



profiles in excellence


a look back at the **people,**
places and **recipes** that
sparked a culinary revolution

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soul food

a deep rooted tradition

Classroom poster inside!



One part **circumstance**, one part **resourcefulness**, and a generous helping of **determination**. Combine them all with a pinch of the past and a dash of family pride, and

you've got the recipe for soul food.

February is Black History Month and this year's national theme is Black Women in American Culture and History. We're tracing the evolution of soul food as a cultural movement, which couldn't be done without celebrating the many women who shaped it. As we tell the story of soul food, we are reminded that gathering around the dinner table is about so much more than food. When we share a meal with family and friends, we share a bit of our history, a bit of our hearts, and a bit of ourselves.

As an organization, we are committed to recognizing the cultures and cultural values of our customers and associates, and promoting diversity education initiatives in the communities we serve. We are pleased to celebrate Black History Month and hope you enjoy this year's spotlight on soul food.



origins in slavery~

While the term “soul food” is a product of 1960s America, the origins of this social and culinary movement are rooted in slavery. Forced to make do with little food, scarce kitchen supplies and no freedom, Africans who had been brought to America as slaves relied on ingenuity to feed their families. These culinary pioneers combined familiar crops with salvaged foods and scraps to develop an entirely new cuisine. But long before it was a cultural symbol and source of pride, soul food was simply a means of survival.

Native African crops such as rice, yams, okra, black-eyed peas, peanuts and kidney beans were originally brought to America for consumption on slave ships, but were quickly incorporated into Southern, and later national, cuisine. Enslaved African women are thought to have been the first group to cultivate rice in the United States and, by the mid 1700s, plantations across the coastal regions of the South had adopted their methods. European settlers likely contributed other key crops, including corn and cabbage, that they brought with them when they settled.

Slaves also began to supplement the meager rations they received from their owners with discarded animal parts including pig’s stomach, pig’s intestines (better known as chitterlings), pig’s feet and ham hocks. Nothing was left to waste in the early African American kitchen, and food scraps like turnip tops and beet greens were used alongside herbs, spices, lard and cornmeal to enhance flavor.





creating a cuisine~

As early Southern cuisine began to take shape, it became clear that this movement would be shaped by much more than ingredients alone. Slaves were often not permitted to learn how to read or write, which meant that recipes and cooking methods remained primarily an oral tradition, characterized by the handing down of skills and guidance from one generation of women to the next. Reflecting on this tradition many years later, author Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor championed the ideals of cooking by instinct, not recipe, in her popular book, *Vibration Cooking*.



One of the first published soul food cookbooks by Abby Fisher in 1881

While oral traditions were—and still are—a significant part of southern cooking, the first cookbooks that began to more fully define and popularize this new culinary movement appeared shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1866, Malinda Russell's *A Domestic Cook Book: Containing Useful Recipes for the Kitchen* was printed, and it remains on record as the first cookbook published by an African American woman. Abby Fisher later followed with *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking* (1881). The creators of a new culinary culture, women were now taking the opportunity to share their knowledge with a wider audience.

the great migration~

New ways of documenting recipes led to more and more people across the country becoming familiar with African American cuisine, as did the migration of newly freed slaves to other regions. As they traveled north, freed slaves combined new influences with their established food traditions.

Although former slaves were now free, some still lacked resources and lived in poverty for many years, continuing the “use what you have” approach. Many of the available jobs were in restaurants cooking for others, so their unique culinary style was now available to the masses.



Newly freed slaves introduced their unique culinary style to the masses

civil rights & changing identity~

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, soul food began to be seen as a source of pride and cultural/familial bonding. This is when the term “soul food” (along with terms like “soul sister” and “soul music”) became a part of American vernacular as African Americans claimed their stake in the American cultural landscape. More freedoms were sought and gained, and African American culture was celebrated more freely. The first soul food restaurants also opened in this decade, further establishing the newfound popularity of this unique cuisine. One example is Sylvia’s, opened by Sylvia Woods in Harlem in 1962. Still in operation today, Sylvia’s has expanded to include a catering hall and a line of grocery products, and its founder is widely known as “The Queen of Soul Food.”



Opened in 1962 in Harlem, NY, Sylvia's is one of the first soul food restaurants.

a tradition continues~

While traditional soul food restaurants remain popular, modern culinary techniques and regional cooking styles have also shaped this cuisine. Often considered unhealthy, many chefs have reinvented traditional soul food dishes for the health conscious by cutting back on high fat and high calorie ingredients.

Today's soul food movement shows no signs of slowing down. From spotlights on The Food Network to large celebrations like the Boise Soul Food Festival or the National Soul Food Cook-Off, those who appreciate the true flavor of soul food and its history are finding ways to keep the tradition alive. At its very heart, soul food is about family, togetherness and sharing – key ingredients to a lasting recipe for success.

soul food, southern food, comfort food–isn't it all the same?

Soul food is comfort food in its own right, bringing a sense of satisfaction, pride, and cultural bonding to those who struggled to create a new identity, and then later serving as a tie to the past and a reminder that culture and tradition are something no one can ever take away.

Homemade Sweet Potato Pie

Makes 3 pies

Ingredients:

- 4 large sweet potatoes
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 Tbsp vanilla extract
- 1/2 Tbsp nutmeg
- 1 stick of butter or margarine
- 3 eggs
- 1 12oz can evaporated milk
- 3 unbaked 9-inch pie crusts

Place peeled, quartered sweet potatoes in just enough water to cover. Bring water to a boil, reduce heat and simmer until tender (about 20–30 minutes). Drain sweet potatoes, cool and mash until smooth. Add sugar, vanilla, nutmeg and butter to mashed sweet potatoes and mix until well combined. In a separate bowl, beat eggs. Add to potato mixture. Pour milk into mixture slowly and beat until filling is creamy. Pour filling into pie crusts and bake in preheated 325°F oven for 1 hour or until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean.





Cassandra Gaines

Founder of the National Soul Food Cook-Off

To me, soul food is comfort food cooked with love and affection. Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, my mom was always in the kitchen cooking meals that filled our house with warmth and love.

Some of the dishes my mom prepared were fried chicken, mustard greens, homemade macaroni and cheese, candied yams (sweet potatoes) and hot water cornbread. As a family, our favorite desserts were sweet potato pie and pound cake. And no meal was complete without a tall glass of homemade lemonade. Everything was made from scratch, not from a box. This, in the average African American home, is the difference between “cooking dinner” and “fixing dinner.”

It was a family tradition to have our meals together so our parents would know what was going on with everyone. I’ve seen this trend change over the years. Now that our society has become so fast-paced, I fear we’ve lost many of the traditions that were passed down from our ancestors.

I developed the National Soul Food Cook-Off to regain some of these traditions. This cook-off, which has become a national event, is not your ordinary competition. It unites the old, traditional cook who “cooks dinner” from scratch with the new cook who “fixes dinner” from prepared ingredients. This event also gives young children the opportunity to sample a variety of dishes and learn more about different cooking styles.

-Cassandra

