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From Scraps to Scrumptious

Soul food is considered to be one of the most eloquent, tasty, and unique cuisines in American society today. The mouthwatering taste of collard greens, sweet potato pie, corn bread, fried okra, and a buttery biscuit helps make this cuisine exceptionally popular. However, soul food has far more significance to it aside from taste. Soul food has an extremely rich history, especially within African American culture. It has become a central aspect in modern African American culture and a defining element of Black identity. This food culture emerged in America during slavery, when Black slaves were forced to create their own meals using only the scraps that their masters gave them. With these leftovers slaves were able to create and cook hearty meals that they could enjoy after a long day of strenuous labor. The majority of the recipes prepared by slaves were not taught to them; rather, they fashioned these new and modified dishes from scratch. Due to the lack of resources, many of the dishes were created using the most ordinary ingredients.

This new type of food symbolized freedom and comfort, hence the reason slaves originally referred to soul food as “comfort food” or “food for the soul.” This food was significant because it provided slaves with some kind of contentment during their difficult lives. They were able to find a sense of belonging and happiness, and “their food culture and food freedom thrived beyond slavery, past emancipation, and through reconstruction—into the late twentieth century—and continued to provide African Americans with comfort during

uncomfortable times and with power against dominant white culture” (Bates 54). During the Antebellum Era, slaves searched for ways to fight against dominant White culture. They struggled to find their own identities, apart from being the slaves to their masters. This newly founded food culture allowed slaves to discover their own individuality and experience a sense of freedom for the first time. Ownership of these dishes and the opportunity to grow, cook, and sell their own food allowed slaves to exert a certain amount of independence in the midst of White hegemony. This food freedom gave African Americans control over at least one aspect of their lives, which contributed to their overall identity. The choice of what to eat and how to prepare and serve it could be understood as an expression of resistance or personal agency. Soul food was used as a tool to fight against classism and racism and became an integral method of providing the soul with support, healing, and encouragement. Eating became a manifestation of personal, social, and religious communion, and therefore, food was not prepared to simply fill one’s stomach. Soul food has acted as a source of comfort in difficult conditions, something that satisfied not only the physical desires of the stomach, but the intangible needs of the soul as well.

Carrying on the Traditions

Although the tradition of soul food originated during slavery, it has developed and been passed down from generation to generation. After I conducted several interviews with African Americans from different backgrounds, it became evident that soul food continues to play an important role in the broader African American community. The individuals who took part in the interviews emphasized that soul food, and the history surrounding it, remains significant here in the twenty-first century. While soul food is no longer necessary for survival as it was to slaves, it has taken on a social aspect that brings African Americans together to remember their history and celebrate the present. The interviews illustrate that the history surrounding soul food is still

prevalent in the African American community, and its origins have not been lost on those young adults who still enjoy soul food two centuries after its creation. Furthermore, the interviewees articulated the connection between soul food and socio-political identities, including class and race. Soul food still remains associated with religion and spirituality; it still carries on a connection to food sharing, and it continues to act as a source of comfort for African Americans in times of distress and misfortune. Therefore, African Americans self-consciously articulate a form of eating that they see as liberating them from the heritage of slavery.

Food for the Soul

Even after slavery came to an end, soul food continued to play a central role in the lives of African Americans and their families. Soul food is not simply viewed as a compilation of ingredients; it firstly provides comfort for the soul and then satisfies the stomach. For African Americans, eating was not just a biological necessity but also an activity that encompassed a cultural purpose. There are several different components of soul food that contribute to the Black identity outside of consumption, including sharing, spirituality, comfort, unity, and well-being. The notion that food has ‘soul’ developed out of the idea that it was actually good for the soul and that it provided not just bodily, but spiritually and fostered togetherness within the Black community (Bates 65). Soul food was thought to nourish and lift up the inner spirit. It represented liberty and freedom, which are extremely calming and beneficial for the soul.

The concept of soul food comforting the inner soul is still relevant in the Black community and is exemplified through the interviews I conducted. Many of the African American individuals on the UC Santa Barbara campus live away from home and miss the comforts of soul food. None of the interviewees are aware of any soul food restaurants in the Santa Barbara area, leaving nowhere for them to feel at home in a predominantly White city.

This has led to African Americans on the campus forming their own community through the Black Student Union (BSU). This student organization has put together potlucks and soul food nights to remind members of the comforts of home. As expressed by one interviewee, BreeYanna Williams, “When I’m in Santa Barbara, sometimes I just get in moods where I crave soul food and want to be around the culture I grew up with. Craving soul food, for me, is never just about the fried chicken and collard greens, but about family and friends coming together to have a good time. We just don’t have that kind of culture here when just over two percent of the undergraduate population is Black.” This testimony parallels the ways in which slaves fought against the dominant White culture by developing their own style of cuisine. The culture surrounding soul food is still being used to escape White dominance in areas that are not widely diverse. Williams’s explanation demonstrates that the desire to escape White culture is not personal, but necessary to reconnect to one’s home. In this way, soul food has remained important to those who are not always close to home.

Sharing is Caring

Families in the Black community have had a long history of struggling to survive in America, which has prompted the concept of food sharing. During the Reconstruction, following the Civil War, newly freed slaves discovered the hardships of trying to feed their families and the struggles of building a new life. The hardships of the Reconstruction only strengthened soul food’s role in African American society. The cuisine that had developed during slavery as a means of comfort expanded to console those suffering during the Reconstruction. Often times, food was in short supply and Black people were forced to be as resourceful as possible. Black individuals frequently found themselves sharing food amongst one another in order to survive. They referred to this as “food-sharing” and fellowship. Although this idea of food sharing

developed during slavery, it has been passed down through generations and still plays a significant role in Black communities. In her article on soul food's connection to hunger and memory, Bates explains, "Many communities were committed to mutual food sharing in an attempt to stretch resources, food sharing and networking were ways in which women reached out in collective unity to help themselves and others to survive amidst rapidly changing conditions of their lives" (Bates 66). Providing others with food was not only for their physical survival, but also for their mental survival. The pleasure of tasting food that is familiar and comfortable is undeniably meaningful. However, the sharing of food was most important because it was central to a family and community's well-being and identity.

The concept of food sharing has expanded beyond the Reconstruction into the twenty-first century and has continued to shape the African American identity through its ability to create a sense of community. One way in which Black identity was created was by African Americans defining their likes, tastes, and preferences against White, middle-class America. Having a food culture that was all their own provided a way for African Americans to define their community and find a place where they knew they belonged in the larger American culture (Henderson 84). In addition, having an entire community to depend on has always been extremely empowering for the Black culture. If there is a family struggling, neighbors are willing to help one another, making the distribution of food in the community very important. Coming together and sharing plates of soul food is a time for celebration and family, which includes children, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and friends. When the tables are filled with sweet potato pies, crispy fried chicken, buttery biscuits, and yams, everyone manages to have a good time despite their individual trials. This further contributes to the idea of "finding comfort in an

uncomfortable time.” Soul food was not only good for consumption, but it stuck to the guts and hearts of these communities.

The African American soul food culture and food sharing is something that can be practiced anywhere and is still central to African American individuals. In an interview I conducted with Kayla Smith, a Black female staff member of UCSB, she expresses how soul food has played an integral role in her life. She recalls growing up in Southern California with a large family and in a poverty-stricken neighborhood. Her family did not have too much money and her mother struggled to provide adequate food for her five children. Smith expresses:

Growing up, I knew I didn't have a lot and that our family was struggling. But when you come from a large family, you learn how to come together and share food and other stuff rather than fight over it. You work with what you have. We didn't eat just any ordinary food that's on the table of a suburban house; we ate soul food, a lot. Whether it was my mother cooking it or a family friend in the neighborhood, soul food was the meal of choice. Sometimes it was a combination of my mom's cooking and a neighbor's contribution to our table that allowed the food to stretch between the seven of us. No matter how much food was there, we made it last and we enjoyed every bite.

This example of a family coming together around soul food not only shows the popularity of the cuisine, but also how it creates a sense of unity. The family knew that they did not always have a lot to eat, but as Smith explains, her family celebrated the things they did have and focused on the strength of their family ties by eating soul food. In addition, the concept of food sharing is explicit in Smith's interview. One begins to understand how natural food sharing is when one learns that it is done on a regular basis for families that struggle to have enough food and even for those that do not. As Smith explains, the food that was given to her family was always greatly appreciated, but nothing was expected in return, and no one ever wanted to make a scene over the acts of generosity because it was simply friends helping out other friends. The significance and beauty of this celebration over food is that it is applicable to all cultures, like that of the Italians and Chinese. However, every culture has its own unique experiences and connections to

different foods. The practice of food sharing and the love that it expresses is central to the African American community.

The Lords Supper

Historically, soul food has been associated with almost everything in the African American community and every occasion, including religious events and beliefs. John Egerton's statement, "Food and hunger, food and survival, food and gender, race and class; food and church, food and social life, food and family, food and love, food and remembrance and even food and funerals," demonstrates how soul food permeates every aspect of life in the African American community (16). In the Black community, food has played a huge role in the spiritual lives of individuals. In the article "Soul Food: Theology," Shirlyn Toppin highlights the spiritual experiences of eating soul food and its ability to insight religious vigor within the African American community. While many people tend to focus on the taste, texture, and preparation of soul food, it also has close ties with religion and spirituality. Many connected food with blessings not because of the sowing and reaping of the harvest, but because of the atmosphere of enjoyment that these created. "Attitudes to food have always been integral to the spiritual life and a prime metaphor for vital energy for the soul" (Toppin 48). The African American community has captured the idea that soul food gives one nourishment and creates a sense of religious strength. In addition, soul food in the African American community was an almost sacramental experience. Toppin relates the preparation and consumption of soul food to the body and blood of Christ, which make up the Eucharist. According to Christian doctrine, sacraments are the ways in which humanity is granted with the grace of God. As explained by Toppin, the same care and attention went into the preparation and consumption of soul food that went into the bread and wine (55). Toppin states that the "preparation that is involved in creating a meal

for all to share and enjoy echoes that of the church” (55). The African American community coming together over soul food to express their devotion, love, and happiness parallels the congregation coming to partake in the bread and wine and the divinity that is found through the sacraments.

In another interview I conducted, one can understand the relationship between food and religion in the African American community. In this interview with Natalie Jarrett, Assistant Coach of the UCSB Women’s Basketball Team, she discusses how she came to know and appreciate soul food through religious events. She explains that she grew up in a very religious household where her family went to church every week. Every Sunday ended with a family dinner comprised of traditional soul food. Jarrett recalls:

I loved coming home from church Sunday mornings and watching my mom start the day long process of preparing the soul food. The aromas of fried chicken, freshly baking biscuits, greens and ham hocks, cornbread, dumplings, and always a pie or cobbler in the oven permeated the entire house and made our mouths water all day. I always watched my mother in amazement and saw a little light of holiness in the grace she moved with and the respect with which she treated every Sunday. I think she cooked these big meals not just for our family to eat, but almost as an offering to God [to show] that she was grateful for what our family was blessed with.

Jarrett goes on to explain that soul food was used for other religious events involving the whole congregation. She remembers the potlucks that the entire community contributed to when there was a church meeting, a wedding, or a special holy day like Christmas. Jarrett states, “Those were special times for me, times when our extended church family came together and celebrated the joys of spirituality and soul food.” In the African American community, soul food is something that everyone comes together around to celebrate their religious beliefs. Furthermore, the extensive preparation that goes into soul food is viewed as a way to give thanks to God for bestowing blessings upon the Black Community. The cooking of soul food is a way for many to connect with their religion as prayers are said over food and blessings are counted. Soul food

serves as a reminder of how far the Black community has come in America and a promise that the deeply engrained African American culture will continue to grow stronger.

Soul food in the African American community is more than just physical food and is actually a representation and celebration of African American history, traditions, religion, family, and life. Soul food goes far beyond the requirements of food to meet one's nutritional needs by fulfilling the needs of one's soul. What began as something to comfort the soul in times of distress and hardships has developed through the generations but has also retained the same core qualities. Soul food has defined generations of Black Americans who sought to differentiate themselves from the majority of White Americans and has provided an outlet for individual and community expression. Because soul food was one of the only things slaves could turn to in order to comfort themselves and their families, it became an integral part of their lives. The concept of food sharing has further defined the African American culture as being generous and wanting to help those in need. Furthermore, religion is another important aspect in the Black culture and is often accompanied by soul food when community members congregate and praise God. The centrality and simplicity of soul food still exists in the African American culture, which explains how the traditions surrounding soul food have been able to survive for more than two hundred years. The richness in soul food is found in the ability for generation after generation to understand from where the food derived and continue to carry on the deeply respected customs that have developed around this extraordinary food culture. Soul food represents so many values and traditions of the Black community that it is sure to remain a staple in African American culture and may even come to embody more qualities valued by the next generation of Black Americans.

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