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Chef Ron, Food Vision keeping Arizona athletes fed during a trying time



By C.J. Holmes (/author/cj-holmes/) Apr 19, 2020

Editor's note: In an effort to support local businesses that are being threatened by the devastating effects of the coronavirus, The Athletic is publishing an ongoing series of stories (<https://theathletic.com/tag/support-local/>) to highlight our treasured communities. #supportlocal

Ronald Young was working at the Arizona Mills Nike Store in 2016, plotting how he'd get his business off the ground, when he made a game-changing connection. It was called Food Vision. He dreamed it up at his other job, Victoria's Secret. At this point, he was in the infant stages of his burgeoning empire. Promoting his food with pictures of food on Facebook and Instagram, pounding the pavement for orders in his reach. The jobs paid the bills and funded his meal prep and catering business.

This woman kept coming into Nike and Young, like a self-respecting single gentleman, was shooting his shot. She was 5-foot-10 inches of gorgeous and he was certain she was into him. She came by the store a few times to buy shoes, asking for him even. He flirted with her and she chatted back. He wound up showing her pictures of his food and sharing his ambition.

As it turned out, a former America's Next Top Model contestant, Jennifer Frost, wasn't interested in a romantic relationship with Young. She was, however, willing to support him. She was intrigued by his vision, his plan for healthy meals, and the pictures of the food. She invited him to her home to cook for her and her fiancé.

Young didn't get a date, but he did get a customer — so he still won.

He showed up at her newly built Scottsdale home, ready to show off an array of his signature meal prep dishes — chicken, steak, turkey. As he walked to the door and rang the doorbell, he expected to be greeted by his new friend. Nope. The fiancé knew Young would be surprised, and welcomed him in with a smile.

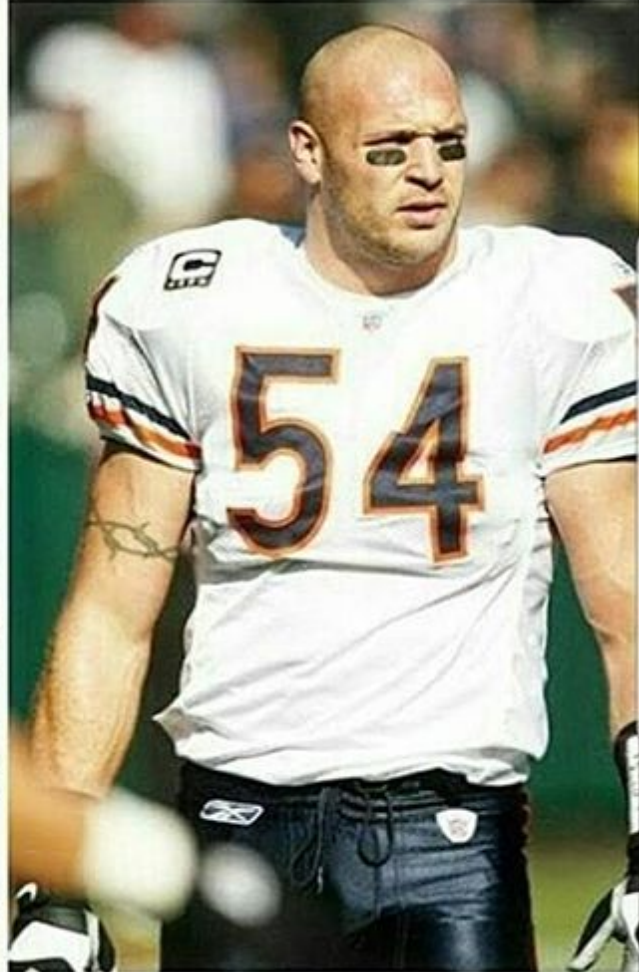
“Boom! Brian Urlacher was standing there,” Young, 31, said of the Chicago Bears legend who would later be enshrined in the Hall of Fame.

“This was right after he retired. They had like a huge Nike display in their house. It was all lit up with every shoe you could possibly think of. So, I started talking with him. I shared my vision. They were telling me that I needed to do this and were pushing me to be more aggressive. From there, he started telling people about me, which started opening other doors.”



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Fast forward to now. Food Vision, the meal prep and catering business he started in 2014, has become everything he dreamed it could be back when he was peddling sneakers and lace bras. He's now Arizona's No. 1 celebrity chef, known in the state as Chef Ron.

Young usually wakes up by 5 a.m. these days. He's not much of a runner anymore but likes to take two-hour walks to meditate and prepare for the day ahead. When he finally settles into the kitchen, the first thing he does is set the tone by pumping something through his Beats By Dr. Dre Pill. Speakers like Eric Thomas keep him focused. He'll bump gospel artists like Travis Greene or Kirk Franklin when he's feeling spiritual, or classic Bob Marley when he's feeling high-energy. Creating a positive atmosphere in his kitchen is important to him because he believes any negative energy can affect the taste of his food.

After a series of meetings with his catering coordinator (Amber Smith), prep cook (John Mitchell) and website manager (Jonathan Molina), the ingredients come out. The ovens are fired up. The sleeves are rolled back. It's time to get to work. They prepare hundreds of fresh, healthy, customized meals almost daily. Their consistency and dedication over the past five years is why clients come back for seconds and thirds, even in the midst of a global pandemic.

Successful food ventures are built on positive relationships, and Young has spent the past five years building them with athletes, celebrities and political figures across Arizona and beyond. Athletes, however, remain one of Young's biggest supporters during this period of social distancing. Grocery stores are hit-or-miss. Most restaurants are either closed or operating on adjusted hours. But athletes still have to put the right things in their bodies while finding creative ways to train — and they still prefer the personalized service to which they're accustomed. Many in Arizona are relying on Young and his team to keep them fed properly during this difficult time, with no real idea when sports will actually return.

It doesn't take much time around Young to understand why athletes are drawn to him. He's got three things going for him.

First, and most obvious, his personality — he can seamlessly blend into any environment. His father was in the military, so he moved around frequently growing up, constantly adapting to different situations, people, places. He can easily segue from personal chef to hilarious homie. Second, he's a former athlete. He played Division I at Alabama A&M. It wasn't just that he can talk the talk with them, or that he has some understanding of who they are and what they'd want. But his attention to detail and his grind, they can spot it and appreciate it.

And the capper is the food.

"It's a blessing, man, to be able to help people in this time of need," Young said. "When things are tight and it's hard to even get out. Because a lot of these athletes are scared to move because they don't want to catch anything and mess up their career. Just to be able to be a help for them, it's a blessing. It's not easy. Nothing me and my team do is easy because we're still taking a risk. We're taking a risk every day when we go out and serve the people. But it's dope that people depend on me, especially during these times."

On a Monday morning in 2019, while serving as a personal chef for NBA Draft hopefuls in Paradise Valley, Chef Ron was driving back from Costco with Smith after picking up some supplies when the call came in. It was an unknown number. Young answered and was greeted by a distinct, soft-spoken voice. But the man didn't identify himself immediately.

This random caller explained how he got the number, his light tone and easy pace filling the car as they drove down the road. Young engaged, offering a pleasant greeting as he gave room for who was calling to be revealed organically. The suspense was killing him. But Young didn't want to just jump in with a "Who dis?" After all, it could be new business for the chef.

Food Vision had been growing in popularity around the Phoenix community and attracts a wide range of customers. Many of them are athletes. He knew in the back of his mind this could be another one, but no way in the world he could know which one. So Chef Ron played it cool.

“I heard you cooked for my nephew. Why don’t you come by the house and cook for me and my family?”

“This is Mike Bibby, by the way.”

That afternoon, Young landed another new client, a surprisingly swole former NBA point guard who also happened to be one of the best to ever play at the University of Arizona. Floored by Bibby’s request, Young immediately pulled over at a nearby Chevron gas station to give Bibby his full attention. Of course, he accepted his offer.

Not long after that initial conversation, Chef Ron was at Bibby’s home in Scottsdale.

Bibby doesn’t eat vegetables, period. Not for his wife, not for anyone. If he even sees vegetables touching his food, he won’t eat it. So Young kept things simple that evening and cooked steak and potatoes (botanically classified as vegetables). Nothing spectacular, but it made quite the first impression.

Bibby was impressed by how much care went into his preparation. He could tell Young had an appreciation for the details. He saw the patience and technique. The potatoes were seasoned perfectly. The chicken came off the grill juicy and flavorful, marinated in citrus.

Chef Ron is now Bibby’s personal chef, going on two years now. Young has earned his spot as Bibby’s go-to for all his nutritional needs. He prepares meals at Bibby’s home at least once a week.

“I’m just happy someone of his status even needed me,” Young, 31, said. “I’m a huge basketball fan and the fact that Mike Bibby was calling my phone was a huge deal for me.”



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Young has a magnetism. These players come in contact with him and they like him, they want him around. The same thing happened with Cardinals receiver Michael Floyd.

After Urlacher spread the word and sent business his way, Young got fired from both Nike and Victoria's Secret. They accused him of divided attention, didn't like him making money from his catering business while on the clock. This was shortly after the visit to Urlacher's house.

Since Young was using that income to stay afloat, he had to make a choice: get another gig for some steady income or go all-in with Food Vision. He chose the latter. He devoted all his energy and resources to meal prep and catering. Business was slow until Floyd called out of nowhere.

"He came over to my apartment," Young said. "I had just gotten this apartment and I had nothing in it but a little black Walmart table and some chairs. Still, he would come in and he would order food. He started telling other Cardinals players about me and I started feeding Rodney Gunter and a bunch of other dudes on the Cardinals. They started passing my name around and it started picking up some plug for me as far as advertising."

Young's clientele list has only expanded. He was eventually contracted by a music promoter who paid him to cook for various artists who performed around the Phoenix area. Keith Sweat. The Migos. Neo. Musiq Soulchild. Too \$hort. Keyshia Cole. The list goes on. And in addition to athletes like Bibby, he's also cooked for Byron Murphy Jr., Christian Kirk, Nico Mannion, Jaelen House and countless others.

When Young isn't in the kitchen, he's spending quality time with his two daughters. He dedicates long hours into his craft, but will always be a father first. During his down time, he takes his daughters on adventures to Flagstaff or Sedona. Amusement parks. Water parks. He's more relaxed around them, they goof around a lot. He's a family man, a guy who knows how to have fun.

Young is a huge LA Lakers fan who, like many, grew up a fan of Kobe Bryant. Usain Bolt and Serena Williams are also on his short list of favorite athletes. Outside of basketball, he's more of a fan of players than teams. His allegiances were with the Patriots when Tom Brandy was in New England. Now in Tampa, Young says he'll start rocking with the Buccaneers.



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Working for the stars requires extra. It's more pressure to perform, much less room for error. And as any athlete worth his or her weight in sweat can attest, the No. 1 ability is availability.

That Young can juggle all that in addition to non-celebrity customers while delivering throughout the state is a testament to his hustle. But he built the whole thing on hustle. It's in the DNA of Food Vision.

He's a California native who went to play college football. Alabama A&M, which is nestled almost perfectly in the middle of the 200-mile straight shot between Birmingham and Nashville. He transferred to A&M after two years at Mesa Community College, and the 6-foot converted linebacker played sparingly over his last two years of eligibility.

After impressing a team scout at A&M's pro day, he spent a year on the New York Giants' practice squad in 2010, then played two years professionally in Canada with the B.C. Lions before breaking his collarbone, ending his career. He knew when he was done with football his next move would somehow involve food.

"My mom is Jamaican," Young said. "Food has always been the main staple of our family, so cooking was always something that was always around me."

Young leaned on the culinary classes he took in community college and eventually landed a job at Pure Sushi in Scottsdale. He started off by washing dishes, busing tables, serving — anything they needed him to do. Hustling. After three years he was promoted to sous chef. And when the head chef quit six months later, he took on the title until the restaurant could find a replacement.

A year went by and the restaurant still hadn't found a new replacement head chef. Young asked for a raise after holding it down for that entire time. He said he quit when the restaurant denied his request. That's when he got a job at the Nike Store and Victoria's Secret.

Bills had to be paid. But the entire time he was brainstorming. On a random routine shift one day, he got the idea to start his own business, and that idea quickly evolved into Food Vision. He printed out 1,000 or so business cards and began passing them out during his mall shifts.

"The vision part came first," Young said. "I was just trying to find purpose, and when I realized that food is what I wanted to do, I just tacked on the food part. From there, the vision I was trying to build around in the beginning was to bring families back to the dinner table one meal at a time. It was just kind of that old-school mentality."

Young figured he could be just like an underground rapper. But instead of making fire music, he'd be making fire meals. Anyone who knows about hip-hop knows the road of an underground rapper is long and hard. They toil behind the scenes for years waiting for a break, watching lesser talented rappers get shine. That's what Young envisioned for himself. He was OK with the hard road.

That work ethic is evident now. During the pandemic, Food Vision is taking online orders. Though the meal prep menu changes frequently, its options remain relatively simple: a protein, vegetables and a side. Those orders are often made in bulk. Food Vision also offers catering.

Because of his regulars, Young says business has remained relatively stable in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few have fallen off with their orders here and there, but his regulars, such as Bibby, remain loyal. Young and his team are working full-force Monday through Thursday, and take the remaining three days of the week off to spend time with family.



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Young and his team receive orders from all over. People let him know when they'll be in Phoenix, and he has fresh meals prepared for them that day. Food Vision even offers a delivery service depending on the size of the order, primarily on the West Coast including major cities such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas. He even delivers to Tucson regularly, although most end up driving up to Phoenix to avoid paying a delivery fee.

Young hopes his business remains leveled throughout this pandemic so it can take off running once things return to normal. Keeping the greater Phoenix area fed has become his life's work. Food Vision has given him purpose, and an important role within the community.

If his days on the gridiron taught him anything, it's that cutting corners isn't an option. That discipline is reflected in his precision and readiness for what he's going through right now. He shows up. He puts in the work. He understands the effort it takes to rise to the top — they watch him give it and respect him for it.

“My drive is that I never want to be broke again,” Young said. “Think of that feeling when you're playing basketball and you get hot. I've always been craving that feeling of scoring a touchdown, getting an interception. I've craved that and I was trying to find it in other stuff. That energy I felt as far as making plays and being on top of my game, I found it in food. There's nothing like being with a group of people and you made the food and watch people lick their plates clean because it's so good.”

And that's the pivotal trifecta in the secret to his success. The food. Many of Young's dishes are inspired by Caribbean and Latin influences, a nod to his Jamaican heritage. What makes his meals unique is the time and patience he puts into his preparation. He lets his food sit and marinate for days before he even thinks about cooking it. There's mouthwatering flavor in every bite, complemented by a colorful aesthetic. The flavor is what his customers can't resist.

Young remembers those nights at Alabama A&M selling meals outside his dorm room to make extra money. He'd take a package of chicken, season it well and mix in a few sauce packets to make chicken bowls for his neighbors. Creative, affordable, healthy, but he was only scratching the surface of his culinary talent.

Today, Young has turned cooking into an art form. And he's not done pushing his limits.

(The Athletic *illustration*)

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