

OUR PLACE

*Amani Ayers, from an interview
with Barbara Ester, October 29, 2015*

I was born in Baltimore, MD, and raised by two sisters from South Carolina. They gave me LOVE; they gave me LIFE, and laid a foundation of Southern Culture. I first came to Miami Beach on spring break as a student at Colgate University. My major was Sociology/Anthropology, with a minor in Education. My path led to the optical sales industry, after returning to where I had gone to Weequahic High School in Newark, NJ. My work and home were in New Jersey, but my LIFE was in New York City.

My second trip to Miami Beach was in August 1983. There I met Lori, who operated a juice bar in a health food store on Washington Avenue where I ate every day. I told her that if she ever needed a partner to let me know. Within weeks Lori called and said, "The owner of the health food store passed away, would you be interested in going into a restaurant venture with me?" "Herstory" unfolded as a new chapter of my life began. Everything seemed in perfect alignment for me to make the big move, too. In October 1983, Lori and I opened Our Place.

Within six months, my sweet friend and lover Raquel and her mom moved to Puerto Rico, and Lori and I dissolved our business relationship. Our Place became 100% mine. I was a restaurant owner who didn't know what the hell I was doing, and "nada" about the restaurant business nor raw foods. Thank the Goddess, I was young, smart, eager to learn, and passionately in love with the bohemian, eclectic lifestyle of South Beach. The ocean, sun, sand, palm trees, low rents, and the air itself beckoned me. When I moved to Ocean Drive, I knew I had found myself, my purpose, and the road to my destiny.

Through my prism, it was a great time to be in South Beach (we called it SOBE). It seemed easy as a young Black female from the

North to open a place and do my thing in a city where twenty years earlier it had been impossible. With the support of local politicians, prominent families, the model and film industry growing, many celebrities in various fields of arts and entertainment, business was good. Our Place began strictly as a natural and raw foods juice bar. We served breakfast to dinner, including desserts. In college, my diet had changed to vegetarian, influenced by 1980s politics. By the time I partnered with Lori, I was ready to embrace the whole raw food and vegan world. Although my knowledge of the food industry and restaurant business was nil, I had a good team working with me. When Lori left, I decided to incorporate cooked foods and remain vegan. A year later, we moved to a larger space and expanded our concept. Customers didn't have to be vegan or vegetarian to fall in love with our food; they only have to come hungry and with an open mouth.

When I first moved to SOBE, knowing no one, it seemed like I was the ONLY Black person living on South Beach. I had the only Black American-owned restaurant on South Beach, as well as the only vegan restaurant, and the only lesbian-owned business at that time. Meeting Pat was exciting! I was no longer the only Black person here, and Pat introduced me to countless people, including Maryanne and Louise, who had a lesbian home-based dining experience named Something Special. Maryanne and Louise helped plant the birth of women's events at Our Place. I had the space and the power to do what I wanted. Womyn's Nights began on Wednesdays and shifted to Sunday brunches. We had a variety of programming, including open poetry, original films, raw food classes, guest speakers, political/cultural events, and live performances. Highlights included Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, Alexis De Veaux, Barbara Ester, Flash Silvermoon, Asungi, Helen Glover, and the list goes on. I owe them all so much! Women from WIN (Women in Network) always showed up! The lesbian community as well as many straight women helped make Our Place, our place. One didn't have to be vegetarian or vegan to love

Our Place and didn't have to be gay or lesbian to enjoy the women's events. So many changes occurred in South Beach; SOBE became America's Riviera.

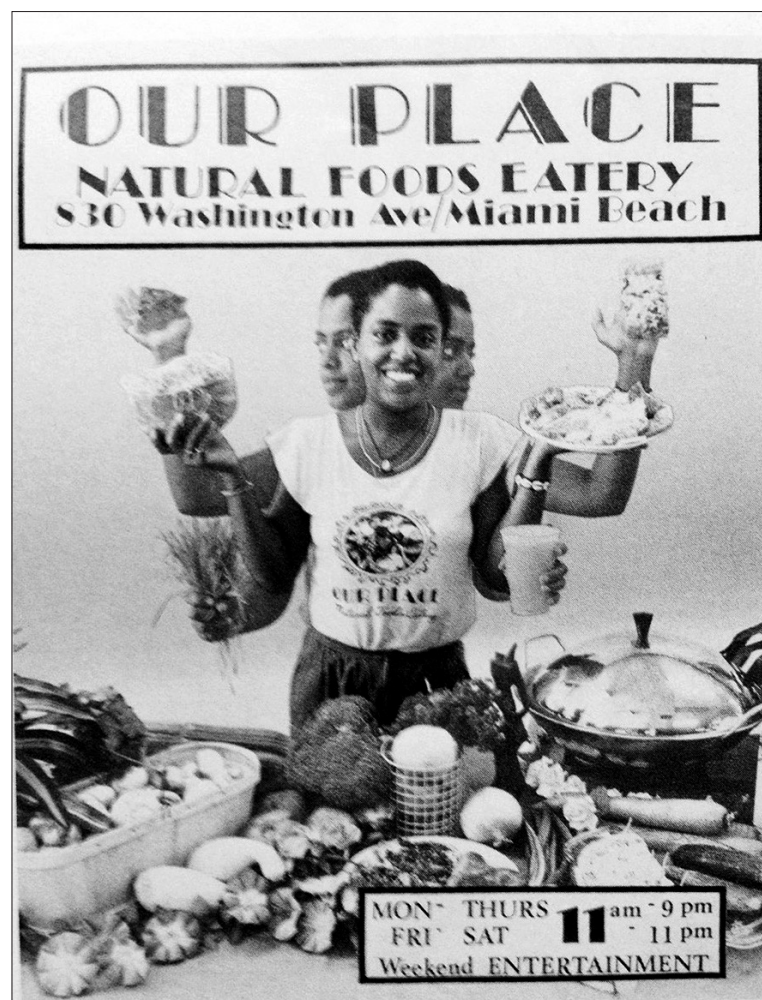


Photo courtesy of Amani Ayers

Our Place Natural Foods Eatery opened in October 1983, South Beach's first vegan restaurant.

I did not own our space and closed after eleven wonderful years. The hand-dipped incense and specialty blended essential/

body oils that had been produced out of my home and sold in Our Place grew into a wholesale business operating out of a Miami warehouse. Life goes on! In retrospect, and now in the real estate business, I should have invested in real estate back then. Our Place fulfilled me in many ways: the variety of programming; as the original home of the South Florida Folk Club, through the mixture of theatre, art, and other events, it was like a mini New York City where I spent seven days a week, twelve hours a day.

I was a business owner with a vegan restaurant, at a time when women's spaces were few. Women's energy was important! EQUALITY is still a big issue for me. As far as we've come and as happy as I am with everything that's happened, it's still all about equality for all of us in every respect: as a Black woman, as a woman, as a lesbian, as an entrepreneur. I have to be me, no matter what I do; I take the whole me wherever I go. It's a package deal! I love people. I love life and making people happy and seeing people happy! Our Place was not about me. It was a place for everyone, hence the name Our Place. I was young and had a whole lot of fun! At heart, that's still me, just a lot older. There are so many wonderful women whom I am filled with sincere gratitude for all their blessings! To J, Nina, V, and all those unnamed, but never forgotten! THANK YOU!