

This Chef Fled a War-Torn Country as a Child. Now She's Helping Other Refugees Rebuild Their Lives.

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Chef Jennifer Sebasigari once dreamed of becoming a celebrity chef, but now she's dreaming about helping others make their own dreams come true.

From becoming a chef to championing immigrant and refugee causes with her SEBAS Foundation, Sebasigari's story is one of transformation and empowerment.

Born in the East African country of Burundi, Sebasigari and her family found themselves forced to the Democratic Republic of the Congo after local unrest and war caused them to flee. They then relocated to a refugee camp in Cameroon before safely landing in Austin, TX in 2001.

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After high school in Texas, Sebasigari tapped into her love of cooking and set her sights on becoming a celebrity chef. Initially inspired by television chefs like Giada De Laurentiis, Sebasigari embarked on a culinary journey fueled by dreams of fame and recognition. However, the reality of culinary school quickly challenged her expectations.

"After culinary school, I thought, 'I'm going to go work for Giada and I'm gonna be this big celebrity chef. And I'm gonna

get all the magazines. I'm gonna have my own TV show,'" she tells Restaurant Influencers host Shawn Walchef of Cali BBQ Media on the new episode of *Restaurant Influencers*. "I signed the paper, started school, and I realized that, 'Oh, no, this is not what's gonna happen.' I had all of these glamorous dreams, but I didn't realize that you start as a prep cook and have to work your way up. So that was pretty funny looking back on it, but I did stick with it and graduated with honors."

Though her dreams of being a celebrity chef were deferred, Chef Sebasigari was able to maintain her pulse on social media and its impact on growing a brand.

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She immediately recognized the power of storytelling in the culinary world. Now she works to help restaurant owners share their narratives authentically with digital media and connect with consumers on a deeper level.

"Start posting," she advises people starting out. "Tell us stories about your food. We want to be connected to your food. There's nothing better than when you're eating something that has meaning behind it."

Helping Refugees

Chef Jennifer Sebasigari's life experience has provided her with an understanding of the challenges faced by underrepresented communities. She is implementing her influence through the SEBAS Foundation and the annual Live Fire Feast – a fundraising event to be held in Houston on June 20, 2024.

"It's something that I'm super passionate about," said

Sebasigari. “We raise money for immigrants and refugees. About 60 percent of our sponsors and all of our staff that we hire are immigrant and refugee-based businesses.”

Chef Sebasigari’s heart for giving back has extended into a short film docuseries entitled, *Table of Nations*, which is part of a larger initiative to “raise special awareness about the refugees and immigrants who feed us and the nonprofit organizations who support them.”

“I’m super excited to just share my story and to connect with more people and to share the story of resilience.”

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