

**\*\*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE\*\***

**\*\*Native Foods in Chicago's South Loop Ushers in a New Era of Black and Employee Ownership\*\***

**\*\*Chicago, IL – January 2024 –\*\*** This Veganuary, the Chicago culinary scene shines a spotlight on its diverse vegan options, with a special focus on Native Foods in the South Loop (218 S. Clark). The beloved vegan eatery now heralds a new chapter as it becomes Black and employee-owned, thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit of Dame Dia.

In September 2023, a significant milestone occurred for Native Foods. Dame Dia, the former Chicago District Manager for the brand, was presented with an extraordinary birthday present: the chance to become the owner of Chicago's last standing Native Foods location. This news was enthusiastically welcomed by the community, particularly by those who were concerned about the potential closure of the Chicago Loop location following the earlier shutdowns of the Wicker Park and Lakeview branches. Dame officially assumed ownership of the restaurant in late November 2023.

Dame's path to ownership is a narrative of resilience and community support. After relocating to Chicago over five years ago to be with his now-wife OnJaLee LaShay, he brought a rich 15-year experience in the restaurant industry. His career journey, beginning in Queens, NY, is a story of remarkable growth, starting as a dishwasher at Red Lobster and escalating to the General Manager of the same restaurant. Before leaving New York, his career had progressed to managing multiple eateries at JFK Airport's Terminal 5, where he also met OnJaLee.

OnJaLee, who is known in Chicago as "The Connector" for her vast marketing and networking skills has been instrumental in this endeavor. The pair, having met at JFK Airport, decided to unite their skills and passion to embark on this business adventure together.

The rejuvenated Native Foods is poised to introduce a captivating mix of traditional vegan recipes and, in the near future, West African cuisine, showcasing Dame's Senegalese heritage and culinary prowess. These cultural dishes, frequently adapted to vegan preferences for his wife, are expected to infuse the menu with distinctive flavors and will be incorporated later this year.

As Veganuary unfolds, Native Foods warmly invites both Chicago residents and visitors to explore and enjoy its rejuvenated, culturally-rich culinary offerings. Join us in celebrating a dream come to fruition, a journey flavored with ambition, community connection, and culinary innovation.

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For more information, please visit [www.NativeFoods.com](http://www.NativeFoods.com)

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About Native Foods: Founded in California in 1994, Native Foods is a premier vegan restaurant chain known for its innovative and delicious plant-based cuisine. Emphasizing sustainability and ethical eating, Native Foods has been a staple in the vegan community for years, continually evolving to meet the diverse tastes of its patrons.

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