



Greens, Beans & Groundnuts
African American Foodways

City of Bowie Museums
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Background:

From 1619 until 1807 (when the U.S. Constitution banned the further IMPORTATION of slaves), many Africans arrived on the shores of a new and strange country – the American colonies. They did not come to the colonies by their own choice. They were slaves, captured in their native land (Africa) and brought across the ocean to a very different place than what they knew at home. Often, slaves worked as cooks in the homes of their owners. The food they had prepared and eaten in Africa was different from food eaten by most colonists. But, many of the things that Africans were used to eating at home quickly became a part of what American colonists ate in their homes. Many of those foods are what we call “soul food,” and foods are still part of our diverse American culture today.

Food From Africa:

Most of the slaves who came to Maryland and Virginia came from the West Coast of Africa. Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria, Togo, Mali, Sierra Leone, Benin, Senegal, Guinea, the Ivory Coast are the countries of West Africa.

Foods consumed in the Western part of Africa were (and still are) very starchy, like rice and yams. Rice grew well on the western coast of Africa because of frequent rain. Rice actually grows in water. Other important foods were cassava (a root vegetable similar to a potato), plantains (which look like bananas but are not as sweet) and a wide assortment of beans. Meats such as chicken, lamb and goat were frequently used and were made into stews and one pot dinners. Because many of the slaves who came here had lived on the coast of Africa, by the ocean, they used much fish and seafood in their diet. Here in Maryland, in the Chesapeake region, they were able to do the same thing! While maize, or corn is native to the Americas, it arrived in Africa in the early 1500’s. Cultivation quickly spread, and it is now a common grain throughout the African Continent. It is often ground into meal to create dietary staples such as “fu-fu.”

In West and Central Africa, one dietary staple is a dish called “fu-fu” or “foofoo.” Fu-Fu is a paste-like dish, similar to porridge, made by boiling a starchy root vegetable or grain in water, and then pounding in a mortar and pestle until the desired consistency is reached. In West Africa, it can be made with yams (sweet potatoes), plantain or maize. In some areas, it can be made from rice.

West Africans used many spices, as well. They were fond of hot foods and used different kinds of hot peppers in their cooking. Spices like cumin, cinnamon and cloves made their way to the colonies on ships bringing goods from different places. Since African

slaves were often cooks on plantations and in city houses, they used these items when they cooked for their owners.

Many sources say that enslaved Africans brought peanuts to North America. However, peanuts are native to South America, and were cultivated there for centuries before they were first encountered by Europeans in the early 1500s. European traders brought peanuts to Africa. Peanuts were soon widely grown throughout Africa, catching on quickly because they were similar to a plant already cultivated by Africans, the groundnut. Peanuts can be found in many African dishes – from soups to snacks. In African, peanuts are called “nguba.” In our country, in the South, peanuts are often called “goobers,” or “goober peas”, a word that comes directly from the African “nguba.”

The list of greens prepared by Africans is long! In some parts of West Africa, greens are called “efo.” Many kinds are enjoyed – bitterleaf, pumpkin, sorrel, sweet potato, turnip and collards, to name just a few. Turnip greens and collard greens have always been popular choices.

The black-eyed pea, also known as the cowpea, is thought to have originated in North Africa, where it has been eaten for centuries. It may have been introduced into India as long as 3,000 years ago, and was also a staple of Greek and Roman diets. The peas were probably introduced to the New World by Spanish explorers and African slaves, and have become a common food in the southern United States, where they are available dried, fresh, canned, and frozen. The flavorful peas are used to make soups, salads, fritters, and casseroles; they can also be puréed; or sprouted.

African Food in early America:

The influence of African slaves is still “tasted” in American cooking. Today’s southern style of cooking greens came with Africans to the colonies. Long simmering in a gravy called “pot likker” creates a tender and tasty side dish of African origin.

Slaves were often given leftover foods from the plantation kitchen, and lesser cuts of meat when animals were butchered. They developed recipes that used these meats, and meats discarded from plantation kitchens. These recipes included the use of pigs’ feet, beef tongue or tail, ham hocks, chitterlings (small intestines of the hog), hog ears and jowls, tripe and even the skin (rind). Cooks added onions, garlic, thyme and bay leaf to enhance flavor. Many African Americans foraged for their own meats, and wild game such as raccoon, possum, turtle and rabbit were added to the diet. Because they were allowed to raise poultry in their own areas, slaves included a wide variety of poultry dishes on their tables.

Corn (maize), and corn meal, became a staple in the African American diet. Native peoples migrating from South America over 1000 years ago to what is now the United States brought corn with them. African cooks in America found many tasty and useful ways to use both whole grain corn and corn meal.

Anything green from the garden or kitchen, slowly simmered with some of these meats, became the famous southern style greens still enjoyed today. Slaves “made do” with ingredients at hand. Fresh vegetables found in Africa were often replaced by throwaway food from the bit house – tops of turnips and beets and dandelion greens. Soon slaves were cooking with new types of greens, as well: cress, mustard and pokeweed.

After freedom came, these foods remained important components of African American diet. They remain the key ingredients of an even larger menu of “soul food” today. They are the legacy upon which the term “Soul Food” is built.

Soul Food:

The phrase “soul food” has its origins in the 1960’s. Today it implies a cuisine associated with things African American. And, indeed, it can trace its roots to much of the West African foodways culture of the 18th and 19th centuries, perhaps as far in the past as the 14th century.

In the 1960s, when the Civil Rights Movement was just beginning, terms like "soul man" "soulful" and just "soul" were used in connection with African American culture. The term caught on in mainstream America, and the term “soul food” became synonymous with African American cuisine.

Many components of “soul food” have their foundations in history of long ago. Explorers from Europe introduced their own foods such as turnips, cabbage, and watermelon to the African continent. Okra and sesame seeds (sometimes called benne seeds) made their way to the West Coast of Africa from more southern regions. The cowpea (which includes what we call black eyed peas which are a very popular soul food dish) was carried from India to Arabia and Asia Minor, thence down into Africa in prehistoric times. From seeds possibly carried in ears, hair or clothing of slaves and traders, some traditional African foods became crops grown commercially in this country.

The slave diet began to evolve when slaves entered the plantation houses as cooks. Suddenly, southern cooking took on new meaning. Fried chicken began to appear on the tables; sweet potatoes sat next to boiled white potatoes. Regional fruits and nuts soon became puddings, cakes and pies; thus, soul cooking began to influence Southern food.

After Emancipation, slaves migrated from the south into many parts of the United States. Black cowboys could be found in Texas, domestics in Illinois and Michigan, porters worked the railroad stations up and down the eastern seaboard. As the railroad tracks expanded across the middle of the country, black cooks could be found working in train kitchens. Wealthy and middle class whites and blacks in large cities hired black cooks. This brought southern black cuisine into the homes of many Americans.

So as to be close to family members scattered far and wide, Sunday dinners became a

special time for families to get together. It was common for a son or daughter to travel some distance just for a good home cooked meal. Aunts, uncles, cousins (both real and pretend) would converge, not to the largest home, but to the house with the best cook for a meal. Occasionally there would be a potluck where everyone brought their "best" dish, but the normal pattern was for the women to get in the kitchen and create a Sunday "feast." Each family had, and continues to have, special favorites. Red beans and rice, greens, Lima beans with ham hocks, stewed okra and tomatoes, cornbread, corn pudding, corn pone, fried catfish, fried or smothered chicken, pickled pig's feet, neckbones, breaded fried pork chops filled the table in the past...and still do in many homes today.

African-American cuisine – what we know today as "soul food" - was wholesome food that used everything available. Nothing was ever wasted in the black kitchen. Leftover fish became croquettes (by adding an egg, cornmeal or flour, seasonings and breaded then deep-fried). Cornmeal was the basis for another tasty dish – the hush puppy. It is said that the hushpuppy got its name from the leftover meal used to "dredge" (dry batter) catfish. This leftover meal was never discarded. Being thrifty, the cook from the house would send this down to the slave quarters and the women added a little milk, egg and onion and fried it up. It is said they were tossed at the dogs to keep them quiet while the food was being transferred from the pot to the table, i.e., "hush puppy! hush puppy!."

Stale bread became bread pudding, and each part of the pig had its own special dish. Even the "pot likker" from the boiled vegetables was turned into which was a type of gravy or as a drink in and of itself. While the master would have an apple, peach or cherry baked pie, slaves were ingenious and produced fried pies that could be tucked into a pocket for a sweet snack as they worked in the fields.

Dining in Africa:

In many African cultures, it is not necessary to be invited to a meal. Visitors are always welcome. There is always enough. The important thing is to share. Meals are an important gathering opportunity for extended – and extensive – families.

In many regions, food is eaten from a communal bowl. A mat is spread on the ground, and the bowl is centrally placed. Good manners require the removal of shoes before stepping onto the mat. Often, men eat from one bowl, women and children from another. Sometimes young boys eat with the men, and young girls with the women. Many dishes (including fu-fu) are eaten with the hands. Hands are ALWAYS washed before and after eating. The right hand is used for eating, even for those who are left-handed.

Hosts are expected to distribute the pieces of meat, fish or vegetables in the bowl to the rest of the group. Any bones or remnants not eaten are placed to the side of the bowl, in front of the diner. In many African cultures, talking while eating, especially by children, is considered disrespectful. Before washing their hands after eating, diners are expected to lick any remaining rice, meat, vegetables or any other substance from their hands.

Guests are expected to express their appreciation at the end of the meal by commenting on its “sweetness.” Unfortunately, desserts are not a large component of African cuisine!

Additional lesson plans and learning activities for all grade levels are available on the Museum on Main Street/Key Ingredients Website:

Museumonmainstreet.org/exhibs_key/key_class_lessplns.htm

A Taste of Africa – A Taste of America

Grade Level: Elementary

Objectives:

- Students will discuss the Foodways of Africa, particularly West Africa
- Students will compare/contrast (based on included educator's background information) traditional African dining customs and their own customs
- Students will make a traditional African dish (fu-fu) to share with each other
- Students will make a colonial recipe (Johnny cakes) to share with each other

Materials Required:

Cornmeal (maize), water, salt, pans, hot plate or stove, spoon, butter, sugar, milk, large pot, 2 large bowls, platter, measuring spoons, spatula, skillet, hand soap (Recipes follow at end of this section.)

“Post Cooking” Activities:

- Have students write a brief story about a special meal they have experienced. Where was it consumed? What did it consist of? Who was present?
- Ask students to create a menu including both African Food and Soul food. Discuss similarities.
- Have students draw a picture detailing a celebratory meal in their own homes.

Discussion:

- Discuss the foods enjoyed by Africans of the past and all Americans of the present

Which of these foods have students eaten themselves?

(Yams, corn, rice, plantain/bananas, greens, beans, peanuts)

How many of these foods are we still enjoying today? How do we prepare them?

Are any of these foods special holiday foods today? (Candied yams at Thanksgiving, corn on the cob for 4th of July)

- How are meals served/consumed in their homes?

Tables, chairs? Where does everyone sit?

Who is served first?

Do they ever have unexpected guests? How are they served?

Do they enjoy a particular food at home that might be traced to the African continent?

Are they aware of other cultures that may use implements other than knives, forks and spoons? (Chinese/Japanese chopsticks) Are they aware of other traditions within our country where food might be eaten with the hands? (Hawaiian, Hispanic)

- After concluding the activity

How are these two dishes similar?

Ingredients, method, taste?

Are these dishes similar to anything students have eaten at home?

Which dish would be “portable,” to be carried by slaves when they went to work in the fields?

Cooking Activity

BEFORE STUDENTS BEGIN PREPARATION, HAVE THEM THOROUGHLY WASH THEIR HANDS.

Activity: Compare African Food and Colonial Food.

To make fu-fu:

Bring 2 cups water to a boil. Add 1 teaspoon salt. Add 1 cup cornmeal. Cook, stirring constantly until mixture thickens. Butter may be added to “enhance” taste.

Pour fu-fu into a large bowl and ask students to sit around the pot, on the floor. They may scoop fu-fu out of pot with 3 fingers. They must wash their hands again if they elect to go back for seconds!!!!

To make Johnny cakes:

You will need this equipment:

Saucepan

Measuring cups and spoons

Mixing bowl

Wooden spoon

Skillet (frying pan)

Spatula

Platter (large plate)

Ingredients:

1 Cup of Water

1 Cup of Yellow Cornmeal

½ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon sugar

½ cup milk

Butter to grease a skillet (frying pan)

1. Heat water and butter in saucepan until they boil
2. Put cornmeal, salt and sugar in mixing bowl while water and butter are boiling.
3. CAREFULLY pour boiling water and butter into mixing bowl. Add milk and stir with wooden spoon until the batter is mixed
4. Heat a pat of butter in the skillet over medium heat
5. Drop six (6) spoonfuls of batter into the skillet. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes or until bubbles form on top of the surface of the cakes. Flip the cakes over with the spatula and cook the other side.

Johnny cakes can be eaten with butter and honey or jam.