



This and following pages: Bryant Terry borrows a friend's Berkeley kitchen to cook up a batch of nourishing succotash soup.

RECLAIMING TRUE GRITS

Why soul food is actually good for you.

BY BRYANT TERRY

PHOTOS BY BRITTANY M. POWELL

Mention “soul food” and you will hear scores of health and medical professionals claim that it is the downfall of the health and well-being of African-Americans. It is true that African-Americans have some of the highest rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers of any group in this country. Frankly, I’m getting sick of soul food being held even partially responsible for this. The majority of people imagine the traditional soul-food diet as unsophisticated and unhealthy fare, comprising high-calorie, low-nutrient dishes replete with salt, sugar, and bad fats.

But rather than vilifying traditional soul food, let’s focus on the real culprit—what I like to call “instant soul food.”

Take instant grits. Mass production and distribution have diminished the original product’s superb quality and have obscured the distinctive characteristics that make down-home hominy so darn desirable in the first place. And the taste of instant grits boxed up in a factory can never compare to the complex, nutty flavor of grits that have been stone ground in a Mississippi mill and slow cooked. So it’s understandable that those who have only had that watered-down stuff (read: many

of my friends in the Northeast) scoff at the mention of grits.

Similar to instant grits, instant soul food is a dishonest representation of African-American cuisine. And to be clear, when I refer to instant soul food, I’m not just alluding to the processing, packaging, and mass marketing of African-American cuisine in the late 1980s. I’m also talking about the oversimplified version of the cuisine constructed in the popular imagination in the late 1960s.

Real soul food is good for you. The term first emerged during the black liberation movement as African-Americans named and reclaimed their diverse traditional foods. Clearly, “soul food” was meant to celebrate and distinguish African-American cooking from general Southern cooking, not ghettoize it. But in the late 1960s, soul food was “discovered” by the popular media and constructed as the newest exotic cuisine for white consumers to devour. Rather than portray the complexity of this cuisine and its changes throughout the late 19th and 20th century, many writers played up its more outré aspects (e.g., animal entrails) and framed the cuisine as a remnant of poverty-driven antebellum survival food.

Most self-proclaimed soul food restaurants, a considerable



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amount of soul food cookbooks, and the canned and frozen soul food industry reinforce this banal portrayal of African-American cuisine. Moreover, film and television routinely bombard viewers with crass images of African-American eating habits and culinary practices that further distort and demonize soul food.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for fried chicken, mac-and-cheese, collard greens, and peach cobbler being reinterpreted. But romanticizing comfort foods that should be eaten only occasionally, and presenting these foods as standard fare, not only rewrites history but also normalizes unhealthy eating habits for African-Americans who are unaware of their historical cuisine.

To paraphrase food historian Jessica B. Harris, "soul food" was simply what Southern black folks ate for dinner.

Sadly, over the past four decades most of us have forgotten that what many African-Americans in the South ate for dinner just two generations ago was diverse, creative, and comprised a lot of fresh, local, and homegrown nutrient-dense food.

When I think about the soul food that my grandparents and their parents ate, I do have some fond memories of deep-fried meats, overcooked leafy greens, and sugary desserts occasionally making a cameo on our menu. But, I also recall lightly sautéed okra, corn, and tomatoes from their "natural" backyard garden in South Memphis. Divine recollections abound of butchered-that-morning herb-roasted chicken from Paw-Paw's coop; "grit cakes" fashioned from breakfast leftovers and then grilled alongside pulled pork; Ma'Dear's chutney made from peaches that came from Miss Cole's mini-orchard next door;

SUCCOTASH SOUP WITH GARLICKY CORNBREAD CROUTONS

Succotash, a Native American dish consisting primarily of lima beans and corn, has been reinterpreted by Southern African-Americans with a number of bean, vegetable, and sometimes meat combinations. Here I remix the simplest version of this dish by making a tasty puréed soup. While you can get away with using frozen lima beans for this dish, using fresh corn is essential. So enjoy it during the summer months when corn is at its peak.

FOR THE CROUTONS

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 large garlic cloves, minced

2 large leftover pieces of Quinoa Cornbread (recipe page 24) or your own favorite, cut into 1/2-inch cubes

FOR THE SOUP

2 cups fresh baby lima beans, rinsed (use frozen if fresh are unavailable)

10 cups cold water

Coarse sea salt

4 large ears yellow corn, shucked, kernels scraped, cobs cut in half and reserved

1/4 cup plus 2 tsp extra-virgin olive oil

1 large onion, diced

1/4 cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley

White pepper

Making the croutons: Preheat the oven to 350°F. In a medium sauté pan, combine

the olive oil and the garlic. Raise heat to medium-low; sauté for 3 to 5 minutes, until fragrant. Remove from heat and set aside.

In a large bowl, toss together the cornbread and the garlic oil. Transfer to a parchment-lined baking sheet, and bake, shaking the pan twice, until the croutons are golden brown, about 15 minutes. Set aside.

Making the soup: In a medium saucepan, combine the beans with the water.

Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium, partially cover, and simmer for about 10 minutes or until beans are slightly tender. Add 1 teaspoon salt and simmer for 5 more minutes. Drain the cooking liquid into a bowl, set the beans aside, and add the liquid back to the saucepan.

To make a broth, add the corncobs to the bean liquid and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, partially cover, and simmer for 30 minutes. Remove from heat. Discard the corncobs (and compost).

While broth is simmering, in a medium sauté pan over medium-low heat, combine the olive oil, 1/8 teaspoon salt, and the

onions and sweat for 15 minutes, until the onions soften. Set aside 1/3 cup of corn kernels and add the rest to the onions. Cook for about 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, until corn is tender. Transfer the corn-onion mixture to the broth. Add the cooked beans. Bring to a boil, immediately reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer for 5 more minutes until the corn is done.

Remove from heat, stir in 2 tablespoons of the parsley, transfer to an upright blender, and purée in small batches. Strain to remove tough corn skins. Season with salt and pepper to taste and set aside.

Preheat broiler. In a small bowl, toss the reserved corn kernels with 2 teaspoons of olive oil. Transfer kernels to a 9-inch pie pan or other oven-proof pan. Place the corn about 3 inches from the heat and broil until browned (but not burned), about 3 to 5 minutes, stirring a few times with a spoon.

Warm up the soup (if necessary), ladle it into bowls, sprinkle roasted corn kernels and garlicky cornbread croutons on top, and garnish with parsley. Enjoy.

QUINOA-QUINOA CORNBREAD

Inspired by Myra Kornfeld's "Amaranth-Studded Cornbread" from her brilliant book *The Voluptuous Vegan*, this recipe uses quinoa flour as well as whole quinoa, which give it a rich, nutty flavor and some crunch. You can find both at health food supermarkets. Up until now quinoa didn't show up often in African American-inspired cuisine, but this is a new day. Makes 4 to 6 servings

5 tablespoons unrefined corn oil, plus more for oiling the pan

1/4 cup quinoa

3/4 cup cornmeal

1/2 cup quinoa flour

1/2 cup unbleached all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon baking soda

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 cup original unflavored rice milk

2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

1/4 cup agave nectar

Set a rack in the middle of the oven and preheat to 425°F. Grease an 8-inch square bread pan and set aside.

In a medium skillet over medium heat, toast the quinoa, shaking the pan occasionally, until the grains start to pop, 2 1/2 to 3 minutes. Transfer to a large mixing bowl.

Add the cornmeal, quinoa flour, all-purpose flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt to the bowl with the toasted quinoa. Whisk to combine.

In a separate bowl, whisk together the rice milk, apple cider vinegar, agave nectar, and 5 tablespoons of corn oil.

Transfer the bread pan to the oven to preheat until sizzling, about 5 minutes. While the pan is heating, combine the wet mixture with the dry mixture and quickly mix just until the dry ingredients are moist. Do not over-mix or the bread will be dense.

Remove the pan from the oven and scrape the batter into it. Return to the oven and bake on the center rack for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the cornbread is firm to the touch and a toothpick inserted into the middle comes out clean. Serve immediately.



and fresh watermelon purchased from a flatbed truck on the side of the road and served with salt sprinkled on each slice.

There are African-Americans like the late chef and cookbook author Edna Lewis, food historian Jessica B. Harris, and Jay Foster, chef-owner of Farmer Brown Restaurant in San Francisco, who acknowledge a more complex culinary heritage and understand the African-American legacy of being "green." It's time, however, that we all reclaim real soul food by learning from elders; rediscovering heirloom varieties; planting home and community gardens; shopping at the farmers market; eating what's in season; pickling, canning, and preserving for leaner months; getting back into the kitchen and cooking; and sharing meals with family and friends. While these actions may not solve all the health issues in our communities, they will get the ball rolling.

Obviously, there are complex social,

economic, demographic, and environmental factors that explain why diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure are so rife within African-American communities. Yes, we can experience real change by making our voices heard and pressuring our elected officials to create national, state, and local policies that ensure that all Americans have access to healthy, affordable food.

The task won't be easy, but employing the same grit that carried our ancestors through the worst of times can pull us through anything.

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The heat is on

Growing climate awareness in California means much more than disaster prevention. BY TWILIGHT GREENAWAY

An increasing number of Bay Area residents are beginning to see their food choices through the lens of a changing climate, thanks to campaigns like Bon Appétit Management Company's Low-Carbon Diet (*ESF* June/July page 5) and headlines about how industrial livestock and food production contribute more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than cars, planes, and other transportation sources combined. What we eat is no longer just a matter of taste: our choices can have serious consequences for the planet.

And yet, "regardless of what we do with emissions going forward, the climate we face for the next several decades is set by the past," Michael Hanemann, director of the California Climate Change Center at UC Berkeley, told an audience of a hundred or so earlier this year, at a Ferry Building presentation sponsored by Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture (CUESA).

Hanneman explained that most scientists and economists divide our climate future into two halves. First there's the gradual change that will occur in the next 20 to 30 years—the precursors of which we are already beginning to see: earlier springs (causing fruit and nut trees to flower earlier and possibly to move out of sync with insect pollinators), fewer cold days, changes in precipitation patterns (including a smaller snowpack in the Sierras, and therefore less gradual melting, and much less water left in streams in the summer), increased heat, and more carbon dioxide in the air (which can cause certain weeds to flourish).

The second half of the century, on the other hand, is still being forecast by several world-climate simulation models that allow scientists to anticipate a range of future climate condi-

tions, from moderate, manageable changes to dire catastrophic ones. Which result we have to look forward to will depend on the choices we make now. Researchers like Hanneman talk about two important terms: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation refers various ways humans can lessen or slow the effects of climate change, while adaptation acknowledges that change is already occurring and will continue to do so, and looks at how we might adjust to it.

Bye-bye, baby lettuces?

Just how much change are we talking about? According to Hanneman, the scientific consensus is that the global temperature will have risen 2 degrees Celsius on average by the end of the century. But "it will really be about 3.3 degrees in California—and that's the year-round average. If you're looking at the Central Valley in the summer, we can expect more like 5 degrees Celsius."

That's the equivalent of 9 degrees Fahrenheit—and huge when you're talking about plants. Indeed, according to the California Climate Change Center's report *Our Changing Climate: Assessing the Risks to the State*, a large percentage of the food crops in California will be directly affected. Stone fruit such as peaches, cherries and plums, for instance, need a set number of cold days to develop properly, and lettuce can suffer burn from high temperatures. The quality of grapes grown in many of the wine-growing regions could also be compromised. Tomatoes will have shorter growing seasons.

Rising temperatures will also play a part in increasing the number of extreme weather events, from untimely freezes (such as the 2006 one that affected the whole citrus industry) to fires (like the several-week long burn last fall that led to the