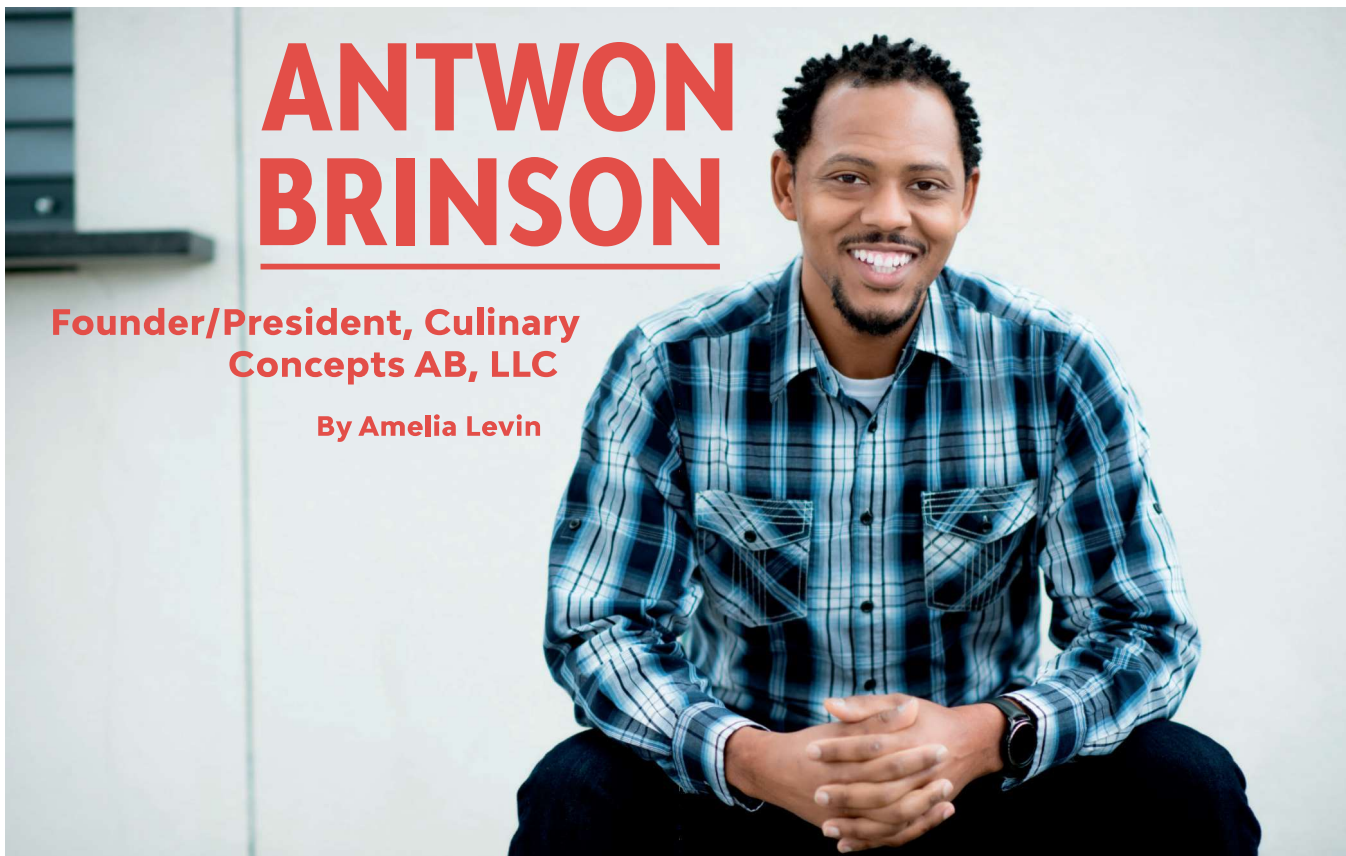


ANTWON BRINSON

**Founder/President, Culinary
Concepts AB, LLC**

By Amelia Levin



Chef Antwon Brinson didn't plan to become a chef.

"My mother joked that I would burn water as an adolescent," he says. It was only when he enrolled in a two-year vocational training program that the doors to the culinary world blew open. Little did he know that path would lead him to attend one of the most prestigious culinary schools in America, travel the world, work at one of the nation's most legendary resorts, and found a culinary program dedicated to helping people of all ages and nationalities not only learn to cook, but also to succeed in any career they end up choosing.

Reflecting on his time in the high school trade school program, Chef Brinson says, "During my first year, I had a chef who was very strict, and we butted heads initially. I was constantly in trouble that year. But, during my second year, I had a different chef who saw something in me I didn't see in myself. He took me under his wing, asking if I wanted to participate in competitions. I ended up doing well and making it to [the] state [championships]. I got my [behind] kicked, but it was the first time anyone gave me that type of direction or leadership opportunity."

More doors began to open. "I was working as a dishwasher at a local hotel, and the chef and general manager recognized my work ethic and invested in me," he says. "[One day,] a line cook called in sick, and they had me take over. I was always watching the cooks, so I was familiar with the dishes. In a case like this, you either sink or swim, and I thought, 'I will not sink.' In fact, 'failure is not an option' inadvertently became my credo."

Chef Brinson has done more than just swim since then. Still, after graduation, he wasn't 100 percent convinced he should go to culinary school, though he admits cooking was the only activity he truly enjoyed. After taking a little time off after high school, he applied to the Culinary Institute of America, knowing it was the best place he could go, even if he had no idea how he would pay for it. Yet, because of those competitions in high school and strong letters of recommendation, he was awarded a full scholarship in 2001.

"My mom wasn't a cook, but she loved dining out," Chef Brinson says. "She was also a dedicated foster parent and raised more than 250 children! I realized later in life that the exposure I had to different cuisines really [influenced] my palate. When I got to culinary school, I was able to identify and experiment with different flavor profiles."

ON A MISSION

Born in Niagara Falls, New York, Chef Brinson says the love he received from his mother (who he notes is his biological mom) and her passion for food and helping others also made him passionate about the same things. "My mission is to [leave] a legacy that will create positive change in our world, one improvement at a time," he says.

At the CIA, while his classmates looked to score jobs in New York City, Chef Brinson instead focused on fulfilling his lifelong desire to travel the world. "I grew up in a very diverse

community, with Italians, Germans, Puerto Ricans and Africans, and I learned about their cultures through food,” he says. Fascinated by the Caribbean, he ended up there for his externship, working at several top restaurants in the British and U.S. Virgin Islands.

There, he says, “I never saw so many men in positions of power who looked like me. My journey has been less about my ability to cook and more about my relentless drive to succeed; this has allowed me to thrive in the kitchen. It was never about just being a chef for me; it was about mastering a craft.”

After graduating in 2006, Chef Brinson enrolled in a rigorous, three-year apprenticeship program under several Certified Master Chefs at the legendary Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia — a program he had learned about from a chef in the Caribbean. The opportunity continued to open more doors for Chef Brinson, who says he was “fortunate to learn, teach, inspire and be inspired by so many wonderful and skilled people”; he adds he enjoyed managing the resort’s 44-acre farm production kitchen.

After The Greenbrier, Chef Brinson continued to travel to cooking gigs in Hawaii; Palm Springs, California; and San Francisco. He ran multiple restaurants; managed a staff of 56; did banquets for up to 2,000 people; served as an executive chef of a private club with revenues of \$5 to \$10 million a year; and opened a restaurant in Charlottesville, Virginia, before deciding to open his own business. In 2018, he founded his company, Culinary Concepts AB, with the intent to “focus on developing individuals’ passions and abilities by teaching life skills through culinary arts,” he says, adding he has had the honor of helping 75-plus students achieve milestones in their lives and careers.

“I came from a neighborhood that most kids don’t make it out of,” he says. “Early in my life, people built bridges for me, and I was able to accomplish my dreams of going to the top culinary school and traveling the world. I always knew I wanted to teach and give back.”

INSPIRATION AND INTENT

The idea behind starting his own culinary program came when Chef Brinson noticed there were no programs designed to help aspiring young chefs gain important life skills alongside the necessary culinary capabilities. Creating a program like this, he realized, also could help the restaurant industry recruit and retain qualified, dedicated individuals by training them to be more than just chefs.

After developing a business plan and pitching it to investors, he secured funding and recruited his first group of six students. “I partnered with Charlottesville’s Office of Economic Development, which provided scholarships for the students,” he says. “After that, I knew there were two major components that I needed to make this vision a reality: students, of course, but also chefs who believed in my vision enough to hire them. I would walk through the community, shaking hands, knocking on doors,

passing out flyers, trying to get people to sign up. Truth be told, I felt like a politician, but I knew that no one else believed in my vision like I did and that it was my job to make them believe.” Chef Brinson says he would hit the pavement in a suit with a clipboard and go door-to-door in restaurants, asking the general manager or the chef for five minutes of their time so he could pitch his vision and get them to hire his students.

“The funny thing is, I never once told them that I am a chef!” he says with a laugh. “I’m not going to lie, there were a few times when I was asked to leave. Some people kind of turned their nose up at me. Talk about [a humbling experience],” he says.

Chef Brinson initially committed 25 restaurants to partner with his program. Fast forward three years: Chef Brinson now works with 70 foodservice partners in the Charlottesville area to employ graduates of his program, which, prior to the pandemic, saw classes of about 25 students of all ages. Chef Brinson’s program has even hosted students from other countries, including Syria, India, Ethiopia and Nigeria, thanks to a partnership with the International Refugee Organization.

Chef Brinson’s program teaches cooking fundamentals, food safety and other technical skills, but also soft-skill development and how to network with other culinary professionals. He brings in contacts from the various boards on which he serves, including the Piedmont Workforce Network, the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation, the local Black Professionals Network, the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center, and the Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center. Graduates of the program earn their Certified Culinarian certification sanctioned by the ACF, as well as the American Hotel and Lodging Educational Institute and ServSafe certifications. They have gone on to work at independent restaurants as well as at universities and country clubs around the nation.

“My goal isn’t just to teach people how to become a chef,” he says. “When you look at the hospitality industry, one major barrier to moving up the ladder is not hard skills, but soft skills, like the ability to communicate and show professionalism.” Each week of the program covers a different life skill, like how to dress for the job, in addition, of course, to cooking skills and tasting as many ingredients as possible.

During COVID-19, Chef Brinson has put the program on hold, but continues to teach others through Zoom classes. He also keeps busy as a father to a newborn son.

Chef Brinson continues to keep in touch with his students. “Whether you want to be a chef or something else, I tell them, ‘You need to pick a direction and start walking,’ he says. I showed up to work every day, and someone gave me an opportunity to keep walking, so I did, and the doors kept opening. Some people see obstacles and they stop. But you never know until you try.”