Cooking Up Soul Food


Soul food may be a mouthwatering emblem of African American identity, but not so long ago rib joints and chicken shacks were points of controversy among black Americans.

When African Americans journeyed northward in the Great Migration that began during World War I, they brought their rural southern culinary tradition with them, writes Poe, a doctoral candidate at Harvard University in the history of American civilization. But their “backward” ways seemed to threaten the hard-won respectability of the middle-class blacks already established in Chicago and other northern cities.

“With their sidewalk barbecue pits, ‘chicken shacks,’ and public consumption of watermelon,” says Poe, “an ugly stereotype of Southern migrants” as crude, unclean, and backward folk “soon developed, no less among the black middle class than among white Chicagoleans.” The migrants, however, “could not understand what the problem was” with their traditional southern food.

Southern cuisine (eaten by both whites and blacks) was largely the creation of slave cooks, using foods and preparations of Africa, Europe, and early America, Poe says. Besides fried chicken and fish, typical foods ranged from barbecued pork to one-pot dishes with regional names such as “sloosh,” “cush-cush,” and “gumbo.” “Most significantly, however,” she writes, “black people developed an affinity for the parts of animals normally discarded by whites: entrails, known as ‘chitterlings’ (pronounced ‘chitlins’); pigs’ heads, which were made into ‘souse,’ a kind of headcheese; [and] pigs’ and chickens’ feet.” One censorious front-page story in the Chicago Defender, an African American newspaper, was simply headlined “Pig Ankle Joints.”

Gradually, however, a sense of racial solidarity emerged, Poe says, and the prejudice against southern food and eating rituals faded. By 1940, the Defender was reporting a southern heritage celebration, complete with traditional food, sponsored by the NAACP Ladies’ Auxiliary. It wasn’t called “soul food” yet, but urban African Americans had already embraced southern cooking as a part of a common heritage.

PRESS & MEDIA

Wire(d) Stories


Web journalism is fast evolving—but, unfortunately, some of its best potential is being left behind, according to Houston, a freelance writer. The twenty-something journalist went to work for Fox News Online in New York in October 1996, hoping to contribute fresh news feature stories. He quit in disillusion a little more than two years later,