

## INTRODUCTION

I am an African American. My family comes from here and can trace itself on both sides back over much of the period documented in this book. Therefore I know intimately, and am linked by blood to, the tastes of pig meat and cornmeal that are a part of this country's African American culinary heritage. I've spent more than three decades writing about the food of African Americans and how it connects with other cuisines in the hemisphere and around the world, and so I also know that the food of the African continent and its American diaspora continues to remain a culinary unknown for most folks.

The history of African Americans in this country is a lengthy one that begins virtually at the time of exploration. Our often-hyphenated name, in all of its complexity, hints at the intricate mixings of our past. We are a race that never before existed: a cobbled-together admixture of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. We are like no others before us or after us. Involuntarily taken from a homeland, molded in the crucible of enslavement, forged in the fire of disenfranchisement, and tempered by migration, we all too often remain strangers in the only land that is ours. Despite all this, we have created a culinary tradition that has marked the food of this country more than any other. Our culinary history is fraught with all the associations with slavery, race, and class that the United States has to offer. For this reason, the traditional foodways that derive from the history of enslavement that many of us share are often perceived as unhealthy, inelegant, and hopelessly out of sync with the culinary canons that define healthy eating today.

Yet, for centuries, black hands have tended pots, fed babies, and

worked in the kitchens of this country's wealthiest and healthiest. The disrespect for our food and for the people who cook it has been a battle that has raged for decades. *Ebony* magazine's first food editor, Freda DeKnight, wrote about it in the introduction to her 1948 cookbook, *Date with a Dish*: "It is a fallacy, long disproved, that Negro cooks, chefs, caterers, and homemakers can adapt themselves only to the standard Southern dishes, such as fried chicken, greens, corn pone and hot breads." More than a half century after the book's publication, at a period when chefs have become empire builders and media millionaires, that debate still rages. Certainly I will have much to say about slave markets, both those in which my ancestors were sold and others where my ancestors and those like them sold goods that they'd grown and items that they'd prepared. I will speak of scant meals of hog and hominy and of simple folk who became culinary entrepreneurs, like illiterate "Pig Foot" Mary, who created a real estate empire from the food that she cooked on an improvised stove on the back of a baby carriage!

I will also speak of presidential chefs like George Washington's Hercules and Thomas Jefferson's James Hemings and of an alternate African American culinary thread that weaves through the fabric of our food. This parallel thread is a strong one and includes Big House cooks who prepared lavish banquets, caterers who created a culinary co-operative in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century, a legion of black hoteliers and culinary moguls, and a growing black middle and upper class.

My family is a part of that middle class and encapsulates both culinary threads. In 1989, I wrote in *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking*, "Fate has placed me at the juncture of two Black culinary traditions: that of the Big House and that of the rural South." The Jones side of the family always held reunions at table. Early childhood memories are filled with images of groaning boards, of "put up" preserved peaches, seckle pears, and watermelon rinds, of "cool drinks" such as minted lemonade, of freshly baked Parker House rolls and yeast breads. The Harris side of the family were no slouches at "chowing down" either. Grandma Harris insisted on fresh produce, and some of my early memories are of her gardening in a small plot where she lived.

Writing about the food of African Americans connects me to my

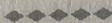
forebearers. On one side of the family was Samuel Philpot, who was born enslaved in Virginia and in his thirties at the time of Emancipation. My mother knew him, and I have several photographs of him, as he lived to be more than one hundred years of age. He was reputed to have been a Big House servant who on one occasion served Abraham Lincoln at supper. He married the daughter of free people of color, settled in Virginia, near Roanoke, and became the progenitor of the Jones side of my family. On the Harris side of the family, my great-grandmother Merendy Anderson had an orchard in the post-Emancipation period where she grew stone fruit—plums, peaches, and more—and sold them to neighbors in her Tennessee town. Closer to me were both of my grandmothers, who embodied the culinary traditions of their families. Grandma Harris cooked little and not particularly well, but she made beaten biscuits and could put a hur-tin' on a mess of greens. She read her Bible and wrote poetry, but was plainspoken, a vestige of her struggle with literacy. Grandma Jones was more eloquent on paper; she'd gone to a women's seminary in Virginia in the late nineteenth century and embodied all the elegance that that state claims at table.

As this book is the direct result of my knowing them, I wrote it as if they'd survived to read it. I have deliberately foresworn the traditional academic format that I teach in order to move the odyssey forward. For *High on the Hog* is a journey into the realm of African American food, but makes no claim at being *the* definitive volume (that copiously annotated, weighty opus has yet to appear and will be the work of another). Rather, this is a personal look at the history of African American food that tells the tale in brief compass, introduces a rich and abundant cast of characters, and presents some of the major themes in a discursive narrative.

Each chapter is—like Gaul—divided into three parts. An introduction sets the stage and presents a personal and present-day look at one of the stops on the journey. The main section of each chapter begins with a chronological presentation of the African American history of the period discussed that raises questions, presents a number of glorious participants, and moves the journey forward. Finally, each chapter ends with a coda that adds a closer look at some aspect of the period's food, much like what is called a *lagniappe* in Louisiana. A collection of recipes—some archival, some from my

cookbooks—follows, presenting many of the key dishes in the African American culinary repertoire. Finally, there is a list of further reading and brief chronological listing of a selection of African American cookbooks for the questing bibliophile.

This book is at the same time a last and a first, as its writing has led me on an odyssey as well as opened doors in my life, my mind, and my soul that I will be entering and investigating in future years as I too attempt to journey from the hock to the ham and take my own life higher on the hog.



Old Master killed about forty or fifty hogs every year. He had John to help him. When he was ready to pay him off he said, “John, here’s your pig head, and pig feet, and pig ears.” John said, “Thank you, boss.”

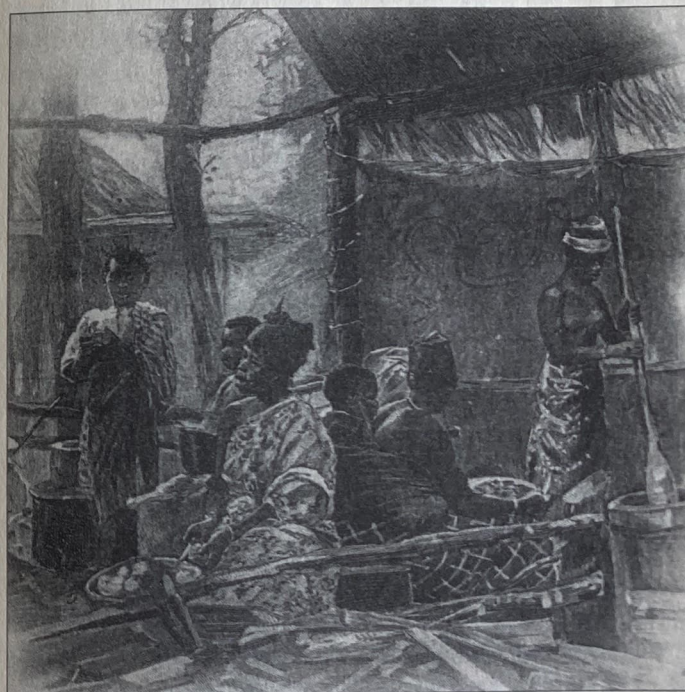
So, John killed hogs for about five years that way; that’s what he got for his pay. Then John moved on back of the place and got himself three hogs. Old Master didn’t even know he had a hog. Next winter at hog-killing time Old Master went down after John. Old Master says, “John.”

John come to the door—“Yessir.” Old Master says, “Be down to the house early in the morning, I want to kill hogs—be there about five-thirty.” John asks, “Well, Old Master, what you paying?” “I’ll pay you like I always did. I’ll give you the head and all the ears, and all the pig’s feet and all the tails.”

John said, “Well, Old Master, I can’t, because I’m eating higher on the hog than that now. I got three hogs of my own an’: I eat spare-ribs, backbone, pork chops, middling, ham, and everything else. I eat high on the hog now!”

CHAPTER 1

OUT OF AFRICA



Foods, Techniques, and Ceremonies  
of the Mother Continent

*Dan-Tokpa Market, Cotonou, Benin, West Africa—*

I visited my first African market with my mother three decades ago. It was a sunny day in Dakar. We had left our hotel, the Croix du Sud, a grand art deco vestige of colonial times, to take a few turns around the European part of the city. Shortly after setting out, we found ourselves in the Marché Kermel, one of the city's many markets. I didn't know it then, but before independence the small bustling market had been designated for use by Europeans. We wandered, looking at the displays, wrinkling our noses at the butchers' stalls. We were fascinated by the flower sellers who jostled each other for position and rather loudly demanded payment for any of the photographs taken. (Indeed they seemed to sell more photographs than bright bouquets of flowers.) Little did I know that my first experience in the Marché Kermel would initiate me into a lifetime of market-love on the African continent and a love of the food that those markets have spawned on both sides of the Atlantic.

I'll never forget that first market visit, but to me the Dan-Tokpa Market in Benin will always be the mother of all African markets. No matter how many visits I make, I am always startled by its vitality and its vibrancy. After years of travel and countless skirts boasting hems stained with market mud from around the African continent, I continue to be amazed at how this large neighborhood market is transformed overnight into a small city of purveyors, each with his own clientele and all trying to hawk their wares.

The Dan-Tokpa Market, or the Tokpa, as it is affectionately known by locals, is a daily market, but every four days it surges into new life and trebles its size to become a *grand marché*. The Tokpa is not solely a food market; everything from brilliantly printed fabric to small and surely incendiary plastic demijohns of gasoline can be purchased. However, the exuberance of the food section and the variety of comestibles sold there speaks to the importance of food on the African continent.

Enormous snails that look like escargots on steroids are piled on mats in one section. In another, the air is pungent with the funk of

dried smoked shrimp that are used for seasoning dishes. Bulging burlap sacks overflow with *gari*, or cassava meal, a major local starch. Earthenware cooking pots and calabash bowls are displayed in all sizes and shapes. Familiar leafy greens, tomatoes, and chilies are sold as well, albeit in different varieties and with unfamiliar names. Everywhere the eye glances there is a celebration of the food of West Africa. In terms of variety, the Topka rivals the exoticism of the souks of Marrakesh and the bazaars of the winding alleyways of Mombasa, Kenya. Yet many of the goods sold—okra, black-eyed peas, watermelon, and more—are familiar and remind me of my American home.

The markets of the African continent are timeless. I collect late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century postcards of African markets and am often amazed and bemused by the similarities of clothing, gesture, and ingredients. Even today, despite the growing proliferation of supermarkets and home freezers among the middle class, there is still a love for the marketplace and the community it creates that will drive even the fanciest West African homemaker to mix with the crowds in search of just the right ingredient.

Over the years, I've also accumulated a mental Rolodex of recipes of West African market food, from the *poisson braisé* (grilled fish) of Benin to the *aloco* (deep-fried bananas) of the Côte d'Ivoire. They include grilled meats that are served up in spicy sauces for busy housewives to carry home in enameled basins and one-pot stews that nourish hungry laborers in from the country. There are also small fried tidbits for after-school snacks and cocktail nibbles for the elite: peanuts roasted on sand-covered griddles, orange-hued fritters dripping with palm oil, and more. The dusty streets of the Topka seem the perfect place to begin this culinary journey. With the food of the African continent on glorious display we can begin to learn how over the course of centuries that food has transformed the cooking and the tastes of the United States.



The cooking of Africa has yet to have its moment on the foodie radar. With the exception of the food of the southern Mediterranean coast and of South Africa, it would seem that we're content to re-

main in the dark about the tastes of the continent. However, those who have tasted *yassa*, the lemon-infused chicken and onion stew served over fluffy white rice, from Senegal, or *kédjenou*, the deep, slow-cooked Ivorian stew of guinea hen, or a freshly caught grilled fish served up with an oniony, tomato-based sauce called *moyau* in Benin know how shortsighted this is. Much African food is tasty indeed. The traditional foods of the African continent may also reflect some of the world's oldest foodways, for, as James L. Newman puts it in *The Peopling of Africa: A Geographic Interpretation*, "all humanity shares a common Africa-forged genetic identity." Some of the continent's food even tastes surprisingly familiar, because, for centuries of forced and voluntary migration, the food of Western Africa has had an influence on the cooking of the world, transforming the taste and the dishes of many nations east and west, few more than the United States.

Current thinking is that the African continent is where man originated. If this is true, it is also where humans first began to forage for food. As early as eighteen thousand years ago, some Nile Valley communities in Upper Egypt made intensive use of vegetable tubers. Later humans began to care for wild grasses as well, but did not establish true cultivation until about the sixth millennium B.C., when people started to domesticate plants and animals and evolved lifestyles that were less nomadic. Many of the crops they cultivated then were native to the continent and are still cultivated today. These include some types of yam, African rice, and cereals such as sorghum and millets. Evidence of early agriculture has even been found within the Sahara, which then had a moister climate. Over time, these peoples migrated south, driven by the increasing desertification of the Sahara. In the western part of the continent, they settled in three different areas, each of which depended on a major grain or foodstuff as the basis for nourishment.

A wide band below the Sahara spanned from Sudan in the east to Senegal in the west and developed around the cultivation of sorghum and several varieties of millet. A coastal area and the Niger Delta region, including what is today Senegal and the Republic of Guinea, depended on rice and *fonio*, a native cereal grass that produces a small mustard-like seed. A third area, also on the coast, ran from today's Côte d'Ivoire through Cameroon and cultivated yams.

These three crucibles—cereals, rice, and yams—also marked three distinct areas from which enslaved Africans were brought to the United States. Each had its own traditional dishes centered on the starch that was its preference. Those from the rice crucible were among some of the earliest transported by the Transatlantic Slave Trade to what would become the United States. They brought with them their knowledge of rice cultivation and their memories of a rice-based cuisine, like that of today's Senegal, where wags say that the Lord's Prayer should be rewritten to say, "Give us this day our daily rice"! Those from the yam crucible arrived later, as the voracious slave trade made its way down the West African coast from Senegal to the Gold Coast, then south to the Bight of Benin and beyond. They saddled the United States with eternal confusion between the New World sweet potato and the Old World tuber whose name it came to bear—the yam. Those from the cereal crucible were inland and therefore not an immediate influence on American tastes until the inception of the slave trade. They depended on millet and on *fonio*, which were traditional, and by the time they were involved in the trade, on large amounts of American corn.

The Western world first began to hear of the food of the sub-Saharan Africa from one who had actually voyaged there in the middle of the fourteenth century. Abdalla Ibn Battuta, a famous Tangerine traveler, left Marrakesh in 1352 to head for Bilad al Sudan (the place of the blacks). He was sent by the sultan of Morocco on a mission to the kingdom of Mali to observe the kingdom that was one of the principle destinations of Berber trade caravans. Like many travelers before and since, he thought of his stomach, wrote often of the food that he encountered on his two-year journey, and became one of the primary recorders of the early foodways of Africa. He reckoned the dates of Sijilmasa in northern Mali some of the sweetest he'd ever encountered and suggested that the dessert was full of truffles (although these were probably some other kind of vegetable fungus). He crossed the Sahara with trade caravans and visited salt mines where the salt came from the earth in huge tablets. He spoke of calabashes decorated with intricate designs that were used as eating and storage vessels. Ibn Battuta's account is of particular interest to those looking at the origins of African American foods and foodways because almost seven hundred years ago he noticed elements

of African foodways that are still reflected today in those of the continent's American descendants. He spoke not only of ingredients and storage vessels but also of cooking techniques, a woman-driven marketplace, a tradition of warm hospitality, and the importance of food in ritual.

Ibn Battuta's journey predated Columbus's voyages by almost a century and a half. By the early years of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, another century and a half later, the African continent had come under the influence of what is now known as the Columbian Exchange. Following Columbus's explorations, a New World larder of foods was unleashed. New World crops like tomatoes, corn, chilies, peanuts, and cassava arrived on the African continent and transformed its cuisine and changed its dining habits. Many of the New World additions, especially corn, chilies, and cassava, have become so emblematic of the continent's cuisine that it is almost impossible to imagine its dishes without them.

Not only the foodstuff made its way across the Atlantic; so did the basic cooking techniques. Whether frying, steaming in leaves, grilling, roasting, baking, or boiling, they could be duplicated using the hearth that was the European culinary standard. Cooking was done using flame, charcoal, and ash. There was no sautéing or braising, and most traditional dishes, while possibly elaborate in ingredients or preparation, relied on some form of live fire until fairly recently. From Morocco in the north to South Africa, from Kenya in the east to Cameroon in the west, the continent's traditional dishes tended to be variations on the theme of a soupy stew over a starch or a grilled or fried animal protein accompanied by a vegetable sauce and/or a starch. The starch changed from the couscous described by Ibn Battuta to millet couscous known as *tiéré* in Mali to the banana-leaf-wrapped fermented corn paste known as *kenkey* in Ghana or its pounded plantain variant, *akankye*. It might even be the plain white rice accompanying the *yassa* in Senegal. The stew might be served over the starch or the starch might be formed into balls, broken into bits, or scooped up with the fingers and dipped or sopped. It has been that way for centuries and remains that way today. Any Southerner who has ever sopped the potlikker from a mess of greens with a piece of cornbread would be right at home.

Our knowledge of early African foodways came not only from

voyagers like Ibn Battuta but also from explorers and missionaries. Mungo Park, the first European to view the headwaters of the Niger, traveled to the continent in the late eighteenth century. Like Ibn Battuta, he was concerned with his stomach and gave a detailed accounting of some of the foods he encountered. By the time that Park made his exploratory journey, American corn had begun to supplant the millet and *fonio* mentioned by Ibn Battuta, but couscous remained a traditional preparation no matter the starch. In his journal, Park described the process for making a corn couscous so precisely that it could be followed as a recipe.

In preparing their corn for food, the natives use a large wooden mortar called a *paloon*, in which they bruise the seed until it parts with the outer covering, or husk, which is then separated from the clean corn, by exposing it to the wind: nearly in the same manner as wheat is cleared from the chaff in England. The corn thus freed from the husk is returned to the mortar and beaten into meal; which is dressed variously in different countries; but the most common preparation of it among the natives of the Gambia, is a sort of pudding, which they call *kouskous*. It is made by first moistening the flour with water, and then stirring and shaking it about in a large calabash or gourd, till it adheres together in small granules, resembling sago. It is then put into an earthen pot, whose bottom is perforated with a number of small holes; and this pot being placed upon another, the two vessels are luted together either with a paste of meal and water, or with cow's dung, and placed upon the fire. In the lower vessel is commonly some animal food and water, the steam or vapour of which ascends through the perforations in the bottom of the upper vessel, and softens and prepares the *kouskous* which is much esteemed throughout all the countries that I visited.

Park also spoke of rice dishes and of corn puddings and of the fact that there were a wide variety of vegetables. Fowl was abundant and included partridge as well as guinea hens, which are indigenous to the continent.

Like Ibn Battuta, the explorers were amazed by the lavish hospitality that was offered by rich and poor alike to guests and visitors. René Caillé, who traveled overland from Morocco through Mali into Guinea, spoke of the foods he ate in his 1830 travel account. He mentioned a "copious luncheon of rice with chicken and milk," which he ate with delight and which filled the travelers for their journey. He also recounted a meal offered to him by the poor of a village, which consisted of a type of couscous served with a sauce of greens. While Caillé enjoyed his copious meal, his hosts made due with boiled yam with a saltless sauce. Similar prodigious hospitality garnered commentary from virtually all writers. However, some of the more gastronomically inclined French travelers, like Caillé and others, were as astonished by the sophisticated tastes of the food as they were by the generous hospitality. Theophilus Conneau, another Frenchman, recorded that on December 8, 1827, he ate an excellent supper. It was

a rich stew which a French cook would call a sauce blanche. I desired a taste which engendered a wish for more. The delicious mess was made of mutton minced with roasted ground nuts [or peanuts] and rolled up into a shape of forced meat balls, which when stewed up with milk butter and a little malaguetta [sic] pepper, is a rich dish if eaten with rice en pilau. Monsieur Fortoni [sic] of Paris might not be ashamed to present a dish of it to his aristocratic gastronomes of the Boulevard des Italiens.

This was high praise indeed from a Frenchman.

Ibn Battuta, Park, Caillé, and others like them also visited the courts of African rulers and commented on the grandeur that attended the sovereigns. Mansa Kankan Musa of Mali, ruler of the region that Battuta visited, was so extravagant in his lifestyle that when he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, he distributed such quantities of gold that in his wake the Egyptian dinar was devalued by 20 percent. Leaders of the Akan, Fon, Bamiléké, Bamun, and Yoruba peoples and other coastal kingdoms equally impressed early European arrivals with their wealth, the splendor of their courts, and the ceremonies and rituals surrounding food and food service.

Christianized Anna Nzingha, and also known as Dona Ana de

Souza, the seventeenth-century queen of the Ndongo and Matamba kingdoms was an absolute sovereign. A lunch in her court, as recorded in 1687 by João António Cavazzi de Montecúcolo in *Descrição histórica dos três reinos do Congo, Matamba e Angola*, was a finely tuned show of prestige combining African and Westernized customs. The queen, in her usual manner, was seated on a mat surrounded by her ladies and ministers. Her meal was served in vessels of clay, although she owned silver ones. When the food was served, it was piping hot, and the guests ate with their hands, passing the food between their left and right hands until it cooled off. Cavazzi, an Italian priest who was in attendance at court, once counted eighty different dishes being served. When the queen drank, all those present clapped their hands or touched their fingers to their feet to indicate that she should enjoy what she was drinking from her head to her toes. She ate in great pomp, and the leftovers were given to the rest of the court.

The pomp of the African courts amazed the travelers, but they also commented on the elaborate rituals surrounding service. Food has remained an integral part of ritual on the continent, from the milk that is poured into the sea at Gorée, Senegal, to placate Mame Coumba Castel, the spirit of that island, to the mashed yam that is symbolically “fed” to the sacred stools of the Ashanti. In general, traditional holidays on the continent can be divided into two basic types: those that offer thanksgiving and sacrifice to the ancestors and the gods and those that celebrate the new harvest. “Hooting at hunger,” or Homowo, among the Ga people of the Accra plains of Ghana, is a thanksgiving festival where the community gathers annually to ridicule hunger and celebrate triumphing over it and vanquishing famine. In Ghana and Nigeria and other countries within the belt where yams are the major starch, traditional yam festivals like Homowo remain common. New yams are propagated from old ones, and so the tuber has come to symbolize the continuity of life. Yam celebrations range from new yam shoots being paraded through the street of the community to ensure prosperity and a fruitful harvest to the elder or communal leader reading yam peelings as an oracle to foretell what the next crop will yield. Many of these celebratory occasions end in a communal meal of pounded yam. Over the centuries, these ceremonies and others like them

were transformed by time and place, religion and culture, and they form the basis for many culinary rituals that remain integral parts of African American life: holiday celebrations, church suppers, traditional New Year’s meals, and even Kwanzaa.

In Western Africa, the recipes and indeed the festivities changed as the continent increasingly became invaded by the cultures of the outside world. The Dya’ogo dynasty that ruled the kingdom of Tekur in what is today Mali adopted Islam around 850 C.E. From this foothold, the religion began to make further incursions into sub-Saharan Africa. It spread through trade, jihad, and conversion deeper into the Sahel and fanned out toward the coastal regions. It was integrated in the cultures of Mali, Senegal, Niger, Mauritania, Upper Volta, and Guinea by the time of Ibn Battuta’s travels and those of the early explorers. Islam brought with it dietary prohibitions, rules about meal service, and a cycle of feasting and fasting, complete with holidays and rituals that melded with those of traditional religions and became a potent cultural force in the western part of the continent by the time of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Christianizing of the continent from the fifteenth century onward resulted in Roman Catholic dietary rules and regulations being adopted by its followers. Those who lived in the coastal areas were more rapidly influenced by the Europeans who made increasing incursions into the continent. Coastal dwellers eventually developed a creolized society that mixed African mores with those of the prevailing European colonial powers. Over the centuries, travelers were followed by explorers who became colonizers, and the Portuguese, French, Dutch, British, Belgians, and Germans all brought their dietary habits, religious restrictions, and everyday rituals to the continent, where they became a part of the culinary kaleidoscope that is the western segment of the African continent.

Recipes, religious celebrations, meals, menus, and more from the African continent were a part of the cultural baggage that was brought across the Atlantic by those who would be enslaved. No matter where the individual’s origins, direct ties to the mother continent were ruptured and scattered in the upheaval of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The general notions of ceremony and the tastes of the food of ritual and of daily life, however, remained in memory, atavisms that influenced the taste, cooking techniques, marketing



styles, ritual behaviors, and hospitality of their descendants and of the country that would become theirs. The matrix was fixed on the African continent; the transformation from African to African American involved one of the most brutal passages that humans have had to endure: the Middle Passage of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

OKRA, WATERMELON, AND  
BLACK-EYED PEAS: AFRICA'S GIFTS  
TO NEW WORLD COOKING



While millions of Africans were brought in chains to the New World, the botanical connection to the African continent remained relatively small. The list is even smaller in the United States, where the weather did not permit the introduction of such tropical species as ackee, the oil palm, kola, true African yams, and other tubers. The few plants that could survive—okra, watermelon, and black-eyed peas—have, however, remained emblematic of Africans and their descendants in the United States and of the region in which most of them toiled, the American South.

Okra is perhaps the best known and least understood outside African American and Southern households. Prized on the African continent as a thickener, it is the basis for many a soupy stew and is served up in sheets of the slippery mucilage that it exudes. Okra probably was first introduced into the continental United States in the early 1700s, most likely from the Caribbean, where it has a long history. Colonial Americans ate it, and by 1748 the pod was used in Philadelphia, where it is still an ingredient in some variants of the Philadelphia gumbo known as pepperpot. In 1781 Thomas Jefferson commented on it as growing in Virginia, and we know that it was certainly grown in the slave gardens of Monticello. By 1806 the plant was in relatively widespread use, and botanists spoke of several different varieties.

Our American word *okra* comes from the Igbo language of Nigeria, where the plant is referred to as *okuru*. It is the French word for okra, *gombo*, that resonates with the emblematic dishes of southern Louisiana known as gumbo. Although creolized and mutated, the word *gombo* harks back to the Bantu languages, in which the pod is known as *ochingombo* or *guingombo*. The word clearly has an African antecedent, as do the soupy stews that it describes, which are frequently made with okra.

Watermelon has been so connected with African Americans that it is not surprising to learn that the fruit is believed to have originated on the African continent. Pictures of watermelons appear in Egyptian tomb paintings, and in southern Africa they have been used for centuries by the Khoi and San of the Kalahari. More than 90 percent water, the fruit is useful in areas where water may be unsafe, and it is also especially prized to cool folks down in hot weather.

Watermelons arrived in the continental United States fairly early on in the seventeenth century and were taken to heart and stomach rapidly as new cultivars were developed that were more suitable to the cooler weather. As with okra, watermelon has been indelibly connected to African Americans. Indeed some of the most virulently racist images of African Americans produced in the post-Civil War era involve African Americans and the fruit. Watermelon became so stereotypically African American that black comedian Godfrey Cambridge in the 1960s developed a comedy routine about

the travails of an upwardly mobile black man trying to bring home a watermelon without being seen by the neighbors in his upscale white community. He declared that he couldn't wait until a square watermelon was developed that would defy detection. (It has been; in the late twentieth century, the Japanese perfected a square watermelon that could be stacked.) National attitudes toward watermelon have changed, but the fruit and its stereotyped history still remain a hot-button issue for many.

Before Fergie sang with a music group known as the Black Eyed Peas, the vegetable was perhaps best known as an ingredient in the South Carolina *perloo* (or composed rice dish or pilaf) known as Hoppin' John. Legumes are among the world's oldest crops. They have been found in Egyptian tombs and turn up in passages in the Bible. The black-eyed pea, which is actually more of a bean than a pea, was introduced into the West Indies from Central Africa in the early 1700s and journeyed from there into the Carolinas. The pea with the small black dot is considered especially lucky by many cultures in Western Africa. While the pea was certainly not lucky for those who were caught and sold into slavery, the memory of the luck it was supposed to bring in West Africa lingered on among the enslaved in the southern United States and the Hoppin' John that is still consumed on New Year's Day by black and white Southerners alike is reputed to bring good fortune to all who eat it.

As came okra, watermelons, and black-eyed peas, so came sesame and sorghum. The African continent is also responsible for our eternal confusion about yams and sweet potatoes. Some variants of true yams are African in origin. Across the Atlantic, they became confused with the sweet potatoes that were the predominant tubers to which the enslaved in the United States had access. In African American parlance and from there into Southern usage, they retained the name of the African tuber that they replaced—yam.

Peanuts are New World in origin, yet they remain connected in many minds with the African continent, because it is likely that they moved into general usage in the United States via the Transatlantic Slave Trade. They returned to the northern part of their native hemisphere complete with an African name that derived from the Bantu word *nguba*, meaning "groundnut"—goober. So we're all celebrating Africa when we're eating goober peas.

Whether in the slip of okra in a southern Louisiana gumbo, the cooling sweetness of a slice of watermelon on a summer day, or the luck of a New Year's black-eyed pea, the African continent is the origin of many of African American foodways. From its ingredients to its techniques and its hospitality, rituals, and ceremonies, the continent has remained a vivid memory: one that left its mark on its displaced children in the New World.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Rum Drinks:*

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# HIGH ON THE HOG

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