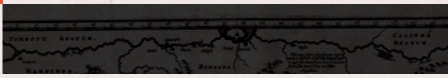
# MICHAEL W. TWITTY

## Teaches Tracing Your Roots Through Food



MasterClass

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## MEET YOUR INSTRUCTOR:

# MICHAEL W. TWITTY

*Get to know the writer, culinary historian, and educator*

**IN THE CANON** of Black food historians, award-winning writer and speaker Michael W. Twitty holds his own. The author of the groundbreaking book *The Cooking Gene*, which chronicles his family history and the impact of enslaved Africans on cooking practices and agriculture in the American South, Michael has become one of the country's go-to scholars on African American food. Combining his African American and Jewish identities in his dishes and cooking techniques, Michael uses food to find out how history and ancestry show up in kitchens. Through his writing and appearances on television shows such as Netflix's African American cuisine docuseries *High on the Hog* and former U.S. first lady Michelle Obama's children's program *Waffles + Mochi*, Michael has helped chefs and eaters from all over the world gain a deeper understanding of African American cooking, American history, and the many ties between the American South and the African continent.

Michael's investigation of the food on his table led him to work in plantation fields in the American South, where he researched African American history, specifically the historical practices of enslaved cooking. At these plantations, Michael picked cotton, worked tobacco, chopped wood, and waded precariously into alligator-infested rice fields in the hope of better understanding African American cuisine and the context in which it was created. Dressed in historically accurate enslavement garb of the pre–Civil War South (trousers, a waistcoat, a long shirt,

and a kerchief), Michael prepared, cooked, and studied hearth cooking (a technique similar to what many enslaved Africans used to prepare meals for plantation owners) in plantation kitchens for audiences. He did so to illustrate what his enslaved ancestors had to endure. He called this immersive experience "historic interpretation." It familiarized him with the tastes of home that enslaved Africans brought with them during the transatlantic slave trade, as well as the challenges they faced making food in these specific circumstances. It illuminated how African American food is distinct: a special alchemy of Indigenous African ingredients rooted in the context of an alien place, leading to new, innovative techniques and recipe variations. Michael also learned the agricultural methods that allowed traditional West African ingredients to thrive in the New World climate, as well as the linguistic traditions that enslaved Africans used to name dishes or ingredients, creating yet another tie to their homeland.

Through these experiences, plus additional research and extensive travels to the African continent, Michael found his way home. He discovered how his family came to have certain food traditions and, by extension, explored and understood the connectedness of his family and so many others whose stories started in Africa and stretched to the shores of America. In this class, you'll take inspiration from Michael's story and learn how to recontextualize the meals on your plate and the stories heard at your family's dinner table. All of Michael's work proves that food and personal history are entirely interconnected. Remember, your food is your flag.

> "*Food is the vehicle. Food is the lens. Food is the opportunity.*"
>
> **—MICHAEL**

Michael in historical garb at Great Hopes Plantation in Williamsburg, Virginia

# LEAN INTO DISCOMFORT

*Learn what hard feelings can teach you*

**IN ORDER TO** understand African American cooking—how certain ingredients came to be in America and why specific dishes are prepared in a particular way—you must turn to history, which is both beautiful and ugly in its hard truths.

The transatlantic slave trade, the kidnapping and forced transportation by Europeans of millions of Africans to the Americas from roughly 1500 to 1900, is a dark legacy the world still reckons with today. Understanding African American cuisine and honoring those that came before means recognizing the migration narratives that are part of that culinary history. When you encounter difficult aspects of the past, take a cue from Michael's journey: Acknowledge the entirety of the past, no matter how painful this act of acknowledgment might be. As you hear Michael's story of his ancestors, and even dive into your own family's story and culinary history, you might come across things that make you uncomfortable, sad, or angry. Don't run from those feelings—they're valid and should be given space. Lean into them instead and get curious about what comes up for you and why.

Discomfort is a part of life, but many avoid it if they get the chance. In reality, discomfort is often felt while on the path of progress; think of it as a growing pain. It also means that unless you're willing to engage with hard feelings when they arise, growth may be hindered. The lessons learned from sitting with discomfort can help you tap into your core values and adjust the way you move through the world to match the kind of person you hope to be. You may initially want to sidestep discomfort, but deciding to lean into it instead can lead you to overcoming the feeling through processing, empathy, and education.

In essence, pain can present something exciting: opportunity.

## If hard feelings come up for you, here are some helpful ways to channel them toward productivity, growth, and compassion.

### 1. Take Ownership

The feelings of unease that might come up for you aren't "good" or "bad"; they're just responses to new information. You're being challenged in the best way. Try not to avoid or judge them; instead, take ownership of your feelings and use them as inspiration to learn more about yourself. If you need to take a break or step away from the information, do that. If you need to do additional research for context, look for reputable sources. But remember: You must return to these feelings in order to move forward. This type of work is a balancing act: Listen to your needs, but don't shy away from the hard realities altogether.

### 2. Be Accountable

History shows how the past has led to the present moment, and therefore it shows how history repeats and persists. In your research, you may learn of history's cyclical nature and injustice's pervasiveness. How do these patterns manifest in your life and your family's lives? How can you break the chain by doing things differently now that you know more? Hold yourself accountable for what you do (or don't do) with this newly acquired information and your newly discovered emotional truths. Now that you know what you know, how can what you've learned impact the way you show up in the world?

### 3. Turn to Your Community

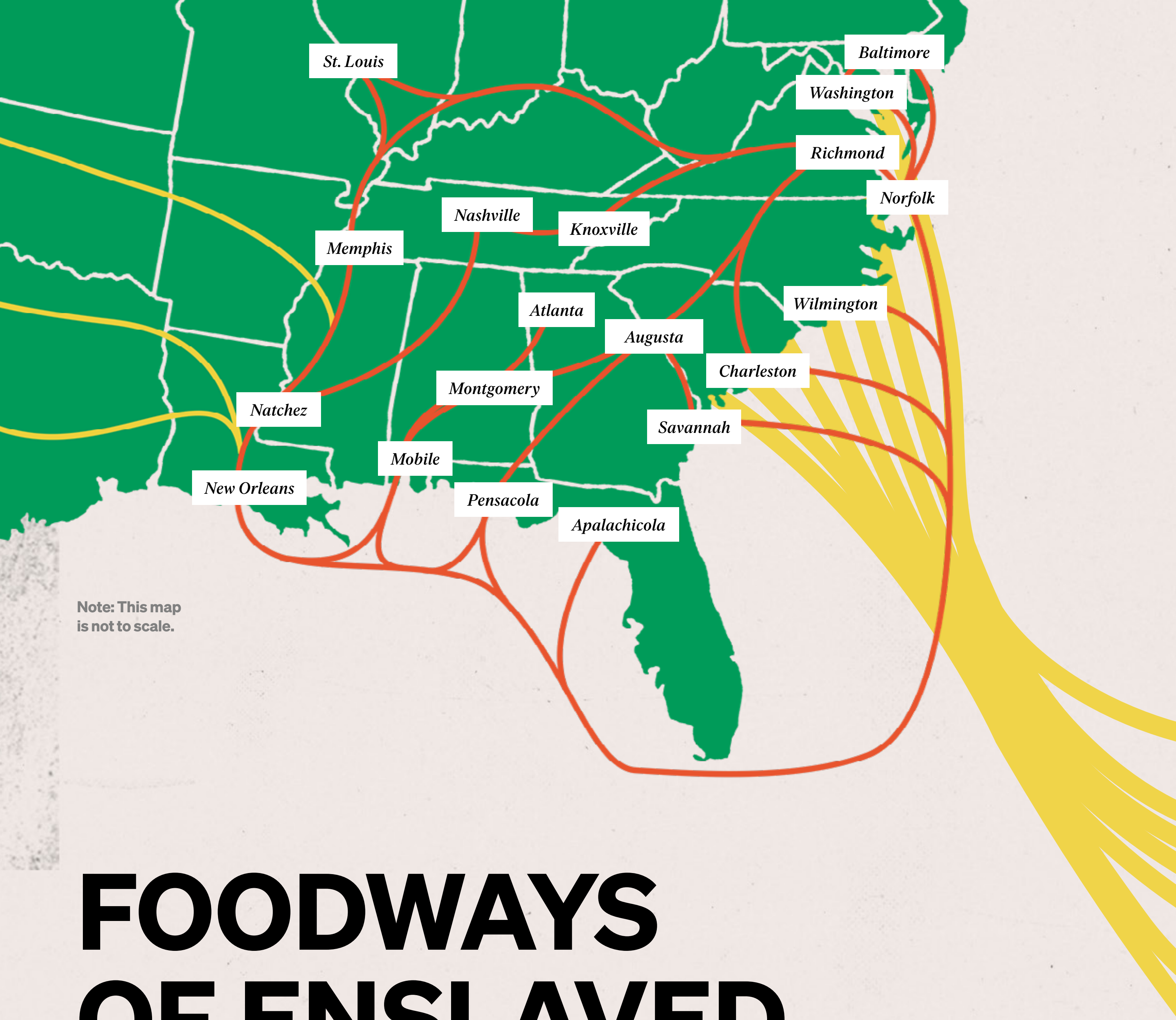
Connection with loved ones is a key part of cooking and eating, but it can also be a key part of emotional and mental processing. When hard feelings come up for you, reach out to someone you trust to discuss why you're feeling this way and what these feelings may be trying to show you. History and experience do not exist in a vacuum; they involve family and community. You may have started this learning journey alone, but you can tap into collective and communal care in order to continue forward.

**ASSIGNMENT:**

## *NAME YOUR PAIN*

*Label a sheet of paper or a page in a notebook "Discomforting Thoughts and Feelings." As you absorb Michael's course, come back to this paper and make a note anytime you feel uncomfortable, indicating the particular moment or lesson in class that caused that discomfort. Next to those moments or lessons, brainstorm ideas for what you can do to follow or nurture your discomfort into something more. What do you think your feelings are pointing you toward learning? How can you reframe these feelings as you process them?*

*As a follow-up, have a piece of paper or a journal nearby with the same label available as you begin to research your own familial and cultural history. You'll likely encounter discomfort again.*

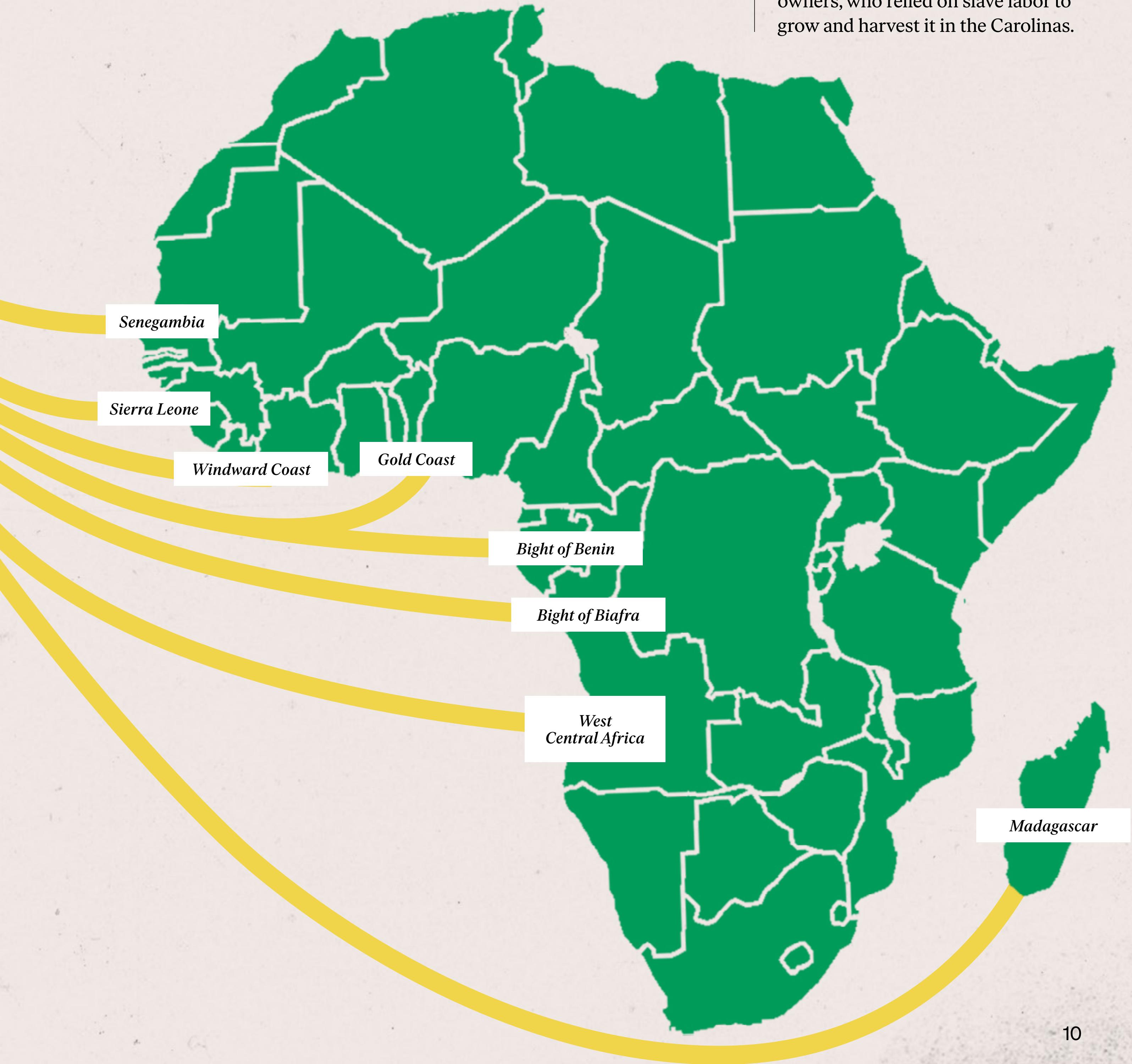

St. Louis
Baltimore
Washington
Richmond
Norfolk
Nashville
Knoxville
Memphis
Wilmington
Atlanta
Augusta
Charleston
Montgomery
Natchez
Savannah
Mobile
New Orleans
Pensacola
Apalachicola

Note: This map is not to scale.

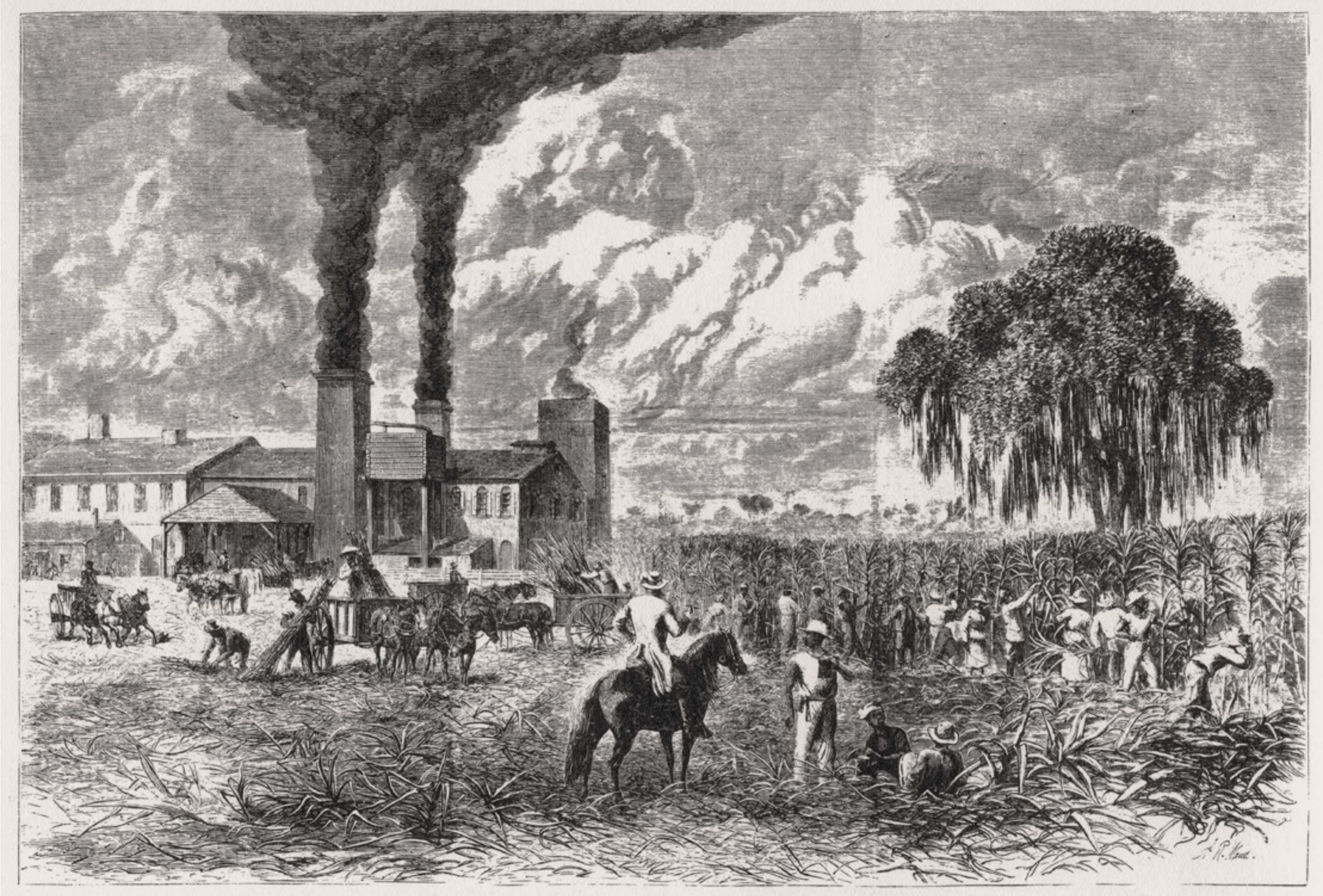
# FOODWAYS OF ENSLAVED PEOPLES

*Both enslaved people and their native foods were considered assets in the slave trade. Here's how they both got here (and why)*

**EUROPEAN COLONISTS** trafficked Africans to America as slave labor so they could exploit New World land and resources. Enslavers not only brought humans; they also transported ingredients like okra, rice, beans, and spices. These food items were brought on slave ships as a source of nourishment for the enslaved during the journey, as well as continued sustenance once they reached the shores of the Americas. Enslavers recognized the benefits that came with enslaved populations' access to foods they were familiar with, in addition to a lucrative opportunity to plant new types of crops in America. Rice, in particular, became a cash crop that generated wealth for many white plantation owners, who relied on slave labor to grow and harvest it in the Carolinas.


*Senegambia*
*Sierra Leone*
*Windward Coast*
*Gold Coast*
*Bight of Benin*
*Bight of Biafra*
*West Central Africa*
*Madagascar*

1870 illustration of enslaved workers crushing the sap out of sugar cane at a New Orleans' plantation.



The term *foodways* refers in part to the links between food practices and the patterns of connection to different cultural communities. It refers to the unique food knowledge and expression that varies within these different cultures, which is influenced by time, location, and culture. The long journey these ingredients took to America has had a lasting impact on Southern American foodways. Dishes like gumbo and jambalaya are amalgamations of traditional West African dishes—such as jollof rice made with black-eyed peas—combined with access to a new world of ingredients and techniques. They're examples of how enslaved peoples, brought to the shores of America and stripped of their ties to home, nevertheless carried with them the knowledge of how to cook the dishes of their homeland.

As Michael believes, along with these crops come lore, language, and spirituality relating to the land. "It's really critical that we put those heirlooms and those crops back in the hands of growers of color, of people of color, so that we can begin to not only propagate them for the purpose of feeding ourselves and keeping ourselves healthy and nourished, but to keep ourselves informed," he says. "And then we can have deeper conversations later about our issues with occupying a land that isn't ours to begin with. But you can't have that conversation until your hands are in the dirt."

**On the next page are some key ingredients that came from West Africa to the Americas that highlight the fundamental connection between Africa and American Southern cuisine →**

## *Black Eyed Peas*

Named for the signature dark-colored spot in their center, these legumes form the base of the popular West African fried accara (also spelled akara) fritters Michael makes in his class (see the recipe on page 31).

## *Rice (Oryza glaberrima)*

This starchy ingredient is known around the world and is an important staple of African and African American cuisine, either as a side dish or a main course. Native to sub-Saharan Africa, *Oryza glaberrima* was cultivated and harvested by the Jola people—an ethnic group whose economy has been based on wet rice farming for at least one thousand years—in the coastal areas of southern Senegal.

## *Yams*

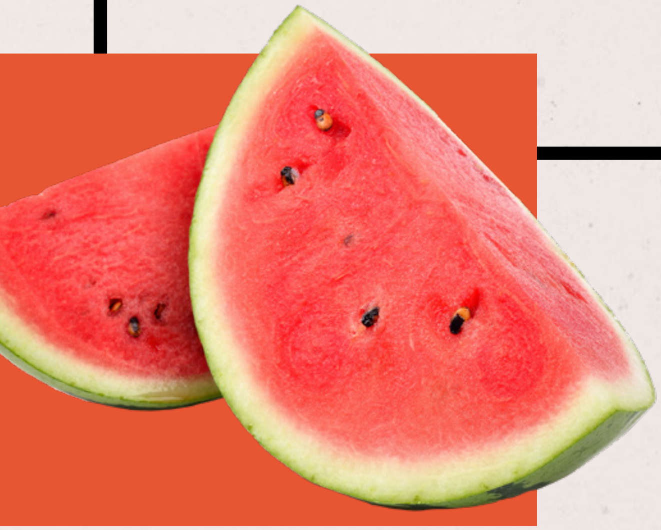
These starchy tubers are an essential ingredient for West African people. They're also an important source of income for many farmers due to their cultural importance, along with high consumer demand.

### *Okra*

Common across the African diaspora, okra appears in many dishes, whether deep-fried, in gumbo, or stewed with tomatoes, offering an earthy flavor and gelatinous texture. As Michael says, pods that are about a finger's length are the best since they're most likely younger and less gooey when cooked. To prepare Michael's stew recipe, which highlights okra, see page 29.

### *Watermelon*

This fruit is thought to be native to north-eastern Africa. In William R. Black's article "How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope" in *The Atlantic,* Beck notes how during and after the Civil War, watermelons were commonly grown and sold by free Black people in order to make a living, thus causing the fruit to be associated with abolition and Black self-sufficiency. However, threatened Southern whites soon made watermelon a symbol of laziness and messiness, birthing a pervasive racist stereotype.



### *Kola Nut*

Kola (sometimes spelled cola) trees are native to the rainforests of Africa. Their caffeine-containing seeds are used as flavorings in carbonated sodas (hence the appearance of "cola" in many soda varieties). Kola nuts were used on slave ships to improve the taste of the poor-quality water enslaved Africans were provided.

### *Scotch Bonnet Pepper*

These chili peppers are ubiquitous in West Africa and the Caribbean, where they're often used liberally in sauces and stews.

### *Benne Seeds (Sesame Seeds)*

Benne seeds, also known as sesame seeds, are thought to have been brought by enslaved West Africans to the American colonies in the 17th century during the transatlantic slave trade. Benne plants were grown by enslaved peoples after their arrival to serve as a nutritional supplement to food rations. Today, benne wafers are a classic treat in the American South.

### *Groundnut (Peanuts)*

Enslaved Africans who arrived in the American colonies in the 1700s brought groundnuts with them. Around the early 1800s, groundnuts were grown as a commercial crop in the Southern United States, starting in Virginia.

**ASSIGNMENT:**

## *YOUR FOODWAYS*

*During his 50-location Southern Discomfort Tour in 2012 (where he cooked, had dinner, and conversed with extended family members), Michael used recipes to follow his ancestors' "foodsteps" (a play on "footsteps") through the American South, underscoring his connection to the people there and in other parts of the world. What do you know of your family and its food history? Research your family and culture's food pathways to see how your culinary DNA was shaped over time. As Michael says in his class, "Start with whatever was at your table." Pick three core dishes that represent your culture as places to start. Where did they begin? How did they change?*

# *Food Evolution*

## Time, access, and history all shape what's on your table and how it's prepared

**MICHAEL DEFINES *SOUL FOOD***, a term used to describe Southern cuisine traditionally made and eaten by African Americans, as a vernacular cuisine, a memory cuisine, and a cuisine of migrations—a constellation of foods unbound by borders and constantly evolving. He points to regionality—specifically, the difference in ingredient availability, climates, cooking practices and techniques, and cultural idiosyncrasies—as the great influencer of recipes with long-standing histories and traditions, a hallmark of what's kept the soul food tradition alive through many generations.

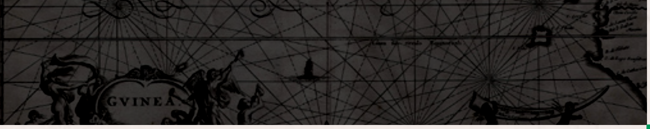
Variation and personalization aren't just common; they are welcomed. "There's soul food, the canon," he notes, "and there's soul food, the construct. So as we discuss these common ancestral heritage foods and how they all connect and intersect…that's the construct. Versus soul food, the canon, where soul food has to be a plate of collard greens, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, and hot sauce."

Although the term *soul food* wasn't introduced until the 1960s, its journey can be mapped via the Great Migration, or the period between about 1916 and 1970 when major waves of African Americans fled the rural American South and its racist Jim Crow laws (which restricted their freedom and enforced segregation) to urban centers in the American Northeast, in the Midwest, and on the West Coast—like New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, respectively. As new African American enclaves formed in these cities, the juxtaposition and intersection of these communities with other disparate groups caused an interplay of food and culinary techniques that created unique takes on classic recipes and formed new dishes altogether. For example, access to Italian immigrant communities brought spaghetti into Black households, and in the Midwest, it became a key component of fish fries, the traditional practice of cooking fish on Sundays. Fish fries would later become a Friday ritual, likely influenced by the close proximity of Catholic communities in cities like New York and Chicago that wanted Sundays reserved for church attendance. Hot links and sausages—staple ingredients of Southern barbecue, soul food, Cajun, and Louisiana Creole cuisines—became varied as well. Half-smokes, or smoked sausages that are half pork and half beef, emerged from traditional German communities interacting with African American communities in Maryland and Washington, D.C.

### ASSIGNMENT:

## *LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION*

*How has location shaped how you cook? Select a specific dish you remember making, and research it to find different regional versions. Are alternative spices or ingredients used in the recipe's various forms? Look at the differences and document them. Has access to (or the lack of) certain ingredients changed the way you prepare this dish? What about the inclusion of family members from outside the community or region of this recipe's origin: How have they influenced and contributed to this meal?*



# THE INSPIRATIONAL LEGACIES OF BLACK MASTER CHEFS

*Meet two Southern American chefs who inspired legions of modern-day cooks and culinary historians—and helped create American cuisine as we know it today*

## EDNA LEWIS

Born in 1916, Edna Lewis grew up in Freetown, Virginia, a farming community founded by emancipated slaves, including her grandfather. There she learned how to cook under the tutelage of her mother, utilizing locally grown and seasonally harvested ingredients for the family's meals.

At sixteen, Chef Lewis made her way to New York City. In 1948, she and a business partner opened Café Nicholson, a Manhattan restaurant that attracted artists and celebrities like American author Truman Capote, Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dalí, and former American first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Later, in 1988, when she was in her early seventies, Chef Lewis ran the kitchen at Gage and Tollner, a landmark fine-dining restaurant that had opened in Brooklyn in 1879.

While each new endeavor allowed Chef Lewis to share her cooking, knowledge, and experience with new people, it was her work authoring a series of cookbooks that brought her Southern American recipes and culinary traditions to her largest audience. From watercress salads and barley stews to poached eggs on country ham and fruit cobblers, the mouthwatering

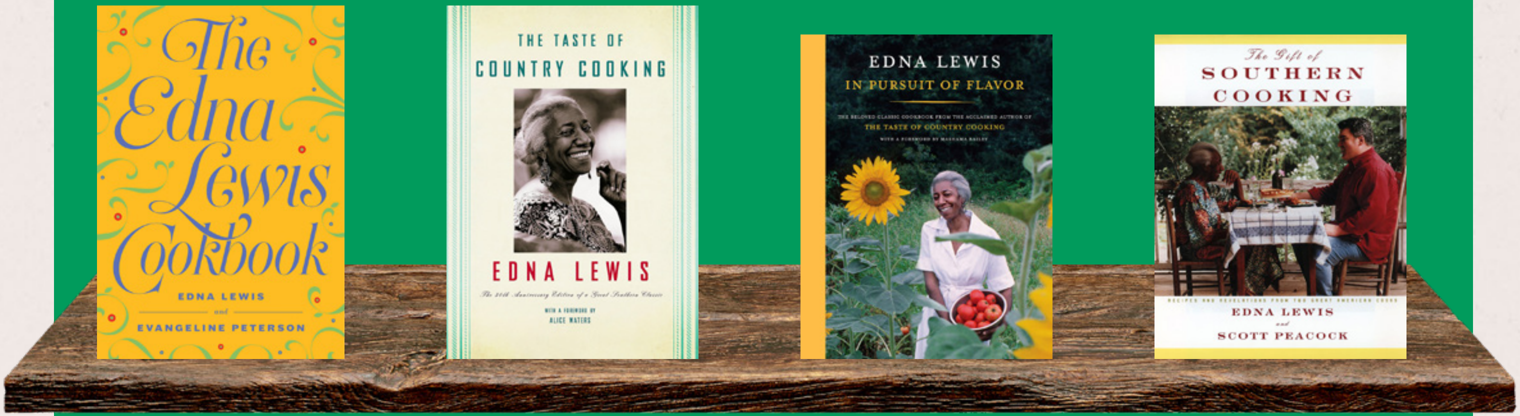
Chef Edna Lewis in the dinning room of Gage & Tollner.

> “*Edna Lewis was ‘the South’s answer to Julia Child.’ She became known for championing the South’s terroir the same way Julia Child popularized French cuisine.*”
>
> **—MICHAEL**

recipes in Chef Lewis’s cookbooks incorporated African American history and cultural stories.

Her first publication, in 1972, *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*, featured recipes organized by season. *The Taste of Country Cooking* (1976) delved into life in Freetown and how it was shaped by growing one’s own food, while *In Pursuit of Flavor* (1988) extolled the value of eating food at its peak seasonality (long before the phrase “farm-to-table” gained traction). Her last cookbook, *The Gift of Southern Cooking* (2003), featured an array of long-forgotten recipes resurrected for a contemporary audience with the help of Alabama-based chef Scott Peacock.

Chef Lewis passed in 2006, but her legacy unquestionably lives on in the abundance of farm-to-table restaurants and vegetable-forward Southern American cooking found not only throughout the region, but all over the country.


The Edna Lewis Cookbook
EDNA LEWIS
and
EVANGELINE PETERSON
THE TASTE OF
COUNTRY COOKING
EDNA LEWIS
EDNA LEWIS
IN PURSUIT OF FLAVOR
THE TASTE OF COUNTRY COOKING
The Gift of
SOUTHERN
COOKING
EDNA LEWIS
and
SCOTT PEACOCK

***The Edna Lewis Cookbook***

Lewis’ beloved cookbook debut and a seasonal-centric classic.

***The Taste of Country Cooking***

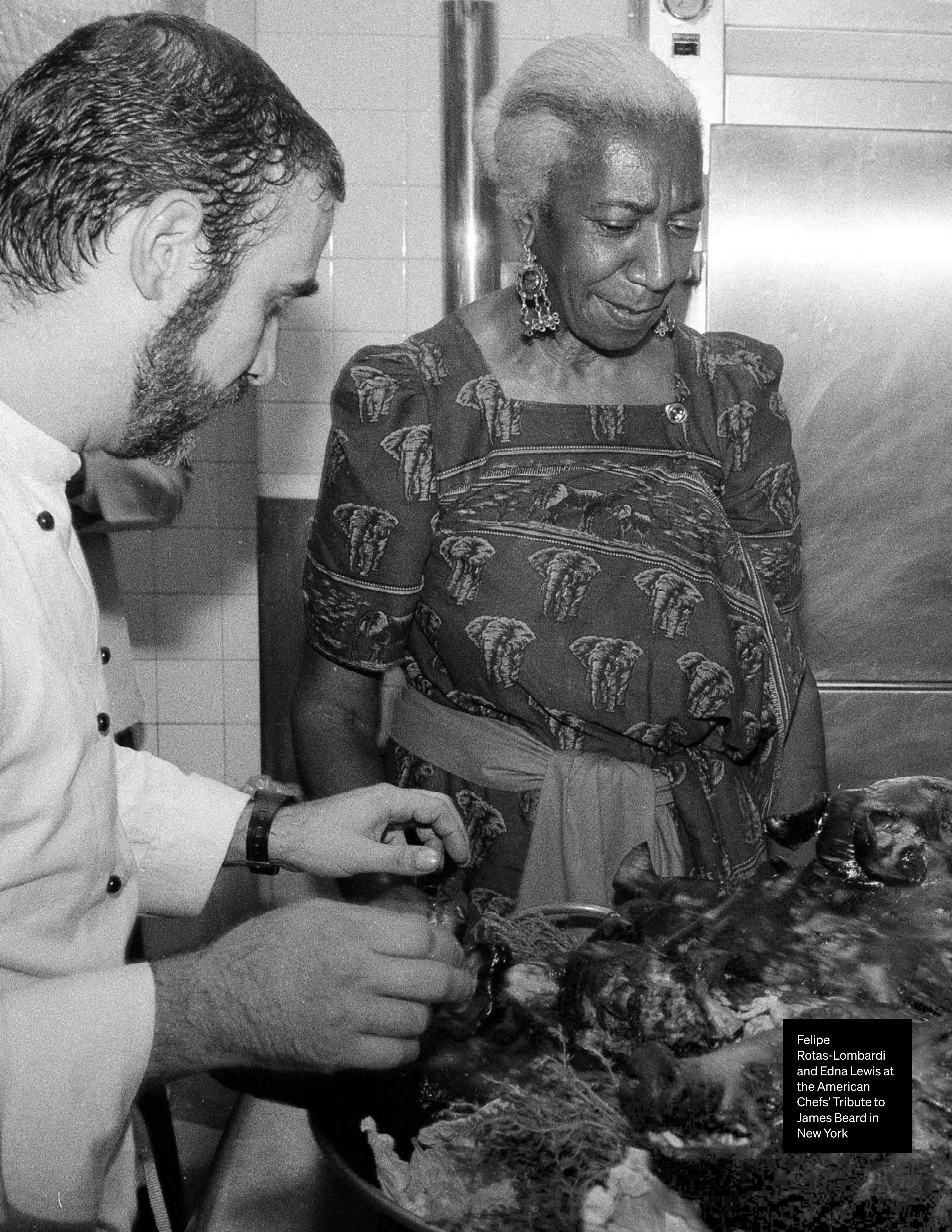
This seminal work contains recipes from Lewis’ childhood spent in Freetown, a farming community settled by emancipated enslaved.

***In Pursuit of Flavor***

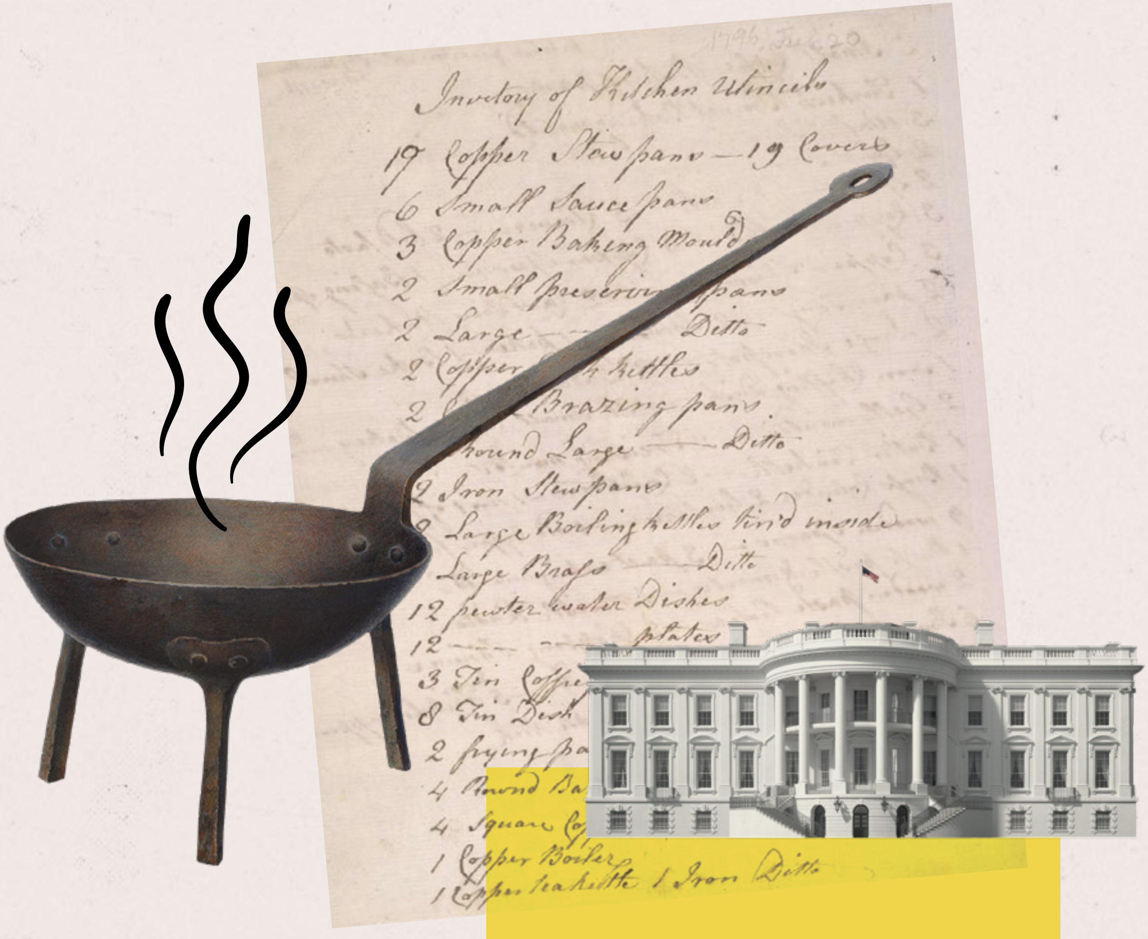
In this James Beard Foundation Cookbook Hall of Fame-inducted work, Lewis highlights the importance of farm-to-table cooking.

***The Gift of Southern Cooking***

Lewis and Peacock develop new versions of neglected traditional Southern recipes brought to light from their research.



Felipe Rotas-Lombardi and Edna Lewis at the American Chefs' Tribute to James Beard in New York



1796, Jun 20

Invetory of Kitchen Utincils

19 Copper Stewpans — 19 Covers
6 Small Saucepans
3 Copper Baking Moulds
2 Small preservi pans
2 Large — Ditto
2 Copper h kettles
2 Brazing pans
round Large — Ditto
2 Iron Stewpans
2 Large Boiling kettles tin'd inside
Large Brass — Ditto
12 pewter water Dishes
12 — — plates
3 Tin Coffe
8 Tin Dish
2 frying pa
4 Round Ba
4 Square Co
1 Copper Boiler
1 Copper teakettle 1 Iron Ditto

## JAMES HEMINGS

Born into bondage in 1765, James Hemings lived much of his life enslaved. At nine years old, he was delivered to future American president Thomas Jefferson's plantation, Monticello, along with several siblings and his mother, Elizabeth "Betty" Hemings, as slave labor. Hemings and his family were among the six hundred people Jefferson enslaved throughout the president's life. Like many of his siblings, Hemings, was fathered by Jefferson's father-in-law, John Wayles.

In May 1784, Hemings joined Jefferson in Paris after the latter was appointed an American minister to the French court to negotiate treaties of commerce (Jefferson brought him along to learn "the art of cookery"). In Paris, Hemings trained with restaurateur Monsieur Combeaux, apprenticed with pâtissiers, and shadowed a cook from the household of the Prince de Condé. After three years, he became chef de cuisine at the Hôtel de Langeac, Jefferson's Paris residence (which also functioned as the American embassy at the time). Hemings's dishes were served to statesmen and aristocrats.

In 1789, Hemings and Jefferson returned to America, and by 1793, Hemings negotiated a contract with Jefferson to gain his freedom: He could become free if he trained his brother Peter to take his place as the successor chef at Monticello. In

> *“James, like other Southern Black cooks were able to do, was trained outside of the South. He was trained in Paris. He comes back to America literate, multilingual, fluent in French, and basically—if we’re gonna be real—the father of Southern gourmet cuisine.”*
>
> **—MICHAEL**

1796, Hemings gained his freedom, and over the following years, he traveled and worked as a cook in multiple kitchens and taverns.

While employed in Baltimore, Hemings took his own life. He was thirty-six. Jefferson’s friend William Evans made inquiries into Hemings’s tragic end on Jefferson’s behalf, and on November 5, 1801, he wrote: “The report respecting James Hemings having committed an act of suicide is true. I made every inquiry at the time this melancholy circumstance took place. The result of which was, that he had been delirious for some days prior to committing the act, and it was the general opinion that drinking too freely was the cause.”

As Michael notes in his class, Hemings is considered by many as the father of Southern gourmet cuisine: “James Hemings in his own time was probably the best trained chef that Federalist America knew. He could read. He could write. He was multilingual. But he was still an African descendant in early America.” Although Hemings’s time on Earth was short and fraught, his legacy lives on today thanks to his invaluable impact on both Southern food’s techniques and flavors.

**ASSIGNMENT:**

## *FOOD OF YOUR ELDERS*

*Talk to the elders in your life about what they remember eating. Who cooked for them? What dishes were commonly on their table, and what did they taste like? What was their favorite thing to eat as a child? The answers to these questions will help you get a sense of your family’s history and context, since food is an edible link to culture.*

*Food preferences and food nostalgia can help you paint a portrait of your elders; by learning what dishes speak to their heart, remind them of home, and bring them comfort, you’ll glean a deeper, more personal understanding of your loved ones. Document these conversations in a notebook and keep it among other family treasures, such as baby books and photo albums. It will be a cherished keepsake that can be added to over time.*

# TELLING YOUR STORY

*Food writing is a useful tool for sharing and documenting your family's story—and your own*

**FOOD IS YOUR FLAG,** and food writing is an excellent way to interact with and honor your family's history. You don't need to have a fancy kitchen or a degree from culinary school to start. You just have to commit to telling your stories honestly (and be willing to write terribly at first). Michael's food blog, *Afroculinaria*, started in 2011 as a way for Michael to document his work and share recipes and insights. "*Afroculinaria* was about creating a space where I could begin to tell stories that were not being told about food and Black people," he says.

Don't be afraid to express yourself creatively; writing is a way to share your unique perspective and place in the world. When writing about history, you're engaging with many stories, perspectives, and cultures that have converged into a multifaceted reality. You can help yourself by having someone around to speak with about your thoughts. The main goal is to be present, as it allows you to home in on what you want to say and why. It helps you be fully in the craft of writing and rewriting and reframing until you get it right.

Writing can be therapeutic, and memory doesn't exist only for nostalgia. The act of writing through painful pasts and hard-to-face information can serve as a means for both healing and honoring. In West Africa,

SOUTH
NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN

there are traveling poets, musicians, and storytellers—called griots—who maintain and sing oral histories, a role that's part troubadour, part bard, part historian, and part community leader. Give your ancestors back their existence by making them non-anonymous and gift them their rightful space and recognition. Your ancestors deserve a living monument and for you to be their griot.

Think about your family history as piecing together a mosaic, as Michael did when he started to research his own. The full picture is made up of many things. When you approach this through the lens of genealogy, be inquisitive. The first part of this research process will essentially be speculative genealogy, where you'll think back to what you know and the stories you've heard. You'll be able to get into the more specific examples of how family members arrived, for example, and where they came from through research. Genetic tests are also available to help. You'll need to find documentation to contextualize the story you piece together and back it up with facts. This mosaic of documentation, speculation, and genetics provides you a unique opportunity to look at your family story and, by extension, your own story in a comprehensive, holistic way.

Many of us don't talk to the living representatives of our family's stories: our elders or members of our community. Talk to them about how they came to live where they live, what they heard from their elders growing up, and what they know about their own ancestry or their parents. Connecting these stories will allow you to know more about who you are and how you got here.

## ASSIGNMENT:

# *YOUR LIFE STORY IN 10 DISHES*

**You've heard of the memoir, in which an author writes about their life, but have you ever thought about how the combination of certain ingredients can communicate much about your family and history?**

### 1

*Draft a list of ten dishes you feel tell your life story. They don't have to be fancy; they should just speak to the truth of how you ate at different points in your life. Some questions to get you started are: What meals were the cornerstones of your childhood? What food makes you think of home? Are memories and emotions are attached to certain recipes? How do recipes drawn from your present-day life distinguish themselves from the meals of your childhood? Have personal, religious, or idealistic preferences shaped the ingredients or techniques you use or don't use?*

### 2

*After your list is done, draft a small blurb for each dish. This blurb can be as short as two sentences or as long as a page—just make sure it communicates why you chose the dishes on your list. Include type of commentary you think might be important: memory, emotion, or thoughts on flavor.*

### 3

*Once you have your annotated list, interview your family to touch on their thoughts and feelings about these iconic meals. It's also fine to focus on just one of the dishes if it holds special meaning for you. Research the history of the recipes and their ingredients. Then pick a dish and expand your blurb to include the recipe's history, your family's commentary, and your personal story to create a food-focused personal essay.*

***As Michael says: "Our own recipes have volumes to speak about the stories that we engender."***

# *Tools and Ingredients of the West African Kitchen*

**The tastes and customs of West African kitchens are the foundations of many Southern American culinary traditions. Here are some key tools and ingredients ➔**

## Mortar and Pestle

A familiar sight in many African households, the mortar and pestle is the workhorse kitchen tool used to grind, emulsify, and break down ingredients to reveal their distinct qualities. In some African countries, the bowl is often made of mango wood; elsewhere, stone is used. The rhythmic pounding of the pestle hitting the mortar bowl is a common sound heard all over Africa.

## Grinding Stone

In addition to the mortar and pestle, some rely on the grinding stone to mill pepper for soups and sauces or to ground spices. The two-stone grinder consists of a flat stone as the grinding surface and a smaller, cylindrical stone used for crushing ingredients together. To be used effectively, one has to kneel or bend forward, holding the upper millstone with both hands and working it back and forth in the grinding stone hollow.

## Wooden Spoon

Used to mix, stir, and taste, the wooden spoon is a ubiquitous fixture in West African and African American cooking, able to scrape the bits off of the bottom of a pan and even sturdy enough to help mix dough.

## Blending Broomstick

Originally fastened from dried raffia palm fronds (now more widely available in plastic), the blending broomstick is used to combine flavors from multiple ingredients within a pot, allowing for the texture and flavor to surface.

## Your Hands

Michael refers to your hands as “time-honored” and the “best cooking utensils you have.” The sentiment is echoed throughout the West African kitchen tradition, speaking not just to the legacy of the meals and who makes them, but to the level of care with which each meal is prepared.

## Maggi Cubes

Invented in Switzerland in the late 1800s, these savory, umami-forward cubes are a popular, time-saving seasoning and stock base that can be added to soup and rice for robust flavor. They supplant traditional thickening flavorings such as soumbala (the seeds of the néré tree), which can be time-consuming to prepare and difficult to acquire. You can substitute Maggi cubes for bouillon cubes in stew or for chicken stock in jollof rice. You can find them at most supermarkets.

## Kitchen Pepper

This is a premixed blend of spices found across the African diaspora that typically includes allspice, clove, cinnamon, and cardamom. You can find it in most West African food stores and online. Or you can make your own.

## Tomatoes

This vegetable shows up in many African dishes and in the Americas as the base of stews. Both jollof rice and jambalaya are made with a foundation of stewed tomatoes and spices. To prepare Michael’s recipe for his okra, corn, and tomato stew, see page 29.

## Habanero Peppers

One of many ingredients that traveled east from the Americas to West Africa, habaneros are Mexican in origin but were transported to Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. Today they’re a common ingredient in West African dishes, providing heat and a bit of fruitiness.

# OKRA, CORN, AND TOMATO STEW

**MICHAEL'S RECIPE TELLS THE STORY** of "the garden of our ancestors" where tomatoes and corn grew together with okra as companion plants—a reference to the practice of growing different plants together for their complementary characteristics, such as pest-repelling abilities, that aid in one another's growth. This recipe's base is stewed tomatoes with okra and onion, which ties it to many parts of the African diaspora: One variation shows up as the base of okra gumbo in America, another that omits the tomatoes gets close to okra stew in West Africa, and the addition of cornmeal creates a dish similar to both cou cou (grits made of cornmeal and okra) found in Barbados and fungi (a Caribbean version of polenta) in the U.S. and the British Virgin Islands. This stew highlights each vegetable while bringing them together to create something truly greater than the sum of its parts. Serve with a side of rice or with cornbread for heartier fare.

**SERVES 4-6**

## INGREDIENTS

**5 slices kosher beef bacon or pork bacon**

**1 cup large-diced white onion**

**Kitchen pepper, to taste (see page 28)**

**Kosher salt, to taste**

**Freshly cracked black pepper, to taste**

**⅓ cup tomato paste**

**¼ tsp cayenne pepper**

**3 red tomatoes, chopped with juice preserved**

**2 cups thinly sliced fresh okra**

**2 cups fresh corn kernels, sliced off the cob**

**1 sprig fresh rosemary**

**1 tbsp roughly chopped fresh parsley**

**1 tbsp roughly chopped fresh thyme**

## METHOD

● In a large heavy-bottomed cast-iron pan or Dutch oven, lay the bacon slices flat and turn the heat to medium. Cook and render the bacon fat, turning the slices frequently, until they are crispy and have browned, about 11 minutes. Remove the slices from the pan and let them drain on a plate lined with paper towels.

● In the same pan, add the diced onion, and sauté over medium heat until it's translucent. Season the onion with kitchen pepper, salt, and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste. Add the tomato paste and cayenne pepper, and stir, coating the onions. Once the paste has caramelized and become a rusty red color, about 5 minutes, add the fresh chopped tomatoes and their juice. Stir the tomato-onion mixture, and continue cooking until the tomatoes have softened, about 5 minutes. After 5 minutes, add the sliced okra to the pan, then stir to incorporate. Let the contents of the pan cook for 10 to 15 minutes.

● After 10 to 15 minutes, add the corn. Lower the heat to medium-low, and add a sprig of rosemary to the pan. Continue cooking for 5 minutes, then taste and adjust the seasonings as you'd like. Before serving, top with crumbled crispy bacon pieces, fresh parsley, and fresh thyme.

# BLACK-EYED PEA FRITTERS (*ACCARA*)

**ACCARA FRITTERS ARE DENSE,** chewy, deep-fried treats made with black-eyed peas, which are popular in many African countries. In Michael's eyes, the fritters are West Africa's answer to falafel, enjoyed as part of a spread of dishes or on their own as a snack. Black-eyed peas hold a special place in African and African American cooking. In Senegal, cooking a pot of nyebe (the Wolof name for the legume) is seen as a way of providing for others, and in America, it's a symbol of future prosperity when eaten at midnight on New Year's Eve in many Black households. Like a pot of black-eyed peas, these accara "inspire generosity," as Michael says, and speak to the importance of communing over food on both sides of the Atlantic.

**SERVES 4**

## INGREDIENTS

**1 cup dried black-eyed peas**

**1 tsp baking soda**

**¼ cup diced white onion**

**1 tbsp kosher salt**

**4 cups peanut oil**

**1 poultry-flavored Maggi cube**

## METHOD

- One day before you make the accara, bring a large pot of water to a boil. Place the black-eyed peas into another large pot. Once the water is boiling, carefully pour the hot water into the pot of beans, cover the pot, and set it aside. Let the beans soak overnight (this allows the beans to shed their skin).

- The next day, gently rub the beans between your fingers until the beans shed their skin. Discard the skin. Continue until the black-eyed peas are white, then set the cleaned beans aside in a large bowl, reserving the soaking water for later.

- In the bowl of a blender or food processor, add the peas, baking soda, onion, salt, and ¼ cup of the soaking water, then blend until the mixture becomes a paste, about 1 minute. Pause in the middle of the blending process and use a rubber spatula to scrape the sides and bottom of the blender bowl to make sure the mixture is being evenly incorporated.

- In a large cast-iron or heavy-bottomed pot, heat the peanut oil (about 2 to 3 inches) until it shimmers. Using an ice cream scoop, add round balls of the accara batter to the pan with an inch of space between them. Once the accara are golden brown on one side, after about 2 to 3 minutes, use a spatula to flip them over to cook the other side for 2 to 3 minutes.

- While the accara cook, add the Maggi cube to the bowl of a mortar and pestle, and pound the cube until it becomes a powder. Set the powder aside.

- Once the accara are golden brown on each side, remove them from the pan using a slotted spoon, and let them drain on a plate lined with paper towels. Sprinkle the accara with the powdered Maggi seasoning and serve hot.

# AFRICAN DIASPORA COOKING

*Resources for learning more about Black cooking and Black food history*

**THERE'S SO MUCH** to know and understand about Black cooking in America. Follow these schools, organizations, and publications and support them by taking cooking classes, donating to their efforts, and researching to learn more about their programs.

## Brownsville Community Culinary Center

This Brooklyn-based nonprofit organization offers paid job training and runs an on-site restaurant serving dishes inspired by the African diaspora.

## New Orleans Culinary & Hospitality Institute

This culinary training program focuses on teaching front- and back-of-the-house hospitality in the history-rich city of New Orleans, Louisiana.

## Afroculinaria

Michael's blog documents Black food traditions in America and on the continent of Africa.

## Edna Lewis Foundation

This nonprofit organization named after the late Southern chef offers scholarships and courses focusing on Southern cooking.

## Ray Charles Program in African American Culture at Dillard University

Located in New Orleans at Dillard University, a member of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (or HBCU), this center for culture studies offers classes focusing on Black cooking.

> “*Food is supposed to inspire us to be generous. It’s supposed to inspire us to share. It’s supposed to inspire us to look beyond dark and bad days for something better.*”

**—MICHAEL**

# CREDITS

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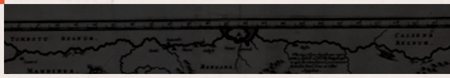

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