The meeting of the Powhatan tribe and the English settlers centuries ago is what now known as Jamestown marked the birth of American culinary traditions. The first settlers established the intempering of European traditions and food ways with those of the Native Americans all along the Atlantic coast in early settlements. Although the settlers brought with them various foods and animals, they soon found themselves interacting with New World foods. This interaction changed their diet and highlighted the stratification of wealth among the settlers. And as the ship's entries were known as 'hogs', cattle, goats, sheep and chickens, as well as pigs, they brought apples, turnips and cabbage, they brought wine, brandy, and rum made by the—this was the rest provided by the New World (Egerton 11).

The first settlers to colonize America were primarily male, but when African slaves and women began arriving ashore, the colonies were quickly transformed into a permanent living community, rather than one used simply for trade, and the focus on the social aspect of living was intensified (Egerton 13). As Spanish settlers scoured the Caribbean setting up base camps for exploratory adventures, the first permanent settlement in the United States emerged in St. Augustine, Florida in 1565 where cooking techniques—barbecue— and cooperative live stock raising with the Pueblo Indians shaped the nature of the Spanish settlements (“Spanish” 1). Perhaps the most important was the adaptation of barbecue as a means to slowly smoke meats into what we now refer to as barbeque.

Throughout the colonies, foods were beginning to take on a distinct nature as influences from European settlers, African slaves, and Native Americans were seen throughout the kitchen. In the English colonies “most cooking was done in the open fire place in pots and kettles brought from Europe,” while the upper class used several of these for each meal, the poor layer class would have only one pot or kettle to cook a meal in, decreasing the quantity and substance involved (Egerton 14). Without refrigeration to preserve foods, colonial had to rely on smoking or salting their meats and eating only the available fruits and vegetables in season. These foods were prepared using many of the same cooking techniques we use today, including frying, roasting, baking and boiling—and the content of what was consumed still lines our grocery shelves: beef, lamb, pork, chicken, fish, vegetables, and baked goods, with seasonings like swine was still hanging, an incision was made down the entirety of the back and On the day of butchering, scalding meat would have a sweet taste but would be essentially useless all of the hairs lining its body. In order to remove the hair, one would either pull it off or scrape it off with a process. It was typically killed by a swift blow to the head with either a rock or an axe head, or the swine was shot with water. Heated rocks would be set into a stone furnace. The bowl would be filled with water first, then the farmer would build a fire in the furnace. The bowl would be placed inside, allowing ample time to heat the water as the hog was killed. People would have an oil drum that was tipped on its side and filled halfway with water. Heated rocks could be set within the water in order to warm it up. Lastly, others would simply heat water on their stoves and pour it over the carcass of the swine directly (Wigginton 198). Hog Killing by Katrin Schlosser Pork has been an important part of the Southerner’s diet since colonial times. The way pork was killed was a way for Southerners to not only provide for their own family but for others as well. The hog was an important source of food because the entire hog was useful in some form or another. “The animal [hog] did not offer its owner milk or the ability to carry burdens, but nearly all of the pig was edible or useful in some manner of cooking: hams, ribs, head (for sausage), feet, internal organs ( intestines for chitterlings), and lard or tallow (as grease or seasoning)” (Bass). This is a prime example of the utility of the entire swine. Hog killing was a profitable business, and it has always been prominent in the South (Bass). They were open range animals, and they initially outnumbered people, hence their popularity in the food chain (Thompson). As hogs ranged freely across the land, eating an assortment of nuts found on the forest floor, farmers quickly learned the taste of the creature was sacrificed. For instance, if a hog were to eat numerous chestnuts, their meat would have a sweet taste but would be essentially useless for white lard. Additionally, if a hog were to eat acorns, their taste was bitter and the consistency of their fat was altered. Therefore, farmers would bring the pigs that were going to be slaughtered down to the farm anywhere from a week to a month beforehand. They would be fed a steady diet of corn and this allowed for the familiar taste of pork that everyone knew and loved (Wigginton 189).

The slaughtering of a hog would typically take place in late November. This time was better because the weather was becoming colder and would stay that way. Because freezers were virtually unheard of, the cold weather was important to farmers in order to keep the meat while it was fresh. Everything was done at the home of the farmer, and the process was a grueling one (Wigginton 189).

On the day of butchering, scalding hot water was prepared for the hog. There were a few different ways of preparing this water. Some people had a cast-iron bowl that was approximately four feet in diameter that would be set into a stone furnace. The bowl would be filled with water first, then the farmer would build a fire in the furnace. The bowl would be placed inside, allowing ample time to heat the water as the hog was killed. Others would have an oil drum that was tipped on its side and filled halfway with water. Heated rocks could be set within the water in order to warm it up. Lastly, others would simply heat water on their stoves and pour it over the carcass of the swine directly (Wigginton 190). Hog Killing by Katrin Schlosser

The killing of the hog was a quick process. It was typically killed by a swift blow to the head with either a rock or an axe head, or the swine was shot into the back of the head or between the eyes. As soon as this was done, the jugular vein was immediately cut open in order to help drain most of the blood from the body. When the bleeding had slowed, the swine’s carcass would be placed into the hot water then rolled over in order to loosen all of the hairs lining its body. In order to remove the hair, one would either pull it off or scrape it off with a utensil such as a knife. This process was continued until all of the hair was removed from the carcass. If the hog was left in the water for extended periods of time, the hair would set in the body and become harder to remove (Wigginton 192).

Once the hair was removed, the hog’s hamstring were exposed and a single tree was placed behind the exposed muscles in order to keep the hog onto a pole that was placed securely in the forks of two oaks. This would leave the hog dangling with the stomach exposed. At this point, hot water was poured over places that had not yet been cleaned to remove all other debris. Once this was finished, the neck was cut at the base of all the hair lining its body. In order to remove the hair, one would either pull it off or scrape it off with a utensil such as a knife. This process was continued until all of the hair was removed from the carcass. If the hog was left in the water for extended periods of time, the hair would set in the body and become harder to remove (Wigginton 192).

Once the remaining blood finished draining, an incision was made down the underside of the pig. It went from the crotch all the way up to the base of two other trees. This incision was made down the entire length of the body and the backbone. The hog was then placed onto a hard surface where its body would be cut into slabs of meat. The tenderloin was the first section to go, followed by the two sections of rib meat. The rest of the pig remaining would be cut up accordingly. Traditionally, the backbones and ribs are usually eaten. The tenderloin would be cooked at once, along...
Both food and religion are very important in the South, so important that in her essay on Religion and Food, Corrie Normand claims, “church food is southern food in the South” (3). There are many different ways in which we can see food and religion coming together in the South. These can be seen in stories in the Bible, in the Church services, and in the activities of the congregation away from the services. From religious based rituals to community based rituals, “food is high symbolic, and food rituals exist in most religions” (Normand 5). This translates into a stronger sense of community in the church congregation by bringing people together to both prepare and eat the food.

The first place where we can see food and religion coming together is in several Bible stories and teachings that center around meals and food practices. An example of one of these teachings is in the practices of Lent. In the true following of Lent, one is to fast during entire the season. In some cases this fasting is to mean to not eat during the daytime, while others will only eat one meal each day. Many people decide to instead fast from one particular food during Lent. However, Catholics and similar denominations refrain from eating meat on Fridays no matter what, even extending beyond the season of Lent (“Food culture and religion”). The most important Christian food ritual recreates the Christ’s Last Supper. During this meal, Jesus is brought bread and a glass of wine, and he told his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me.” This translates into the celebration of Communion. In the Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran churches, the Eucharist is eaten every week, and they also believe in the transubstantiation – the belief that the bread and wine are literally transformed into the body and blood of Jesus when they are consumed. Many southern Protestant churches observe Communion less frequently. This change is significant because it deemphasizes the importance of the religious food ritual.

The emphasis in Baptist and Methodist churches seems to differ from the traditional influences of church food. In the South, the first thing that most people think of when they hear the phrase “church food” are the Sunday afternoon suppers or Wednesday night family dinners at their own church. These meals tend to be potluck or covered dish affairs. Church dinners create a stronger sense of community in the Church congregation than grocery stores or supermarkets. Without the costs related to shipping and packaging, the food they sell today is also significant in personal lives. Church food allows people to develop a stronger sense of community as a whole, and to find their place in that community.

There are a few different ways in which the stereotypical church dinner originated. One of these origins is from the evangelical camp meetings of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These meetings lasted from all day to all weekend. The attendees would eat picnics of food that they had prepared at their homes, and brought with them. Usually the meal would be prepared from ingredients that were grown or raised by the family or in the community. This would add to the sense of community in two ways. One, they were from a certain farm or garden, then they would be bringing their unique product to the table for everyone to enjoy. If they used ingredients from various members of the community, then the dish or meal would literally be a blend of different elements of the community. This blending also helps the people together and strengthen the community. This feeling of community also takes place between the women preparing the meals. As time moved on, people continued to have picnics on the church grounds, however it became encouraged to bring enough to share, and then people would be expected to serve meals to others. These church potluck suppers create a strong sense of community, which can be seen in the homeowners and other large celebration meals where “in one mill village [the church] has only 60 members today; but over 300 ‘came home’ to its recent homecoming celebration” (Norman 5).

African-American African markets also incorporate food into fellow church food. In 1967, Joanne Wilkins-Forson explains in Building Houses out of Chicken legs that, “having spent most of the entire day in church, ... many congregants would not have the time to travel home and back to make it to the late evening service.” Because of most of the country churches were also devoid of any form of kitchen facilities, women would prepare the meals at home, and during a break in the service, would spread their meals on blankets and other coverings to serve” (136). The act of preparing these meals together and the signify of (back and forth) going that centers on “the meal is a way of creating a stronger community among the women in the kitchen. The meals prepared by this small community ‘allowed worshipers to enjoy not only the fellowship of the spirit but also the fellowship of the members whom they would see only during these occasions’ (136).

Food plays many and a wide variety of roles in church life. It is important in following and staying connected to one's own religious faith by following teachings concerning food, such as Lent and Communion. However, it is also significant in personal lives. Church food allows people to develop a stronger sense of community as a whole, and to find their place in that community.

As Americans’ attitudes toward food have changed radically in the past fifty years. In Georgia, for example, we have transformed from a largely agrarian society to one where many children grow up unaware of how our food is produced. In recent years, we have seen a push back towards localism and organically grown produce. With the development of the local food movement in America, farmers markets have become increasingly popular because they provide many benefits to both the local community and small farmers. There are many different types of farmers markets in the U.S., all with different regulations about the products being sold and not all farmers markets require that food be locally produced or organically grown. Markets similar to those found in the United States can be seen in countries all over the world. Shopping at a local farmers market can be a beneficial solution for those of us who are not blessed with a green thumb or acres of farm land.

Agriculture remains Georgia’s largest industry, contributing 15 percent of the state’s employment and 12 percent of the value added in Georgia’s economy. There are currently about 50,000 active farms in the state, 65% of which are small farms that produce less than $10,000 per year in sales (Flatt). Yet, many small farmers still struggle to make a living. Restaurants and grocery stores no longer turn to local for farm fresh products. The American consumer has no concept of “out of season” produce. Regardless of the time of year, nearly any fruit or vegetable is available in the local grocery store. Our globalizing world allows us to easily ship produce across the country and the world, and this food then becomes available to us year round. These fruits and vegetables rack up frequent flyer miles, yet also have a tremendous impact on the environment. According to Steven L. Hopp in Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, “Each food item in a typical U.S. meal has traveled an average of 1,500 miles...If every U.S. citizen ate just one meat meal (any meat) composed of locally and organically raised meats and produce, we would reduce our country’s oil consumption by over 1.1 million barrels of oil every week” (Kinowski 5).

Farmers markets are not a new creation, but they have been extremely easy to locate a farmers market anywhere in the US through the U.S.D.A’s website or in Georgia through the Georgia Department of Agriculture.

In many countries around the world, open air markets are the norm. A weekly market day is a normal occurrence in cities and towns across the globe. France and other European countries are well known for their street markets. Paris has about 80, each selling its own assortment of unique wares, attracting all different types of customers. Some markets are known for their fish, cheese and bakeries, others for their organically grown food and ecologically correct products (Fayard). Prices vary from market to market based on the quality of the products being sold.

The number of increasing farmers markets in the U.S. indicates a change in the American mindset toward food. Many people have begun turning to local farmers to provide them with fresh food, fresh produce. In the recent years, we have seen a push back towards localism and organically grown produce. Without the costs related to shipping and packaging, consumers receive better quality food at a whole lot cheaper price. It is also extremely easy to locate a farmers market anywhere in the US through the U.S.D.A’s website or in Georgia through the Georgia Department of Agriculture.

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Subsistence Farming
by Kathryn Doornbos


Church Food
by Alison Dorner


Subsistence farming wasn’t always this novel. In fact, for the vast majority of agricultural history it was the most direct and simple means to feed one’s family. Ever since humans settled in the Nile River Valley people sustained themselves from what they could grow on their own land, it was a matter of life or death. Eating food that you are not intimately attached to by means of killing, cultivating, or foraging is a fairly new concept in the spectrum of history. In the American South, the trend towards agribusiness in lieu of subsistence began during Reconstruction. Before that time, rural families provided the vast majorities of their foodstuffs for themselves. Subsistence farming served as an alternative to share-cropping for some, but in most cases it was practiced because there was no other choice. In this era the average farmer supported approximately 25 individuals. Today a single farmer supports an astounding 200 people (Institute). This number takes into account only food products grown in the United States. If we were to factor in the globalized farming model, one farmer would support as many as 850-1000 people. In less than two centuries, we have drastically changed the nature of agriculture and our means of sustenance. Certainly, this change has fostered a new era of convenience and variety. But what have we lost in the transition?

Principally, we have lost cultural awareness of the origins and means by which our food is produced. Subsistence farming requires a family to live in harmony with their surroundings, working with the earth to cultivate a relatively constant supply of sustenance. It requires acute knowledge of the place where one lives, and consistent, dedicated physical labor in order to flourish. Our grocery fueled lifestyle antagonizes all that subsistence supports. We defy the laws of seasonality and freshness by careening fruits and vegetables thousands of miles from farm to supermarket. We forget the man hours and nuances required to raise a vine-ripened tomato. We can “disengage from the places where we live and, instead, rely upon the mythical notion that a place like Tucson, Arizona, a city surrounded by a desert whose water is supplied by a pipeline, even exists is testament to our disengagement from the importance of place” (Kingsolver 32). For eons cities flourished only where the perfect combination of fertile land, ample water, and protective landscapes coalesced. Today we coax them out of nothingness. Maybe that’s okay, but I find it disconcerting.

On a more philosophical level, we have lost a degree of personal sovereignty. We are independently and culturally so deeply invested in the image of the kind and funny black mammy was once comfortable and safe to many white consumers. Aunt Jemima Pancake Ready-Mix was paired with “Aunt Jemima's Historical Timeline.” The Quaker Oats Company. (http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2009/mar/01/opinion/chi-perspec0301gardenmar01)

Aunt Jemima has been a prominent symbol in American culture for more than 115 years. In 1889, Christ Rutt and Charles Underwood of the Pearl Milling Company developed the first pancake ready-mix. They used Aunt Jemima as their logo. Tina Gianoulis explains that “the image of the kind and funny black mammy was comforting and safe to many white consumers.” Aunt Jemima Pancake Ready-Mix was paired with the soothing image of a mammy figure, and the overwhelmingly popular image aided the growth of the Pearl Milling Company, which was eventually renamed the Aunt Jemima Mills Company in 1914.

Disappearing boundaries of time, space, and money allowed many families across the nation to acquire certain commodities, such as Aunt Jemima products, that would make the average American life a little easier. The first ready-mix was produced from wheat, corn, rye, and flour. The ingredients’ availability, cheap production costs, and bulky supply families provided with a simple source of sustenance. However, critics have argued over the cultural implications of the Aunt Jemima products for about as long as the product has been in existence. In Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs, Paische Williams-Forson explains how black women were not “a threat to white men’s virility and white women’s bodies, a white man’s own desires for black and white women’s bodies notwithstanding” as opposed to a black man in a domestic setting that could be in direct contact with vulnerable women (38). She further analyzes “how power can be present in even the most mundane objects of our material culture for more than 115 years. In 1889, Christ Rutt and Charles Underwood of the Pearl Milling Company developed the first pancake ready-mix. They used Aunt Jemima as their logo. Tina Gianoulis explains that “the image of the kind and funny black mammy was comforting and safe to many white consumers.” Aunt Jemima Pancake Ready-Mix was paired with the soothing image of a mammy figure, and the overwhelmingly popular image aided the growth of the Pearl Milling Company, which was eventually renamed the Aunt Jemima Mills Company in 1914. Even in the weeks following the new White House garden, national seed companies have seen sales increase by “25-30%” compared to last year (CNN). Perhaps, as a nation, we are realizing that, in the spirit of a well-known Cree proverb, “we cannot eat money.” Subsistence farming shouldn’t be extraordinary or news-worthy; it should be an everyday practice in maintaining a connection with the food we eat, the place we live, and the last shreds of personal sovereignty we afford ourselves.

Works Cited


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Leah Chase
by Erin Garner

Leah Chase is the executive chef and, with her husband, co-owner of Dooky (pronounced ducky) Chase restaurant in New Orleans, Louisiana. She is known as the Southern chef of New Orleans and has fed tourists, celebrities, political leaders and New Orleans residents for the fifth year in a row. In 2000, she hosted a national PBS cooking show, "Cooking with Leah." Her restaurant is famous for many things: its place in civil rights history, the art collection inside, and, of course, Leah's Creole cooking.

"Cooking with Leah." Her restaurant is famous for many things: its place in civil rights history, the art collection inside, and, of course, Leah's Creole cooking.

Leah Chase

She was born in Madisonville, Louisiana, a rural area near the northern side of Lake Pontchartrain in 1923. Because the town had no Catholic high schools for black children and Chase's family wanted her to attend a Catholic school, she moved to New Orleans at age 14 to live with an aunt and attend high school at St. Mary's Academy (Grayson). After graduation, she worked at Colonial Restaurant in the French Quarter—her first taste of the restaurant business. She married Edgar "Dooky" Chase II in 1945. Shortly thereafter, she started working at his parents' restaurant, first as a hostess. She gradually assumed more responsibility in the business, altering the menu to better reflect her Creole heritage (Global Gourmet, History Makers).

Dooky Chase restaurant began as a stand selling homemade po'boys and lottery tickets. By the time Leah began working there in 1946, it had become a sit-down establishment, though the restaurant boasts his husband's name on the door. Leah does all the cooking and Dooky keeps the books (Global Gourmet). However, she has had no classical training as a chef—her recipes are only inspired by her family's meals and her Creole heritage. She does not measure her ingredients, cooking instead by relying on the look and texture of her dishes. Despite her lack of training, she is considered one of the best chefs in the nation, particularly in the South. She does not delegate much in her kitchen, preferring to be as hands-on as possible.

One of Chase's signature dishes at Dooky Chase is gumbo z'herbes, served once a year on Holy Thursday. Traditional gumbo z'herbes recipes are meatless because of Catholic Lenten traditions, and the gumbo is rarely served outside of Lent. Chase's, however, contains several types of meat. Recipes for gumbo z'herbes call for anywhere from five to fifteen different types of greens (Chase's uses nine), but traditional cooks usually use an odd number of greens to bring good luck. Simpler recipes are quite different from traditional gumbo, and many do not call for any sort of thickening agent, such as okra, roux or file. Some are not even served with rice (McGreger). The gumbo z'herbes at Dooky Chase, however, includes file and is served over rice. Though it breaks traditions, Chase is largely responsible for keeping gumbo z'herbes alive. Before she started preparing the dish in her restaurant, the tradition had nearly disappeared from Louisiana's culture. Many who still prepare it are older people, like herself.

Dooky Chase is home to artwork from many notable African-American artists, many living in the New Orleans area. Chase began her art collection by simply hanging posters of fine art prints around her restaurant in the 1970s (MacCay). When she first began collecting original works, Chase would often trade meals for paintings. As her collection and her restaurant grew, she transitioned to paying artists with money instead of food. She has served on the boards of directors for several New Orleans arts and cultural establishments and is a lifetime trustee of the New Orleans Museum of Art. She has even spoken before Congress in favor of greater funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. Some art critics and other collectors have said the collection at Dooky Chase is the best collection of African-American art in the country.

More impressive than the art collection, however, is Dooky Chase's place as a historical part of the civil rights movement. During the 1960s, activists groups would gather to talk about the civil rights movement and eat Creole cuisine at Dooky Chase. People of different races would come to the restaurant and talk about their efforts—where should they hold their next sit-in? How difficult would it be to protest in a certain location? Though such meetings were illegal, the restaurant was so popular that police left the area alone. Though Chase did not participate in the meetings, her role in the civil rights movement was an important one: preparing food to serve to activists groups while they met (Shaban). Many civil rights leaders, including Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr., along with countless other African-American activists, dined at Dooky Chase during the height of the civil rights movement. The restaurant continues to be a political meeting ground (Jenkins). African Americans were a lucrative market during the age of segregation—restaurants serving blacks were rare. Few blacks dined out; many did not even really know what restaurants were about (Jenkins). Restaurants like Dooky Chase, serving both whites and blacks, were even rarer. Chase's restaurant was ahead of its time according to social regulations (not to mention laws prohibiting integrated dining). She built a reputation for herself as a civic leader, a position that brought her surprising popularity among even the wealthiest circles of whites, who became her patrons in the post-civil rights era (Elie). Dooky Chase was one of the first New Orleans restaurants to surpass cultural barriers that pushed people away from certain establishments.

Chase has also served notable guests, including Duke Ellington (who convinced Chase to serve his favorite beer, Heineken), Ray Charles, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, and President Barack Obama during his presidential campaign (Global Gourmet). For her community involvement with the arts and her role in the fight for civil rights, Chase has earned several prestigious awards, including the Loving Cup Award in 1997 from the New Orleans Times-Picayune, the Outstanding Woman Award from the National Council of Negro Women and a series of NAACP awards.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in September 2005, Dooky Chase filled with five feet of water. Because the restaurant is a historically significant part of the city and a special place for many residents, other members of the New Orleans restaurant community helped 86-year-old Leah reopen her restaurant. Other restaurateurs hosted a benefit in the French Quarter to raise money for Dooky Chase to reopen, complete with Leah's gumbo. Their efforts raised over $60,000 to help the Chase reopen their establishment in 2007. The Southern Foodways Alliance was responsible for much of the fundraising, and Starbucks donated $150,000 toward the renovations (Severson).

In 2007, Chase served a meal to President George W. Bush, a gesture not well received by many in the New Orleans community. Many New Orleans residents, including Chase herself, were living in FEMA trailers in neighborhoods still devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Many felt as though the federal government had not taken enough action toward rebuilding the city and saw Chase's service to the president as a betrayal.

Leah Chase wears many hats—chef, business owner, civil rights leader and artist collector, among others. She is an unofficial ambassador for the city of New Orleans and one of the city's most loved residents. Her legacy is large, and she is famous beyond the culinary world. For over 60 years, she has been serving up some of the best food in Louisiana and much, much more.

Leah Chase’s Gumbo Z’Herbes

1 bunch mustard greens
1 bunch collard greens
1 bunch turnip greens
1 bunch watercress
1 bunch beet tops
1 bunch carrot tops
1/2 head of lettuce
1/2 head of cabbage
1 bunch spinach
3 cups onions, diced
1/2 cup garlic, chopped
1 1/2 glasses water
5 tablespoons flour
1 pound smoked sausage
1 pound ground ham
1 pound hot sausage
1 pound brisket, cubed
1 pound stew meat
1 teaspoon thyme leaves
Salt and cayenne pepper to taste
1 tablespoon file powder

Clean greens under cold running water, making sure to pick out bad leaves. Rinse away any soil or grit. The greens should be washed 2 to 3 times. Chop greens coarsely and place in 12- quart pot along with onions, garlic and water. Bring mixture to a rolling boil, reduce to simmer, cover and cook for 30 minutes.

Strain greens and reserve liquid. Place greens in bowl of a food processor and puree or chop in meat grinder, giving greens a mixture into a bowl, sprinkle in 5 tablespoons flour, blend and set aside.

Dice all meats into 1-inch pieces and place into the 12-quart pot. Return the reserved liquid to the pot and bring to a low boil, cover and cook 30 minutes. Add pureed greens; thyme and season with salt and pepper. Cover and continue to simmer, stirring occasionally until meat is tender, approximately 1 hour. Add water if necessary to retain volume. Add file powder, stir well and adjust salt and pepper if necessary. Serves 8 to 10 over steamed rice.

From the Associated Press.

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Sharecropping
by Jay Hood

Following the ratification of the 13th amendment, the South experienced the sudden creation of an un-employed work force of 4.5 million former slaves, most of whom were illiterate and had no skills other than agricultural cultivation. After the Civil War, southerners still relied on agriculture as their primary source of economic sustenance. Southern landowners employed former slaves along with poor whites to work the land as part of a system that disenfranchised the uneducated laborers by exploiting their ignorance of contract law. By hiring themselves and their families to a land owner, laborers inadvertently tied themselves to the land in an almost inescapable cyclical system of debt. These individuals became what are generally known as tenant farmers. Charles Aiken explains that “three basic types of farm tenants existed in the Southern plantation regions during the last quarter of the century following the Civil War—cropper, share, and cash. A cropper, also called a sharecropper, owned no farm implements or work stock. All that a sharecropper contributed to the production of a crop was labor, including that of his or her family” (Aiken 29-32). Sharecropping quickly supplanted slavery as the South’s source of cheap, expendable labor, and the majority of the victims were newly freed slaves.

The system of sharecropping seemed to be a simple way for a destitute farmer to provide for himself and his family. The system appealed to landless laborers because “under customary rental agreements the landlord and the sharecropper split the crop fifty-fifty. Each also paid for half of the fertilizer, insecticide, ginning, and other production costs” for whatever the sharecropper would need to work the land (Aiken 32). Rather than growing food for his family, however, the sharecropper would be required to exclusively grow cotton or another cash crop. If not, “landlords could exploit their right to refuse to renew the lease at the end of the season as a means of exerting pressure on sharecroppers” (Royce 182). At the end of the year, the sharecropper would harvest his crop and give it to the landlord to take to market and sell, and the laborer would receive anywhere between one half and one third of the remaining sum, after the landlord subtracts the cost of supplies. Frequently, the cost of supplies and food purchased in the landlord’s commissary would exceed the value of the crop. This drove many families into a cycle of inescapable debt, tying them to the land like the slaves they were intended to replace.

This cycle, sometimes described as a “crop-rhythmic” or “crop-cyclical,” became even more common after cotton became a major crop in the Southern economy. Having sold for 43 cents in 1866, by 1882 cotton had fallen to 10 cents per pound. Cotton in and of itself is difficult to grow, requiring a long frost-free period, plenty of sunlight, moderate rain, and a fertile, nutrient-rich soil. Soil depletion, drought, and poor farming practices significantly reduced the yield per acre. But cotton remained the South’s most valuable crop until the boll weevil entered America’s cotton belt just prior to the 1920s. Within a few years, the pest cost the South 13 billion dollars in lost crops.

Before the emergence of sharecropping, slaves and other laborers typically ate the same kind of food every day: some kind of corn based food, such as cornbread or cornmeal, salted pork or fat back, and molasses. Many of these foods contained the proteins containing the essential amino acid tryptophan. Because tryptophan can be converted into niacin, foods with tryptophan but without niacin, such as milk, prevent pellagra.

Given the sharecropper diet of cornmeal, salted pork, and molasses, most children were without the essential vitamins and minerals required for healthy bodily development or a strong immune system. Sharecroppers, who usually did not have cows of their own, would have to purchase milk on credit from a merchant or from their contractor. Whenever the child of a sharecropper became afflicted with pellagra, it would often result in one of the two sharecropper's family: the death of the child, or even greater debt (Ngn).

The greatest victims of sharecropping as an institution were not the laborers, but their children. Often made to work in the fields with their fathers, and mothers, these undernourished and drastically undereducated children became a part of this cycle of destitution. Without any knowledge of any practice beyond farming, the children of sharecroppers would soon enough become sharecroppers themselves. They grew up in close proximity to their siblings and parents, without privacy, warmth, or cleanliness. The building likely consisted of little more than a large, single room, with bed, table, fireplace, and, if the family was fortunate enough, a stove. An outhouse, more similar to a latrine than anything else, would be the family’s restroom.

As a cultural institution, sharecropping all too effectively demonstrates the way in which poor, desperate people can be victimized by the dubious and wealthy into a system of debt peonage that makes any sort of improvement in the lives of the impoverished impossible. Along with slavery, sharecropping is an example of the many ways in which the greed of a few can lead to the suffering of many.

Works Cited:

Farm Security Administration Photographs by Carl Lewis

"Eat something—even if you're not hungry—because you never know when you might get hungry, and you don't know what it's like to be hungry" my great-grandmother Nonnie used to tell me as a boy. Even as a stubborn and picky kid of the consumer-driven 1990s, I dared not question Nonnie. She knew what she was talking about. Nonnie had suffered through her fair share of hunger growing up as the eldest daughter of a penniless Georgia sharecropper in the Depression-era South, and I had heard all the family stories to prove it.

Nonnie’s story is nothing unique, however. It is just one of the thousands of stories of a vast epidemic of southern rural poverty in the 1930s that left one-third of the nation “ill-housed, ill-clad, and illnourished.” In the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s second inaugural address. The economic crisis in the South was not simply a product of the Great Depression. External factors, including the growth of farm tenancy and sharecropping and widespread infertility of the soil caused by the irresponsible long-term growing of cash crops, put families across the South in dire economic straits. In fact, by 1930, more than 80 percent of southern farmers were left farming someone else’s land, making very little money doing it (Godden 10).

For the better part of the early twentieth-century, mainstream America most overlooked the South’s economic problem. Instead, Americans generally bought into what historian Sidney Baldwin calls the “agrarian myth” that “tended either to deny the existence of poverty altogether, or to explain it away” (Baldwin 22). In simpler terms, most Americans mistakenly held the opinion that “the South did not have poor people; it had farming people, and farming people could never truly be poor” (Owen 1). As books documenting rural poverty like Erskine Caldwell’s Tobacco Road and John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath became popular on a national level, however, the reference to widespread impoverishment came into clearer focus. Depression-era economic studies of the “South’s number one economic problem” were commissioned by the Farm Security Administration in 1935, which was later renamed to the Farm Security Administration in 1937. The Administration’s primary goal was to put farmers back on its feet by making loans to individual farmers and constructing planned suburban communities (“FSA-OWI: About the Collection” n. pag.).

To document the progress of the Administration’s various revitalization efforts, the FSA commissioned a team of roughly twenty photographers, led by Roy Stryker, assigned on location across the South. As FSA photographer Arthur Rothstein later recalled, “It was our job to document the problems so that we could justify the New Deal legislation that was designed to alleviate them” (Poska II). In a short matter of time, however, the photographers realized that the problem was “not the South” but the white farmers in the Delta. As FSA photographers began to depict the poverty of the white farmers, “a sense of human suffering on a level hitherto unknown” started to emerge in their photographs (Poska II).

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Courts when many of them had serious reservations about the FSA's documentary work. As Kidd puts it, they were often "uneven specimens and reluctant icons" (Kidd 31). In countless fact, in at least one instance, the subject of an FSA photograph spoke out against the unpermitted use of her image in a negative and inaccurate light. Mrs. Reed, the woman captured in photographer Dorothea Lange's famous "Migrant Madonna" portrait, lied suit against the Curtis Publishing Company in 1939 for the publication of her image in the Saturday Evening Post (Kidd 40).

Absentmindedly from among the FSA's collection are pictures of African-Americans. While the collection does provide a brief glimpse into black southern life during the 1930s, it focuses much more heavily on white poverty than it does black life. In her book Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs, Psych Williams-Forton points out that even when African-Americans are portrayed in FSA photographs, the manner in which they are presented often falls into stereotypes. For example, a search of the FSA's collection on the Library of Congress website yields only 23 results for the term "negro eating." When the term "negro cooking" is entered, however, 138 results are returned. The considerable pictures of African-Americans in cooking comparison to consuming food perpetuates the stereotype that blacks belong in the kitchen, not the dining room. To compound the problem, only a small handful of the FSA photographs accomplish anything in the way of speaking out against racial injustice and violence. As historian Nicholas Natanson comments, "If the shadow of poverty hung heavily over blacks in the FSA file, the shadow of terror was all but nonexistent!" (Apel 155).

However one wishes to view the images file—as either exploitation and overgeneralization or bestialization and idealization of the southern underclass—one thing remains true: The images captured by the Farm Security Administration provide a lasting portrait of a people in hardship, a portrait that still contributes to many popular conceptions today.

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The mammy archetype takes form in many mediums, but in all of them, her visage remains the same. In *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders lays out a definition of the mammy, "Mammy's body is grotesquely marked by excess: she is usually extremely overweight, her skin is nearly black. She manages to be a jolly presence—she often sings or tells stories while she works—and a strict disciplinarian. First as a slave, then as a free woman, the mammy is largely associated with the care of white children or depicted with noticeable attachment to white children" (Wallace-Sanders 6). Other common attributes include loyalty, deep God-fearing principles, and a general lack of sexuality. Significantly, this archetype rose to prominence in the mid-1850s, which was the tail-end of the antebellum period. This is significant because the survival of the mammy archetype depends greatly on distorted southern memory, rather than documented history, for its recognition to continue. The history and understanding of the mammy is most accessible through her appearances in entertainment, marketing, politics, and myth.

Mammies by Eleta Andrews

The mammy archetype made headlines in 1923 when a Mississippi senator and a Virginia chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy suggested that a statue commemorating the black mammy of the Old South should be erected and placed in the Capitol building. This idea quickly lost favor by the majority of the legislature, but the suggestion tells a unique story about the exception of the mammy in a time of turbulent race relations. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, a social group which honors the men who fought for the Old South, wanted a statue that revered a double minority: an African-American woman. It is significant, however, that these women wanted the mammy figure as opposed to any other African-American actual person or stereotype; the mammy was loyal, docile, and non-threatening, and she supposedly held together the fabric of the glorified Old South. Wallace-Sanders writes:

> Her large dark body and her round smiling face tower over our imaginations, causing more accurate representations of African-American women to wither in her shadow. The mammy's stereotypical attributes—her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her cautious laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites—all point to a long lasting dream of the past.

The idea of the non-threatening mammy has been researched and analyzed by both African-American and White American scholars. For example, a search of the FSA's collection on the Library of Congress website yields only 23 results for the term "negro eating." When the term "negro cooking" is entered, however, 138 results are returned. The considerable pictures of African-Americans in cooking comparison to consuming food perpetuates the stereotype that blacks belong in the kitchen, not the dining room. To compound the problem, only a small handful of the FSA photographs accomplish anything in the way of speaking out against racial injustice and violence. As historian Nicholas Natanson comments, "If the shadow of poverty hung heavily over blacks in the FSA file, the shadow of terror was all but nonexistent!" (Apel 155).

While many scholars label the mammy figure as a myth, the Works Progress Administration narratives suggest that, although this figure has been exaggerated, there were many slave women who took care of white children. By serving as wet nurses and child caregivers, some of these women did form bonds with their masters' children, and this pattern of black women tending white children continued for several generations. The difference is that the existence of mammy's in white memory is the image that continued in entertainment, marketing, politics, and myth, the white becoming more exaggerated and turning one image into the myth that still exists today in the public culture.

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Minstrel Shows

The Minstrel shows were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the United States during the 19th century. These shows were first performed in the 1830s and became immensely popular. They were a form of vaudeville that featured performances by African-Americans, who would dress in blackface and sing songs and perform dances that were intended to entertain the white audience. These shows were often accompanied by a band and included a variety of acts, such as acrobatics, pantomime, and comedy skits. The minstrel shows were not only popular but also controversial, as they were often criticized for perpetuating stereotypes of African-Americans.

Several characters that would typically appear in the shows, and they all followed the same general outline of a "typical" slave family. The head of the black family was commonly referred to as Old uncle or Old daddy. His counterpart within the family was the mammy or old auntie. There were other small family roles played, but one of the larger roles was the character that...
Jim Crow would always seem to fail and prove that he was not of competition to the white race. Another common character in almost all minstrel shows was the character of Jim Crow, whose name attached to the set of laws that separated the races. “Jim Crow” was a song written by Thomas “Daddy” Rice about an old singing slave.

“Wheel about, an’ turn about, an’ do as is so; 'B'ry time I wheel about, I jump Jim Crow.”

It was through these performances that several common misconceptions about the African American race were introduced into the American way of thinking. Lazy, loud, musical, uneducated: these were all examples of the stereotypes that were started through the various acts of the minstrel shows. In many instances, the African American society as a whole was expected to live up to these stereotypes or risk punishment by whites. These stereotypes stuck with the African American race for a good half of the 20th century. Through the various blackface sketches, the characters introduced several misconceptions about the society as a whole. In Building Houses out of Chicken Legs, for example, Phoebe Williams-Forson discusses the idea that black men were thought to be “Chicken Stealers” based on the character “Jim Crow.”

Minstrel shows also had their impact on other several aspects of the American media. For many years in the early 1900s, cartoon characters resembled performers singing and dancing in blackface. In fact, it has been said that Walt Disney’s original character for Mickey Mouse had several characteristics of a minstrel performer. More recently, Spike Lee’s movie Bamboozled portrayed blackface minstrelsy as a hilarious ratings booster for a struggling TV Network. The show, which was expected to be a failure, surprisingly turned into the nation’s most watched television show. The network soon realizes the ignorance and sense of falseness portrayed by the show and eventually stops airing it. At the very end of the movie, a long mixture of racially demeaning clips from movies of the 20th century are played across the screen, which suggests that the legacy of minstrelsy endures.

Minstrel shows had a huge impact on the American social structures. It has been many years since any such performance, and yet we still find ourselves having the same outlook on certain types of people. Through song, dance, and even cartoon shows, America portrays how an expert stereotype can be developed and perpetuated.

Works Cited


“Southern” Fried Chicken by Jenna Jackson

Many people believe that the practice of frying chicken comes from African Influence. Tribes from West Africa were known for frying whole chickens on special holidays. Hogs and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America by Frederick Opie tells us how African techniques made its way into the southern kitchens of the New World. The Igbo, Hausa, and Mandé people were three West African tribes well known for their frying techniques. Most of them seasoned the chicken and fried it in palm oil, a reddish oil that comes from the palm oil. Since most captives taken into slavery were natives to these West African tribes Opie explains, this practice of frying chicken made it through the slave trade.

American slaves usually had rationed food, but they were sometimes allowed to keep a garden and a few chickens to supplement their daily meals. And slaves working in plantation kitchens introduced frying chicken into white southern cuisine, so the practice persisted. Since Emancipation, fried chicken has been frequently identified with African American cooking, with both positive and negative associations, as Phoebe Williams-Forson explains in Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power.

Frying chicken was once a laborious process. Killing, cleaning, plucking, preparing, and cooking a cooking took a great deal of time and energy. Local markets did not sell chicken pieces, cut, cleaned, plunged, or even dead for sale as they do now. As technology and food preparation improved, frying chicken became a lot easier. More often than not, chicken was pan fried in the early 20th century. Pan frying is a technical skill that requires pouring in an inch or two of grease—animal fat, or some other type of frying oil—then rotating the chicken in the hot fat until golden brown on the outside and done on the inside. This practice is tricky and calls for an expert eye. Some cooks place chickens that is golden brown on the outside in the oven after frying to finish the inside of the chicken. A sign of a novice chicken fryer is a done crust but raw middle. Edna Lewis, an African American cook born in 1916, became well known for her writings on southern cuisine. In her book, The Gift of Southern Cooking, she gives her recipe for southern fried chicken. She calls for buttermilk marinated chicken, dipped in egg, dredged in salted flour, and then pan fried in a mixture of sour cream, sweet butter, and ham.

Somewhere between the 1920s and 1930s deep-frying chicken became more popular. Most commercial restaurants use this method. Pan frying cannot produce more than a few pieces of chicken at a time, and requires a trained eye. Deep frying allows many pieces to be fried and one time, and since most done chicken floats, it is much more efficient to use in restaurants. Because the term deep fry can only be traced to the 1930s, it is unclear when exactly deep-fried chicken emerged. Pressure frying is also a well-known technique, often used by fast food restaurants. It is said to be the most efficient method. When the chicken is put in the pressurized oil, it is instantaneously seared. The moisture from the chicken turns to steam therefore cooking the chicken faster from the inside while still producing a golden crust.

Black women oftenShock, for Sundays and holidays. This tradition gave the chicken the nickname the “gospel bird.” In addition to its ceremonial significance, Phoebe Williams-Forson asserts that provided one economic stability for black families, as well as a source of protein. A great example of the financial support chickens to supplement the women who sold fried chicken to arriving train passengers in Greensboro, Virginia. These women are seen as some of the first black female entrepreneurs. Freed slaves and their descendents used fried chicken for sale marks the beginning of this dish’s rise to the main entrées in souther food.

What exactly constitutes for “southern” fried chicken is a question few people can answer. The Encyclopedia of American Food and Drink defines southern fried chicken as “Chicken parts that are floured and then fried in hot fat. The term southern fried first appeared in print in 1925.” With the information I have compiled, it is hard to define “southern fried chicken” precisely. Is it as simple as chicken fried here in the South? Or should it be defined by the old recipes slaves used initially years and years ago? In my own opinion, I believe that southern fried chicken encompasses a lot of factors. It is more than just the chicken itself. It is the greens and cornbread that come with it. Fried chicken is a product of more than just feel and oil, but of tradition and history. Chicken that is made for the nourishment of a loved one, to celebrate a holiday or to sell for economic survival is essentially southern fried.

Works Cited


Plantation Kitchen by Eva Walton

If the old adage that the “kitchen is the heart of the home” is true, then for the Plantation South, the big house kitchen was the heart of the home. Without the plantation kitchen, and the black women and men who ran them, the Old South could not have existed. In many ways, the plantation kitchen provides a window into the inner-workings of the plantation society through which one may view the complex relationships of the issues of race, class, and gender as they became entwined with one another in front of an open hearth fire. The plantation kitchen became a distinct society within the white, male-dominated Antebellum South where mastery was a symbol of power and was closely linked to one’s status in society stating, “cooks were respected by the black as well as the white folks.”

The Plantation Kitchen from roughly 1820 to the start of the Civil War in 1860 in the South Carolina low country, the “Black,” was the region in which the majority of African American slaves labored in fields of cotton, tobacco, and rice. Away from the fields and “separated from the Big House by only a few yards of boardwalk under foot and a lean-to shelter overhead” (Walker 40) was the plantation kitchen. As a general rule, most plantation kitchens were built away from the main residence for fire protection. The placement of the kitchen as its own physical entity also secured that the “odors, noise, and activity” of the bustling societies “did not filter into the Big House proper,” comments southern historian Eugene Genovese (542). A good plantation kitchen “embraced its roots in Africa and accepts the turmoil of slavery.” Fried chicken is a product of more than just feel and oil, but of tradition and history. Chicken that is made for the nourishment of a loved one, to celebrate a holiday or to sell for economic survival is essentially southern fried.

Working in the plantation kitchen, although might be more a more secure and comfortable existence than working solely in the fields, was no simple endeavor. Cooks in the kitchens, though slaves, “might be highly—or even professionally—trained, or they might have learned at the side of an older cook, possibly their own mother” (Fox-Genovese 158). The kitchen ran on a hierarchy of power, with the chief cook expecting “swift obedience from her helpers, especially from her own daughter [and...few had patience with dropped dishes or fists in the dessert]” in the preparation of the three daily meals and the occasional feast for the family and guests in the quarters. It was the chief cook’s position in the plantation kitchen that was one of the most powerful. She was the “kitchen’s throw much noise and bustle, quarters, confusion,” all under the watchful eye and skilled hand of the chief cook. Representative of the cook’s unique power on the plantation, Genovese notes that it was uncommon to hear the “crack of Mammy’s whip across the back of a stupid, slovenly, or incompetent helper” come from the kitchen door (Genovese 542). Fox-Genovese comments on the status of the cook in the plantation society stating, “cooks were respected by the black as well as the white folks” and that often the chief cook was regarded to by masters as their “right hand man” and were “looked up to” by all the slaves on their respective plantations (Fox-Genovese 160).

As master craftsmen and craftspeople, plantation cooks handled the technology of the kitchens with skill and ease. As a general rule, most cooking was done in a large open-hearth fireplace sometimes with stoves of wood or to “twelve feet high” (Fox-Genovese 160), although a rare exception was a tenant powerful enough to furnish an iron cook stove for his cook’s purposes. Inside the fireplace, a multitude of cast-iron pots hung above...
It was so popular, Georgia currently evidence suggests that the Igbo and Mande were farmer to
Interestingly, peaches, but most researches amount of cotton in the South, farmers had
raccoon meat, fried chicken cooked in the fire by iron hooks. African foodways, particularly West
People of several regions of the United States eat African and African American related foods during social and religious events. As a result of the slave trade, West Africans were forced to migrate to the South. They brought many aspects of their culture that have played a crucial role in the development of southern cuisine. The perceptions of enslaved field hand laborers, nonstop peach cobbler, and never-ending pork from the East allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the region's past and present. The peach is one of the most popular fruits grown in the region, and it has a rich cultural history that is deeply intertwined with African American cuisine.

The diversity of roots and fruits African American cuisine and soul food can be traced back to 1619, when the first African Americans were sold in the New World. Over the next two hundred years, more than a million West Africans were shipped to the New World. Before slavery, green peas, and okra were regular staples in the Atlantic Ocean. West Africans were notably well nourished group of people, eating plenty of yams, and milk—a whole range of vitamins and protein similar to meat—and they also consumed an abundance of fish, chicken, lamb, and goat.

The diet these slaves took a drastic turn when they reached the plantation. Slaves were forced to renounce their natural dietary needs in order to survive plantation life by eating the less desirable parts of the pig, which consisted of chitterlings, feet, tail, and jowls, while the master and mistress of the plantation ate the loin which was considered "high on the hog." Despite these scarce conditions, enslaved Africans learned how to "make do" with what they were given. Foods that white people may have considered waste were transformed into decadent and scrumptious works of culinary art by slaves in kitchens composed mostly of hearth fireplace and cast iron pans. Leftovers pieces of pork were used to make sausages, cracking cornbread, and add flavor to various types of greens, peas, and beans. Liquid leftover from cooking greens, commonly known as potlikker, would be used as soup and stock. Eggs, cornmeal, and seasonings were added to leftover fish and fried in it to make croquettes.

These and other culinary customs of slaves made for large meals that were the center of social and religious events such as potluck dinners and Sunday dinners. In my home, food is usually the center of any family affair because it provides conversation and comfort. There isn’t anything more enjoyable than routine Sunday dinners that include my grandmother’s cream corn, oven roasted bacon, fried chicken cooked in previously used vegetable oil, stewed hog mawls, and spicy sauce. These foods not only feed our bodies, but they also feed our souls. The slaves’ implementation of "making nothing out of something" is mostly responsible for the evolution of what most Americans consider southern cuisine and debatable soul food.

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African foodways, particularly West African cuisine, have had a great influence on southern cuisine. Foods that play a crucial role in West African diets have similarities with foods that are considered southern. Historical evidence suggests that the Igbo and Mande were among the largest ethnic groups to arrive in colonial Virginia and the Carolinas. The Igbo people were distinguished for their superb yam cultivating skills and for their use of palm oil for frying. Their use of yams and palm oil to make dishes like yam foofoo was later replaced with making sweet potato dishes and pan frying with pig fat to make fried chicken and cracklings. In addition, they substituted grits for millet porridges. Lobster, crabs, crawfish, fish, and okra also have similar uses in the South and in the Igbo tribe because they are major ingredients in African foods and pivotal in Sub-Saharan Creole dishes such as gumbo and jambalaya.

Similar to the Igbo, the Mande people adapted their cooking techniques to the New World. Mande women adapted to their new environment and learned how to make do with what they had. They would traditionally serve fried chicken with greens and dumplings. This practice has many similarities to the traditional Sunday dinner of an African American family. The innards of the chicken would later be used to make soups similar to enslaved women’s creation of soup, a sauce consisting of leftover portions of a pig. The African-American tradition of eating fried chicken, particularly fried on special occasions, originates from the Igbo and Mande who ate poultry as a part of religious ceremonies.

After nearly four hundred years, the techniques and recipes that enslaved Africans used to create fulfilling dishes are still used in many African American kitchens today. My mother and grandmother, for example, use salt pork to add special flavor to various vegetables. The recipes of my African ancestors continue to play a special role in my American foodways.

The term peaches arouses a delicious aroma of memories, summer days, and pleasant times. Whether eating peaches in a cobbler, with pork tenderloin, as ice cream, or with plain salt, it is easy to reminisce about younger days while enjoying peaches. But the history of peaches and their cultural implications for the South reach much farther than a memory.

There are three different families of peach—clingstone, freestone, and semi-freestone—that are used for different purposes, some for canning some for eating whole. There are conflicting claims on the exact origin of peaches, but most researchers believe peach cultivation began in China, centuries before the birth of Christ. Also, peach was introduced to the European colonies by the Spanish. The peach was named the official fruit of the United States by the President in 1983. The peach is one of the most popular fruits grown in the region, and it has a rich cultural history that is deeply intertwined with African American cuisine.
Cornbread
by John Buckner

When Europeans reached the New World in the 1600s, they faced many struggles, but the most obvious and critical issue was food. The Native Americans introduced them to maize, or corn, which helped the early settlers survive. Since then, corn has continued to be an essential element of the southern diet.

Corn can be ground into meal mixed with water and salt to create simple yet nutritious bread. Though the natives ground the corn with handheld tools to produce cornmeal, later Europeans set up gristmills that could produce larger quantities faster. "Gristmills, or the essential basics of such, that had been around since the Romans," said Mike Buckner, a miller in middle Georgia who operates his family’s eighty-year-old gristmill. Buckner added, "The process hasn’t changed that much. The mill just makes it faster. Round stones are turned using the power of water to crush the corn into meal for cooking."

Cornmeal is commonly used to produce cornbread, but in the early years the bread produced was not quite what we think of today. Native Americans knew how to grind the corn and make flat bread that would have likely resembled a griddlecake or a thin pancake. The mixture of water, cornmeal, and salt could be cooked on a flat rock heated by fire. Cast-iron skillets soon replaced the heated rocks, and over time移动ed cakes such as hoecake changed to woodstoves. By the 1800s, some cooks would use baking soda to make the bread rise when baked. However, the flat, unleavened bread remained a staple, appearing in such forms as johnnycake, johnnycakes, hoecakes and lace bread.

Johnnycake is probably the oldest term used to describe the flat cornbread and, though the name’s origin is disputed, it is possibly a corruption of Shawnee cake (from the Shawnee Indians) or ‘journey cake’ because it was easily prepared by travelers, or possibly based on some old Louisiana French word of way of 'jonakin' or 'jonikin' (Hoecake). The term hoecake is believed to have originated from slaves or agrarian workers who would use a hoe as a flat surface on which to prepare the bread; “this baking process is a facsimile of how African women in Angola and São Tomé baked corn bread wrapped in banana leaves in the centuries of '25,' Buckner states. "I haven’t ever heard of that being done around here, but it wouldn’t surprise me; cornmeal could have easily been taken to the field in a gourd or jug, mixed with water from a nearby creek and cooked on the hoe which would have polished clean from constant use in the soil." Further, he states, "using all the tools available for as many purposes as possible was common practice and if a hoe could be used to prepare food, it probably was. After all, such methods were practical and meant less time away from the field."

Edna Searcy, a 95-year-old daughter of sharecroppers and granddaughter of slaves did not say whether she remembered ever cooking hoecakes directly on a hoe, but she said the term was used to describe the bread even when cooked on the stove. Though, "we mostly ate pone bread," she said. Pone bread is yet another simple but common bread enjoyed by many poor people. Cornmeal, salt, and water are mixed to create a thicker substance than that used for hoecakes. The dough is then kneaded and molded into a shape comparable to a hockey puck and cooked. The term pone may have come from Native Americans who inhabited the Chesapeake Bay region and who were "well known for their bread, called poneap" (20). For many like Searcy and other rural poor people, it was common to use the fireplace and cast-iron cooking pots with lids on which hot coals could be placed to create a small oven for baking bread.

Edna Searcy also said that it was uncommon to make hoecakes. An hoecake is essentially the same as pone bread but instead of being cooked in a pan, ashes in a hot fireplace were brushed out of the way to expose the hot floor on which the bread could be cooked, hence hoecake. With a slight chuckle, Searcy said, "you couldn’t spit in the fire like you can now, you might have to cook bread in it later." When asked if her bread was good, she said, "you had to brush it off, but it was sho-nough good." Pone bread and ashcakes might also have cracklings, bits of crispy pork skin, added for flavor.

Though such terms as ashcakes and hoecakes are less common, people still enjoy cornmeal and the bread as it yields. Today, cornmeal mixed with salt, eggs, baking powder and baking soda and cooked in a well-greased pan creates a delicious treat that has evolved from the crude dish that sustained early settlers and subsequent generations of southerners. Cornbread technology, however, has evolved slowly until very recently. Now, many premixed concoctions appear in grocery stores, and many southerners eat commercially-baked wheat four breads instead of cornbread. But the traditional allure of cornbread endures.

Works Cited

Southern Louisiana
by Jeanette Crawford

Maida Owens, a writer and New Orleans native, states that “in order to fully understand a cultural feature, one must understand the context in which it exists.” This statement seems to hold true in terms of the evolution of food within Southern Louisiana. It is shortsighted to say that Louisiana is culturally diverse. Louisiana possesses a degree of cultural complexity that surpasses most countries. Southern Louisiana’s ethnic culture has been built upon the experiences and explorations in France, French exiles from Acadia and the Caribbean, Spaniards from the Spanish reign, African slaves, and finally English, Irish, and Scottish settlers. Also, to add to the diversity of Louisiana, Southern Louisiana already had Native Americans contributing to the cultural diversity of the area throughout this period.

After establishing the influx of immigration in Louisiana, one may be able to better distinguish the understanding of how Louisiana and Creole food became as unique as it is today. Although these two foods labels may be synonymous, they are distinguished by their origin.

Cajun cuisine derives from an influx of French exiles from Acadia, Canada into South Louisiana. Because these immigrants were poverty stricken, they were forced to live off of what was available. Cajun food contained locally available ingredients due to the family’s financial limitations. Furthermore, because this food contained locally available ingredients, the cuisine was considered very rustic. Preparation was simple and was geared towards feeding a large family. Typically a supplementary duty within any Cajun family was farming. Feeding a large family, all of whose members did physical labor everyday, required a large amount of food. The authentic Cajun meal typically has three dishes. One pot was dedicated to the main dish, which usually consisted some sort of meat needed for protein. The two side dishes were designated for grains and vegetables, depending on what was plentiful at the time. As one can see, the development of Cajun food developed out of necessity. This process hasn’t changed that much, the mill just makes it faster. Round stones are turned using the power of water to crush the corn into meal for cooking.

In light of food being a necessity, it was also food a community event for Cajuns. Events like a Crawfish Boil, where Cajuns boil crawfish, potatoes, onions and corn over largest propane cookers were and still are common. Lemons and mustard bagnes filled with a mixture of bay leaves, mustard seeds, cayenne pepper and other spices were added to the water in the Crawfish boil for seasoning. There is also a traditional pig-slaughtering party, or boucherie, where Cajuns gather to socialize, play music, dance, and of course prepare a pig. Even today, this event takes place in some rural parts of Southern Louisiana.

Although Cajun cuisine originated from a necessity for food, Creole food has its roots in cultural blending. French and Spanish settlers brought this style of cooking to Louisiana. And, although Creole cuisine was founded in soups and sauces from France, it was grafted with a variety of tastes from the Spanish, Native Americans, and Africans. Risa and Richard Collin sum up this division in their New Orleans Cookbook published in 1975 by stating, “in wealthy New Orleans homes most of the older cooks were blacks, whose ancestors had contributed to some of the earliest important Creole dishes, such as gumbo. Those black cooks had an inherited love of spicy food and were adept at preparing old dishes.” Although the French are acclaimed for the creation of the Creole dish, the underlying diversity of the cultures that makes up Louisiana, adds their own finesse to what we know today as Creole food.

One food that crosses this Creole/Cajun barrier line is gumbo. And, more importantly, gumbo reflects a cultural blending, known as Creolization. This dish is closely associated with Southern Louisiana and it mixes African, European, and Native American cultures. The word, gumbo, itself, originates from the African Barth word for okra, okra. Gumbo, usually defined as a soup-like dish featuring two or more meats or seafood and served with rice, is often attributed to the French bouillabaisse, French soup dish, but a preference for soups in Africa seems to have contributed greatly to this food tradition. Ako, Native Americans added file, which is ground sassafras leaves, to the conglomeration of ingredients known as gumbo. (McDonald, Mardi Gras, Gumbo, and Zydeco: Readings in Louisiana Culture)

Gumbo not only tastes good, but it can also reveal a vast amount of historical information as well. By analyzing the different ingredients within gumbo, one can get a sense of where the gumbo was made and even what kind of family made it. For example, seafood gumbo is more common on the coast because seafood is more plentiful there. If one was to find duck, venison, or squirrel in their gumbo, one could assume that it came from the back country of Louisiana, and, moreover, that a hunter was a part of the family that made it. If there is a scoop of potato salad in the gumbo, one could assume that the chef had German influence. If meatless gumbo, or gumbo z’herbes, is on the menu, the family likely has Catholic roots, as the dish is common during Lent.

To appreciate Southern Louisiana’s food fully, one must keep in mind that Cajun and Creole food is a result of three hundred years of continuous sharing and borrowing among the many cultural groups. The French contributed sauces and breads; Africans contributed okra, barbeque, deep fat frying, and a preference for hot sauces; Germans contributed sausages and brown mustard; Caribbean immigrants contributed beans and rice dishes; Native Americans contributed file and a fondness for corn. This melting pot of cultures contributed greatly to the evolution of food. Southern Louisiana has been described as the melting pot of how food is served in New Orleans and in Southern Louisiana is that food is regarded as more than just mere sustenance. Food is relished. . . No matter where you are in Louisiana, the food traditions of families and other cultural groups reveal information about the people. It might be settlement patterns, historical connections, migration patterns, ethnicity, religious or simply family traditions" (Owens, Swapping Stories: Faktales from Louisiana)


Spitzer, Nicholas R. The Smithsonian Institution’s 1985 Festival of American Folklore. 1985.
Several cultural and traditional religious observances hold important holiday, and it is marked with parades, fireworks, festivals, and special foods. An important holiday, New Year’s Day is a sacred holiday, but New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day have become common secular holidays.

My family, like many southern families, celebrates New Year’s Day with black-eyed peas and collards. According to tradition, these foods bring good luck and wealth for the coming year. Some southerners insist on including hog jowls, and one story suggests that the jowl represents a pig and the hoppin’ John with jerked beef represents money and coins. Especially strict followers of the superstition recommend eating exactly 36 peas for each day for the coming year. At least one pea should be left on the plate, too, to leave luck for others.

South Louisianans tend to eat red beans and rice on New Year’s Day, but most southerners eat their peas in the form of hoppin’ John, a mix of peas and rice. This dish has its own peculiar mythology. One theory for its origins, according to The Encyclopedia of American Food and Drink refers to the custom of inviting guest to eat with “the request to ‘hop in, John.’” An equally bizarre theory ascribes to the ritual of having “children hop once around the table before eating,” and the most outlandish cites a crippled minstrel character, called Hoppin’ John. The most likely explanation for the dish’s unusual etymology is that the phrase is actually a corrupt form of “pois pigeon,” the French phrase for pigeon peas. Since the dish is common throughout the Creole Caribbean, this theory seems plausible but far from conclusive.

The dishes’ linguistic history becomes complicated when we consider its anthropological history. James E. McWilliams explains that “some scholars identify it as a strictly West African dish carried to the colonies by slaves from the Congo. Others plausibly suggest an Islamic origin, noting that Senegalese and Nigerian Muslims cooked hoppin’ John with jerked beef rather than verboten pork. Yet another popular theory highlights the influence of the Seminole Indians, as runaway slaves living among the Florida Native Americans may have adapted the dish to Seminole practices, particularly with respect to the incorporation of beans” (131). The convergence of culinary traditions in the South has led to a large number of foods that combine disparate foods and techniques, blending European and African approaches into a uniquely southern cuisine.

Most theories about the southern practice of eating peas and greens on New Year’s Day place its origins in the Old South. One hypothesis suggests that the meal would be the last meal among a slave family before members would begin a new period of hired labor. Many farmers in the antebellum period would rent slave laborers from their owners for terms that ran from New Year’s Day until Christmas Eve. Slaves would return to their homes for a week at Christmas time, and the New Year’s meal would be their final one together. Another theory suggests that peas, which were often planted as fodder for grazing animals, were one of the few abundant foods remaining after the Civil War. The war destroyed much of the South’s food distribution system, so southerners were forced to eat foods previously intended for animals. Attributing a hope for prosperity to the food may have added some dignity to the humble food. Both of these theories play into southern mythology, but the more plausible explanation is much more practical. The simple fare would be available through the winter; peas could be stored dried and greens could grow into the winter if covered or could be preserved in a hill of dry sand.

Both peas and greens flourish in the southern climate. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson both cultivated peas on their plantations in Colonial Virginia, and George Washington Carver promoted peas, as well as peanuts, as a viable crop to both revitalize fields depleted by cotton and to augment the meager southern diet. Greens enjoy an extremely long growing season in the South, especially in the sandy soil along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. Southerners tend to prepare greens by boiling them for an extended period with salted pork, which produces a strong sulfurous odor and a rich broth, known as pot likker—itself an important indigenous cuisine. Non-native southerners frequently describe greens as an acquired taste, and collards themselves have gained a certain degree of cultural significance. They are often mentioned in song, such as the blues standard “Them Greasy Greens,” and the jazz pianist Thelonious Monk sometimes performed while wearing a collard leaf as a beret. Some superstitious southerners believe that a collard leaf hung over the front door of a home can ward off evil.

Beyond the southern tradition, the association between specific foods and the New Year is surprisingly common in Western cultures, many of which have migrated to the United States. On New Year’s Day, Mexican families eat menudo, Polish families eat creamed herring, Dutch families eat apple fritters, Italian families eat sausage and lentils, Austrian families eat pink marzipan pigs, German families eat round rolls called wecken, Swedish families eat cabbage, and Hungarian families eat stuffed cabbage rolls. Almost all of these people the sharing of traditional foods reinforces communal bonds and signifies hope for the coming year.

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