From those days grew an interest in the food service industry for Mr. Houston, and upon turning 16, he entered the business by becoming a bus boy at the Frances Marion Hotel in his hometown of Charleston, SC. His eye was not only on the food, but also on the money, and he soon geared himself toward promotion to waiter. After time spent in that position, he set his sights on management and later became dining room manager for the hotel. After having reached his lofty goals, he realized his passion was for culinary arts, and he began studying at Cornell University.



After completing his studies at Cornell, Houston partnered with Bob Funderburk and created the Funderburk Restaurant. He spent a portion of his career in the restaurant business, but soon figured it would be easier to advance if he ventured out on his own. In 1987, Houston moved to Columbia, SC to open his own catering business. Business was tough. Chef Houston was the only employee of the newly established firm, and banks saw him as a risky investment. Forced to rely on his own capital, Houston struggled to create a new business in an already well-established metropolitan market. His first year sales just totaled over \$50,000.



It Takes Two

By 1994, he met his wife, Millie, who was completing her degree in Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management at the University of South Carolina. Millie had extensive restaurant and hotel experience, and the two together were a power couple in the food industry. Combining their similar experiences, Houston's Catering turned into Houston's Enterprise Catering Service, with Chef Houston running the kitchen, and Millie running operations in and out of the office.



For the next several years, Houston's was forced to rely on generating its own revenue, with no assistance from outside financing. The couple was the only employees of the firm, and together, catered everything from birthday parties to family reunions. There wasn't an advertising budget, and Houston's relied heavily on word of mouth as their biggest selling tool. All of Chef Houston's creations were fresh and made from scratch, so the Houstons knew their product could sell itself, and before long, it did. The food and service Houston's provided was consistently upscale and prepared in a thoughtful and deliberate fashion tailored to each individual client. The company's reputation soon preceded them, and doors opened to an entirely new customer base.

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Now Hiring

It was a long uphill battle, but by year 2001, their sales had reached over \$278,124. Houston's was finally servicing major corporations, community based organizations, state agencies, and private clients. Chef & Millie Houston were able to begin hiring an in-house staff, and created on-call positions for special events. The Houstons felt a strong tie to their community and used their success to create opportunities for others. They began routinely hiring disadvantaged employees who needed work. They created a secretarial position open

“Anything is possible if you believe and try.”

to single mothers, hired persons with handicaps, and spent summers mentoring school kids, hoping to inspire the ideas inherent to entrepreneurship.

The Houstons tried to communicate that “anything is possible if you believe and try.” Very closely tied to the church (Chef Houston serves as an associate minister at St. Peter Baptist Church in Irmo, SC), the Houstons believed that faith was the center of everything, including their business.

After 2001, sales began to decline due to two major factors: a large increase in competition (the number of caterers in the Columbia Metropolitan Service Area grew to 40+), and in 2004, the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center opened. The Convention Center sole sourced catering, and provided all services necessary for major events in one central location. Houston's sales dropped from 2001's figure of \$278,124, to \$240,308 in 2002, \$212,541 in 2003, and \$240,617 in 2004. Despite this decline, the business was still able to maintain profitability, and earned a 10% net profit in 2003, and 2.3% in 2004. In 2005, their net income was 14.6%, and by 2006, the firm's sales were over \$250,000, with earnings of 15.1%.

A Love of Community & Business

Today Houston's Enterprise Catering Services is well focused on growth and job creation. They now have a staff of six in-house persons, and an on-call staff ranging from 30 persons to over 200. In its beginning, Houston's only employee was Chef Houston, and later, only he and his wife. As the company grew, the Houstons began

offering opportunities of employment to members in the community needing work. Part-time certified banquet employee Janice Smith says of the Houstons, “Both are kind, compassionate, caring individuals, eager to offer opportunities to those in need. Their catering services are professional and incredible thought goes into preparing meals for their clients.”

Chef Houston has also mentored numerous business persons in the industry, many of whom have gone on successfully to create their own firms. He has an “open-door” policy and routinely shares information and equipment to various persons in the food service industry. The Houstons provide a wealth of networking opportunities, and try to influence others that they too can be entrepreneurs. Their message, “Anything is possible if you try.”

In addition to Houston’s job creation, the business focuses heavily on community service and philanthropy. Annually, Houston’s contributes to AIDS benefits, the Oliver Gospel Mission, Harvest Hope Food Bank, and various women’s shelters.

They also donate a great deal of time and effort to the local school systems, participating in youth mentoring, DARE programs, and Buffalo Soldiers, an organization mentoring children ages seven to 17. The Houstons were also instrumental in coordinating the inception of the “Chef & Child Program,” an initiative under the Midlands Chef Association, for which Mr. Houston served for over six years. The business has received numerous awards for their community



involvement, including service awards from the American Culinary Federation (years 1996-2000), and citations for outstanding support to St. Peter Baptist Church.



Partnering & Learning

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The Houstons regularly participate in City of Columbia business development opportunities, but credit much of their vision for the future to the South Carolina Minority Business Enterprise Agency (SCMBEC). Having been a continual client of the center for more than a decade, the Houstons and the SCMBEC began working closely

together in 2006 in order to take the business to the next level. Chef and Millie Houston both said the assistance from the SCMBEC has resulted in restructuring their bottom line with sound advice and strategy-smart business packages. Chef Houston says, “Advice from the center has given us a sense of possible new levels—we now see ourselves as a mature business. They have kept us out of pitfalls, and have provided a wealth of knowledge concerning entrepreneurship.”

A critical achievement the SCMBEC was instrumental in is a new contract between the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center and the Ovations Company. The SCMBEC assisted Houston’s Catering in winning a partnership agreement with the Ovations





Company to handle various catering events at the Convention Center. Previously, the Convention Center sole sourced catering services, not allowing Houston's Catering to bid on contracts for the Convention Center's clients. With this new agreement, sales are projected to double, with figures exceeding \$500,000 for fiscal year 2007. This achievement qualifies Houston's Catering as a rapidly growing business, and will result in significant job creation.

Politicians Vote for Houston's

Assistance from the SCMBEC has also led to a more sophisticated clientele. While Monday through Friday Houston's Catering focuses on corporations as their bread and butter clients, they now are serving major state and public entities, with groups as large as 2000. In February 2007, Houston's Catering was contracted to provide food services for the private reception hosted by presidential hopeful Senator Barack Obama. The event was held at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, and Chef Houston's thoughtful preparation of the dishes served got particular attention from Senator Obama and his wife.

In handling political events, the Houstons have also received attention from South Carolina's politicians. Columbia's own mayor, Bob Coble, says of the Houston's, "As Mayor, I have attended many events catered by [Houston's], and their professionalism and high culinary standards are things I always anticipate, in addition to their delicious food." State Senator Kay Patterson says he has had "the privilege of experiencing the Houstons unique catering service, and in 35 years, has never been disappointed with their service or food."

Vision for the Future

Houston's Enterprise Catering Service is looking ahead to new ventures, such as marketing signature items to grocers, and focusing heavily on servicing weddings. The SCMBEC is slated to continue providing business services to Houston's, and is proud to nominate the firm as "Minority Service Firm of the Year." Chef & Millie Houston exemplify entrepreneurship and have overcome significant obstacles in a very difficult industry. The recent achievement to partner with the Ovations Company and the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center will contractually double the Houstons sales, and qualifies them as a rapid growth business, with revenue of \$500,000+. This achievement also stands to generate significant job growth, and their philosophy of hiring those who are disadvantaged provides jobs in a community of people needing work. In the end, all the Houstons do translates into a love of food, people, and community, for which they should be honored.