

SANDRA SALMON'S SHE'S ROYAL EXPRESS PATTIES INTERVIEW – Sandra Salmon

Look carefully or you'll miss it. Royal Express Patties stands sandwiched between a Spanish restaurant and a beauty parlor, two doors away from a Chinese restaurant, on 170th street off the Grand Concourse in a humble section of the Bronx. Its proprietor, Sandra Salmon, bought the bakery in 2009, remodeled it, renamed it, and parlayed it into a thriving hybrid business that serves as a bakery and a restaurant.

Sandra's Royal Express Patties can be seen as an anomaly—a reaction against the various ubiquitous artery-clogging fast food restaurants in the neighborhood. Sandra caters to people with an appetite for a good old-fashioned home-cooked meal—or one of her many tasty patties: beef, which comes mild or spicy, chicken, spinach, soy, and vegetable.

Her best selling dish is the oxtail with rice and peas with vegetables and plantains. The oxtail is cooked with spices and sauce—not too much to stifle the meat's flavor—in away that allows the flavor of the oxtail to dominate. You get two big scoops of rice surrounded by two slices of tomatoes, a scoop of steamed vegetables, about seven pieces of plantain, and five or six succulent pieces of oxtail. The oxtail is brown from the browning seasoning, and juicy.

Sandra's oxtail and rice and peas is one of the best meals I have ever eaten, and I would say the same of her other dishes: jerk chicken, curry chicken, and curry goat. And customers have a choice of three sizes: small, medium, and large, with the right portion to fit the appetite of a moderate to the most voracious eater.

On the pastry side, Sandra carries buns, bulla cakes, and hard dough bread. But the main star is the beef patty and coco bread — delicious to eat. I'm tempted to call it the single best beef patty in all of the Bronx. "The patties taste good because of the way they're prepared, and the spices," Sandra said. The patties have a distinctive taste and are easily distinguished from other patties.

Sandra is light-skinned, affable, and is a Jamaican immigrant. Before buying the bakery in 2009, she worked with her husband, who is in the restaurant business. Then in 2009 the owner of an unassuming little bakery decided to sell. "I saw the opportunity to have my own business," Sandra said.

And so Sandra is the proud owner of Royal Express Patties, the name that is boldly displayed outside above the restaurant, but a glimpse at her license, which is displayed on the wall, gives the name as SHE's Royal Express Patties, an inconsistency that no one seems to notice, and one that doesn't affect the quality of the patties.

The place is decorated simply: a display case with sliced-hard-dough bread, buns, water crackers, and bulla cake; a fridge with a variety of soft drinks as well as Caribbean favorites—Iris Moss, Double Trouble, Kola Champagne, and Carrot Juice; on the walls are pictures of famous people: a framed portrait of Mickey Mantle and Roger Morris together, Derek Jeter, Malcolm X, Michael Jackson, and President Obama.

Up front with Sandra is her trusted employee Dawn, who has been with her since she bought the place in 2009. Dawn says she likes that Sandra doesn't treat her like a worker, but as person, and that they work as a team.

The bakery is in a community that is mostly Hispanic. They make up the bulk of Sandra's customers. "The Spanish people love the beef patty and coco bread," she says. Her other customers include West Indians and Africans—or just about anybody in the mood for a patty. It also benefits Sandra that the bakery is in close proximity to a high school whose discriminating eaters come there for lunch.

A few days ago while I was there, an African woman who works in a nearby discount store came in and ordered a beef patty. When she got it she asked, "Why is it small?" "The economy." Dawn joked, then got into a conversation with the woman about some products the discount store carry.

After the woman left a man came in. "Give me a medium oxtail and Snapple," he said. And Sandra went in the back and came back bearing the man's order.

Then a young woman came in, brown-skinned, and wearing jeans and a white and sky-blue blouse and extensions. "You look good today," Sandra said. The young woman accepted the complement and ordered a beef patty, coco bread and a Ting.

Given the transitory nature of the restaurant business and the condition of the economy, added to the fact that this is one of the poorest communities in the Bronx, consisting mostly of Hispanics followed by black Americans, it's remarkable that Sandra's bakery-restaurant has managed to stay afloat. Sandra said it all comes down to personality, appearance of the store (she got an "A" in her last inspection), and the ability to make people come back. "You do this by giving them the best – the best patties possible, the best food and the best service possible. Restaurant business is hard work and dedication, and without the customers you won't be in business."