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## Vegan soul food: Down-home cooking goes meatless

By JULIA TERRUSO  
Philadelphia Daily News

[terrusj@phillynews.com](mailto:terrusj@phillynews.com) 215-854-5444

SOUL FOOD carries a certain connotation of deep fryers, heavy cream, lard and tastiness at the expense of arterial clogging. It doesn't have to be that way.

Vegan food also carries a certain connotation - of tasteless but sensible cuisine dependent on faux tofu meats and processed fake cheeses. That's not always the case, either.

Chef and self-proclaimed food activist Bryant Terry wants to set the record straight: Soul food can be fresh and even healthy; vegan cooking can have soul.

Terry's cookbook, "Vegan Soul Kitchen" (Lifelong Books, \$18.95), brings the flavor without the fat. It's a collection of fresh fruit-, vegetable- and nut-based meals which, while classified as "vegan," are also traditional family recipes with a hip and healthy flair.

"I thought it was important to make an intervention in the genre of African-American cookbooks," Terry said in a recent interview. "In terms of books from major publishers, there isn't a single book that presents African-American cuisine without animal products - without dairy, without meat."

Terry was raised in Memphis, Tenn., where he watched his grandfather cook up Southern dishes every day. Watching such a strong man in the kitchen made it a far less gendered space, he said.

Terry completed the Chef's Training Program at the Natural Gourmet Institute for Health and Culinary Arts, in New York City. Since then, he's founded b-healthy, an initiative to involve

youth in the sustainable-food movement, and has written three cookbooks. These days he lives in Oakland, Calif., and lectures across the country.

Terry's not a fan of food-preference classifications even though he's answered to almost all of them. He went from childhood omnivore to high-school vegetarian to college vegan. He spent a summer as a fruitarian and tried the raw-food diet in graduate school.

"When I reflect on my journey with food, I realize that most of the times when I was naming my diet, it was for other people," he said. "I want to empower people to embrace a more ethical, sustainable and helpful diet without feeling like they have to box themselves into a model," he said.

Vegan soul food isn't just about promoting healthier diets, Terry explained. It's about dispelling common beliefs on the history of the cuisine.

"When people think 'soul food' or 'African-American cuisine,' they think antebellum survival food. They think of enslaved Africans eating the remnants of plantation owners' tables," he said. "But I think that there needs to be an understanding of the complexities and the changes that have happened with the cuisine."

Start with soul-food staples, Terry said, and the cuisine becomes healthy by nature.

First, soul food is about fresh, green ingredients, often from a backyard garden. Terry is a major advocate of the locally grown movement. He said that fresh fruits and vegetables from community gardens, farmers markets and local stores are a good health and monetary investment.

Second, soul food is rooted in slow cooking. The key to his vegan soul-food cookbook is avoiding the processed foods from grocery stores - Terry calls them "industrial foods" - and the fatty shortcuts by making things from scratch.

"You have to allow the time to build the flavors," he said. "With traditional African-American cuisine, that means adding bacon fat or lard or pork to food to give it flavor. You can have as much flavor if you take the time to build it with fresh herbs, or by caramelizing."

Perfect example?

Terry's Open-Faced BBQ Tempeh Sandwich with Carrot-Cayenne Coleslaw, which takes some time for the flavors to set.

Philadelphia soul-food chef Delilah Winder has a more traditional meat- and dairy-inclusive take on the cuisine, but she said that she sees how a vegan approach would work.

"You're really just incorporating all the different elements - collard, mustards, dandelion, the nuts, the blueberries and blackberries, the corn and legumes, black-eyed peas, watermelon, fresh herbs, pecans and peanuts," she said. "Looking at that, you're getting your protein, and you're getting all of your vegetables and vitamins."

Winder, who owns five Southern cuisine stands locally, also wants to disprove the stereotype that soul food is nothing but deep fried and battered. She said that she has always focused on whole, fresh foods and avoided the processed or canned. She tries to limit the amount of salt and sugar in recipes, and uses canola oil for frying.

Terry's other tips for healthy eating? Pay attention to seasonality.

"The Earth is very intelligent and knows exactly what we need," he said. Summertime fruits and vegetables, for example, have a higher water content, which makes them lighter and easier to digest. One of his favorite summertime recipes, for instance, is cucumber-watermelon soup with pickled watermelon-rind salsa.

Terry's book also comes with a suggested soundtrack for every meal. It begins with "Thankful," written by Terry's uncle, Don Bryant. A fan recently put a playlist of all the suggested songs on iTunes.

"Growing up we would have delicious food at family gatherings, singing and dancing," Bryant Terry said. "Those things are intimately tied together for me. I wanted to share that with readers. That spirit around the intersection of food and music."

Putting a healthy twist on soul food couldn't come at a better time. The federal Centers for Disease and Control reports that 66 percent of adults over 20 in the United States are obese or overweight.


In the African-American community, the statistics are even more alarming. The federal Office of Minority Health says that 78 percent of African-American women and 60 percent of African-American men are obese or overweight.

Terry said that the most important message eaters of all types and ethnicities should take away from his book is that healthy eating works for a variety of cuisines.

"I just hope," he said, "to get people eating real food, increase consumption of plant-based food and complicate the understanding of what African-American cuisine is." \*

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