

The Chef at Virgil's Gullah Kitchen Self-Published a Memoir. You Should Read It

'Black Enough Man Enough' chronicles Gregory 'Gee' Smalls' journey coming to terms with his identity.

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PHOTO: JUAN & GEE ENTERPRISES

Six years ago, husbands and serial entrepreneurs Gregory “Gee” and Juan Smalls had a business plan for their Gullah-Geechee-meets-soul-food restaurant, Virgil’s Gullah Kitchen & Bar in College Park, Georgia, and an idea for a self-help relationship book.

First came the restaurant, where Gee is executive chef. Opened in 2019, their port-inspired eatery is named in honor of Gee's late dad, a Navy vet who loved to cook, and serves family recipes and signature cocktails. Lowcountry offerings like jam up wingz, slammin' sammin, two-piece fush (fish) basket, the vodka-based Look Yah, and boozy Get Tight Up celebrate the Geechee dialect and his father's infectious catchphrases.

Virgil's 1,900-square-foot space features a wall-size mural of Gee's dad by the front entrance, columns painted with rice plants by the bar, and a 40-foot wooden communal bench in the dining area.

That self-help book project eventually morphed into *Black Enough Man Enough*, Gee's recently self-published memoir that chronicles his quest towards accepting his identity as a sexually fluid, biracial man. Officially released this July, a year after Virgil's opened its doors, *Black Enough Man Enough* is a savory, emotionally rich concoction that traces Gee's coming-of-age story in both James Island, S.C., and Atlanta. He sprinkles family photos between chapters, which explore his experiences and views surrounding marriage, fatherhood, race, family, bisexuality, love, masculinity, relationships, body image, faith, and self-esteem.

"There was just something inside of me that felt like it needed to be shared in detail," Gee, 43, said. "I revisited all of these old moments and relationships, and it took on a life of its own."

"It takes a very strong, diligent, and intentional person to write a memoir and to break open their heart and spirit to allow the world in," Juan, also Virgil's general manager, added.

Gee was churning out page after page. His spouse, however, wasn't as motivated to write. Before Gee knew it, he'd whipped up 170 pages to start, feeling that his message could also be cathartic for others on a journey towards self-acceptance. "My backstory ended up turning into this memoir," Gee said. "All of these stories just started coming out of me that I didn't even know was in there, but it was a story that needed to be told."

A great deal of *Black Enough Man Enough* centers around the author's hot-and-cold relationship with his white mother. Gee, who is the father of a 19-year-old son, Lil' Gee, from his previous marriage to his high school sweetheart, also confronts the constant taunting and shaming he endured for his once androgynous and overweight appearance.

This summer, Gee created and hosted a panel-style limited digital series, *Black Enough Man Enough Live*, as a companion to his autobiography. Each installment is a dialogue with thought leaders and several of his immediate family members. Gee's mother was his guest on the pilot episode, "White Mother/Black Son." She discussed being stigmatized by her parents and past employers for her interracial relationship with Gee's father, a Black man.

"The book has been an opportunity for all of those relationships that I wrote about to experience healing," Gee said. "It was an effort to have these important conversations we don't have."

Gee, a former event planner and IT specialist, brought on a consultant to coach him through editing and publishing *Black Enough Man Enough*. He hopes to one day get scooped up by a major publisher or have a studio adapt his story for the screen.

Going the self-publishing route for now, Gee says, is the best option to control his narrative. "I wanted to own my own story, not give it away for someone to have rights over it," he said. "Self-publishing is extremely tough, but I could be in control and release my story my way."

In the meantime, Gee is focused on carrying his restaurant through COVID-19. While Virgil's can't host dine-in customers, takeout orders have doubled. "In the beginning, things were real slow, and everyone was really nervous," he said. "We're a Black-owned business that celebrates Black culture, so that's helped to carry us through COVID because patrons are extremely supportive of Black business in response to the social climate."

Virgil's loyal customer base stems from the Smalls pair's core Black LGBTQ audience in metro Atlanta. After hosting a few weekend events with exceptional turnout upon opening, some of College Park's local officials were under the impression Juan and Gee, founders of their nonprofit, The Gentlemen's Foundation, were managing "just another Black gay club."

Their restaurant opened, the couple says, to create more Black business options targeting the Black LGBTQ community. Even when Juan and Gee, the first Black gay couple to appear on HGTV's *House Hunters*, were deciding on locations and raising the capital to start the business, being out and proud still created barriers to entry. (Property managers

wouldn't allow Gee and Juan to sign the lease, for example.) These days, Virgil's is one of the brightest spots in downtown Historic College Park, Georgia.

"The neighborhood has embraced us so much since then," Gee said. "It was an opportunity for them to experience something they were uncomfortable with, but it worked for us instead of against us."

Next year, Juan and Gee plan to revive the Gentlemen's Ball, their nonprofit's flagship event billed as "a second-chance Black LGBTQ prom," to commemorate its 10th anniversary.

Completing the memoir and concurrently overseeing the restaurant, Gee said, have helped him become more comfortable with who he is.

"I'm able to see myself outside of myself," Gee said. "I see myself as human, and writing my story allows me to have more compassion for myself and others. The book is a love letter to everybody. People can read my story and hope that they, too, are enough."



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