

Get 'Em While They're Hot: African American Cookbooks as References to Black Culture

by Jenifer Lyn Grady

African American cookery is finally getting the recognition it deserves as a truly American cuisine. Black Americans, publishers, restaurant-goers, and scholars are realizing that what was once known as "soul food" has both a rich history and an unmistakable influence on the way we eat today. Going right to the source, through cookbooks written by chefs who are "maestro[s] of dignified distinction," is a mouth-watering way to trace the origins of black cookery and its synthesis into the American culinary tradition.¹ With an increased appreciation of African American cookery has come the realization that cookbooks from this tradition are collectible and appropriate for some libraries.

Arthur Schomburg, a historian, bibliophile, and scholar of black culture, asserted that black cookery is a compilation of the following:

several key dimensions, including the ceremonial; the symbolic; the economic; the African and West Indian; the relationship of rural to urban cooking; the importance of black cooking as a means of resistance to racist domination; and, finally the description of that cooking as a living knowledge rather than artifactual tradition.²

Schomburg, who sold his book collection to the New York Public Library, proposed that black scholars study the traditions of African American cookery. He was impressed with the fortitude of African slaves who managed to create life-sustaining meals from scraps and maintain distinct Africanisms (spices, one-pot vegetable dishes served over starches) in their food preparations.³ Although Schomburg's ambitious proposal was never carried out, he laid the groundwork for research in African American cookery.

Studying black cookbooks is an excellent way to find out more about African American culture. The text found in many of these cookbooks reveals how recipes were created and what food means in the black family. Many cookbooks also include personal reflections that may have nothing to do with cooking but that do express facets of the African American experience. For instance, in *Pearl's Kitchen*, readers learn that, for Pearl Bailey, cooking is synonymous with love. Her cookbook includes both recipes and bits of nonfood trivia, such as the fact that in 1973 Bailey predicted pay television and described premenstrual syndrome before there was a name for it.⁴ The National Council of Negro Women's *Historical Cookbook of the American Negro* contains copies of letters by John Brown, the Gettysburg Address, biographical sketches of famous blacks, the words to "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (the Negro National Anthem, written by James Weldon Johnson), and photographs of historical sites in black history.⁵

Many of the staples of this cuisine are residuals from slavery. Adult slaves ate sweet potatoes, corn, and dishes made from cornmeal.⁶ Peas of all sorts and greens were eaten when they were in season. Slaves consumed little or no milk and few meats. Pork was usually the only meat in the slave diet, unless someone in the household hunted or fished. Hominy grits and rice were commonly used to make meals heartier. Although today's black cookbooks contain a sampling of Creole, Mexican, French, Italian, and Asian recipes, most recipes reflect the culinary heritage of three hundred years of bondage.

In *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gift to New World Cooking*, Jessica Harris showed the food ties between Africa and America and the geographic and cultural origins of many foods. Chef Leah Chase, in *The Dooky Chase Cookbook*, demonstrated the influences of other cultures in African

American cookery. The Dooky Chase restaurant, in New Orleans, serves dishes that are African American and Creole, which is a mixture of African, French, Indian, and Spanish.⁷ In Carol Marsh's *The Kitchen House: How Yesterday's Black Women Created Today's American Foods*, children are taught how slavery influenced American cooking.

As southern black people moved from the rural areas of the South to cities and to the North, some traditional foods were either relegated to the status of novelties or were ignored altogether. For example, scrapple and spoon bread are in the "Old Fashioned Recipes" section of *Women's Missionary Union Cookbook*.⁸ *The Black Family Reunion Cookbook* takes a more positive approach to traditional dishes by highlighting "Heritage Recipes," including "Chitlins a la California." These "Heritage Recipes," both new and old, remind readers of traditional dishes.⁹ The contents of cookbooks from local, church, regional, and societal organizations are evidence of members' financial and community status, as well as their attitudes towards traditional black cookery.

The symbolic aspect of black cooking forms the premise of quite a few books, among them *The Black Family Reunion Cookbook*, compiled by members of the National Council of Negro Women; *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*, by Norma Jean and Carol Darden; and *Family of the Spirit*, by John Pinderhughes. These cookbooks are based on memories and reminiscences that reflect the love and shared traditions of families and communities. Relatives live through recipes they have left for future generations. When John Pinderhughes dedicates a chapter to a friend or relative, readers learn how food and recipes from revered and respected loved ones influenced the author. *Spoonbread* is a mixture of genealogy, biography, history, and cookbook, illustrated

with drawings and family photographs. The recipes reflect the eating habits of the Darden family, but they will work for a wide variety of families.

The format of black cookbooks varies. Most include recipes, but some recipes are so embedded in the text they seem like afterthoughts or chiefly occasions to recount a happy experience. *Pearl's Kitchen*, for example, claims to include one hundred recipes, but they are so integrated with the reminiscences that one can forget they are instructions. "Turkey Dressing A Go Go" begins with, "Telling you about the beef stew reminded me about another recipe I got on the train one time. It was around Thanksgiving time."¹⁰ The recipe is unobtrusively placed in the middle of the next paragraph. The recipe is not structured in the format common to recipes—ingredients in a list, then detailed, formal instructions.

The quality of the cookbooks varies with the producers. Books put together by local groups generally have a simple style. Many are type-written and spiral-bound or bound with glued bindings. (These binding formats will be troublesome for future conservators; some cookbooks from early decades of this century already need care.) With the advent of desktop publishing, organizations will be able to compose more professional-looking publications. In older, locally produced cookbooks, illustrations usually were hand-drawn, if they were present at all. Recent titles incorporate African and African American artistry, such as the reprints of paintings by black artists in *The Dooky Chase Cookbook*.

Chapters in *Family of the Spirit Cookbook* are graced with photographs by Pinderhughes of the individuals to whom the chapters are dedicated.¹¹ The National Council of Negro Women embellished *The Black Family Reunion Cookbook* with motifs from African fabrics, and *The Black Family Dinner Quilt* will feature quilts crafted by black women, both famous and not-so-famous. As interest in African American traditions has increased, commercial publishers have begun to release sturdily bound, aesthetically pleasing black cookbooks.

Graham Tomlinson of Baptist College at Charleston analyzed recipes as examples of written instruction.¹² He identified the internal elements of a recipe: the name of the recipe, the ingredients, and directions for cooking; and the external elements, such as instructive and evaluative comments. The titles of the recipes can be as

plain and self-explanatory as "Boiled Spare-ribs with Sweet Potatoes" or as ambiguous as "Bushalini," a meat dish originated by Leah Chase's sister Eleanor.¹³ "Carter Hill [Walton County, GA] Barbeque Ribs" is an example of a regional name.¹⁴ Evaluative names include "Chicken Wings Like Mom Used to Make" and "A Good Corn and Tomato Soup."^{15,16}

By far the most popular method of

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naming recipes is for people—those who have created the dish, passed it along, or whose memories are evoked in its preparation. Verta Mae Grosvenor includes recipes for "Eddie's Mama's Pigs Feet," in her cookbook, while *The Chavers Family Cookbook* reveals the secret to "Leora's Greens."^{17,18}

Most cookbooks use a formal approach to recipe writing. *The Black Family Reunion Cookbook* is typical. It includes explicit instructions and places the "Food Memories" associated with a recipe in an unobtrusive location at the side of the page. Even the most clearly written recipes can be misunderstood because of the assumption that readers know euphemisms such as "lights" (calf lungs).

External messages abound in black cookbooks. Informational, rather than evaluative, messages are most often found in recipes. They include descriptions of ingredients, serving suggestions, and how many people the dish serves. The evaluative comments that are present are usually gentle hints based on personal experience, such as buying peas that have just come to the market to ensure maximum flavor.¹⁹ At the end of *The Taste of Country Cooking*, Lewis regretfully informs readers that her preferred baking soda, Royal, is no longer being made, and then gives instructions for substitutes. Chase advises her readers to use Magnalite cookwear.²⁰

The cookbooks include recipes for non-food items, and these recipes are valuable in their own right. *Spoonbread and Straw-*

berry Wine includes Aunt Lillian's beauty potions, tips for keeping skin smooth and supple, and recipes for perfume.²¹ Readers will also find diet hints for cancer patients, directions for making poultices, advice on Christian living, and instructions for preserving a husband.

Most of the cookbooks include an index, some have standard measurement tables, and a few have guides to utensils and cooking terms. Herb and spice listings are common. Books printed for churches and other organizations by commercial firms that specialize in fundraising publications typically include many pages of tables.²² Some cookbooks include glossaries; these are especially helpful if the book does not include descriptions of ingredients with the recipes. *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons* and *The Black Family Reunion Cookbook* have extensive glossaries compiled by Jessica Harris.

Black cooking continues to evolve as lifestyles change and interests and opportunities grow. Recipes in newer cookbooks include instructions to use store-bought canned goods rather than those canned at home.

Lifestyle changes also dictate that meals must be healthy. African Americans are at risk for hypertension and diabetes because of diets high in fat, salt, and cholesterol.²³ Cookbook authors today recognize the need to provide alternatives and modifications to traditional dishes so they will be both good to eat and good for the body. *The Dooky Chase Cookbook* has a chapter of low-sodium/low-cholesterol dishes.²⁴

In response to requests for cookbooks of the black experience, past and present, publishers are becoming aware of their marketability. Some large presses are publishing black cookbooks, although most cookbooks are still produced by individuals and groups or by small presses. Persons who want to collect African American cookbooks must use several collecting strategies. Since so many cookbooks have been produced by churches and social groups, collectors should become members of such organizations or at least attempt to be placed on their mailing lists. Community groups that use public library branch facilities also may have produced their own cookbooks as fundraisers. Attending meetings aimed at African Americans, such as the recent National Conference of African American Librarians (NCAAL), sponsored by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, is a good way to identify

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publishers and to discover newly issued titles. Browsing at such meetings supplements systematic review of the catalogs of black publishing companies and regular visits to local bookstores. Out-of-town visits should also be occasions for bookstore browsing, since the selection of used books shows considerable regional variation. One caution: titles with "soul food" and "southern" do not necessarily mean that the author is African American; more investigation may be necessary.

Booksellers also realize the worth of black cookbooks. Marian L. Gore, a bookdealer in San Gabriel, California, offered *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking*, written by Abby Fisher, for \$2,100.00.²⁵ This cookbook, published in 1881, is the first known cookbook by an African American. The *Bookman's Yearbook* lists Gore and other booksellers who might have older editions of cookbooks in the "Cookbooks & Cookery" section. These dealers serve the growing markets for both cookbooks and African American books. Libraries and collectors planning to develop holdings of African American cookbooks will want to get to know dealers and private collectors; they shouldn't wait too long because interest in these repositories of black popular culture is growing, as both African American culture and popu-

lar culture are recognized as important parts of our national heritage.

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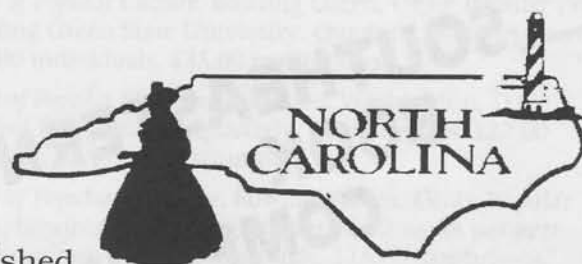
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