Acadiana’s Other Ethnic Cuisine

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It isn’t always easy to ferret out the paternity of food. Pizza, for example, is not Italian but American. Hamburgers were invented in Germany. Juan Valdez can pick coffee beans in Brazil because the plant was smuggled in from Arabia. But there’s no doubt that soul food is black, American black.

Soul food does not have the illustrious history that many other types of cuisine can claim. It emerged in the United States probably between 1820—when the practice of slavery had taken hold in most Southern states—and 1865, the year of the Emancipation Proclamation, although the first slaves arrived in America in the 1600s.

“I’m sure this type of cooking comes back from the slavery time, when blacks had to qualify the taste of the foods they ate, made mostly from the discarded pieces of meat they were given,” says John Freeman, owner of Captain’s Inn, a soul food restaurant on the corner of Champagne and Simcoe streets. “We’ve learned to cook with modified recipes, highly seasoned, that include a little bit of everything.

By definition, local establishments such as Dwyer’s Cafe in downtown Lafayette could be classified as soul food restaurants. Dwyer’s serves up its share of red beans and rice, black-eyed peas, cornbread dressing and pork roast. “You ever looked in his kitchen?” asks a soul food purist, “All his cooks are black, that’s why his fried chicken and smothered pork chops are so good. But Mike Dwyer, he’s white. And soul food restaurants, I guess, have to be owned by black people.”

Very few soul food cooks in Lafayette call their dishes “soul food.” It’s a term that emerged in the 1960s when this ethnic cooking became the “new American cuisine” and restaurateurs capitalized on its popularity.

Now that Cajun cooking has become trendy, black cooks are content to go back to thinking of black cooking as they always have. “Soul food is just good country cooking,” says one.

“I don’t think of myself as a chef,” says Merline Herbert, owner of the successful Creole Lunch House at 612 St. Charles St. “I think of myself as a cook and I want to be considered a good cook. But I don’t do anything fancy with stuffing pots around and making flames shoot up.”

GASTRONOMIC DEMOCRACY

Slavery and racial bias may have divided blacks and whites at one time, but there is no prejudice in the cookpot. Religion and politics, language and culture may separate people, but gastronomy—the art of good eating—unites them. At Laura’s Drive Inn Cafe on Voorhies Street—where more than 600 plate lunches of barbecued ribs, hot sausage, rice dressing and potato salad are served every week for $4 each—nearly a third of the customers are white.

And of the two races, blacks are certainly the least inhibited, most adventurous eaters, welcoming to their black iron skillets almost anything that will taste good on its own or add flavor to the gravy.

Take for example the versatile pig. Detractors say Cajuns will eat everything but the squeal. But soul food cooks have learned to incorporate nearly every part of the animal, the “good meat” as well as the tripe, into their diets. Pork chops are a dinner table tradition, of course, as are sausage, bacon, ribs and salt pork. But also used in soul food cooking are pig’s feet, ham hocks and pig shank; pig’s tail for seasoning; pig back as a delicacy; chitterlings (pronounced chillings), which is pig’s intestines; fried pig’s ears, fried fat called cracklins and hoghead cheese. Most of these products are still served, with the foodstuffs purchased at Martin’s Slaughter House or LA Frey & Son.

IN SEARCH OF SOUL

More than 40 years ago, Sam’s Star Club rose like a star in the east of Lafayette, one of the first black-owned businesses in the city and said to be the first soul food restaurant. Owned by Sam Lilly, it was a nightclub, restaurant and hotel where the likes of Fats Domino, Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles and B.B. King performed before they became big-name black entertainers. Where fried chicken was served every day, along with buckets of red beans and rice and mounds of...
And every election year, like clockwork, politicians begin to knock on the door at Mrs. Taylor's house and fill their bellies at Laura's Cafe. "Yeah, about that time a lot of politicians start to drop by," says Dist. C Parish Councilman Mervin Harmon, who is black. "It's a convenient place for them to meet people."

Politicians seem to migrate in search of soul when there's a potential for black votes. "I think that's their reason," concedes Harmon. "They never do it after the election. The food there is very good. Of course, that's our tradition. That's our ethnic background. I go by a lot to eat. But I also make a point to go by during election time."

Lorita Taylor serves lunch to friends each Thursday, but the main course is politics.

MISS LAURA NEVER WENT TO NO COOKING SCHOOL

No one would contend that blacks under slavery were well fed. But as it evolved from slavery days, soul food consists of an almost completely balanced meal, high in energy foods containing protein and carbohydrates, fiber that aids in digestion and vitamin A that improves night vision and can prevent infant blindness.

Superstitions may have also played a role in the foods consumed by blacks in the 1800s. Black-eyed peas were said to bring prosperity. The slaughter of a pig was a religious offering. Even chickens had spiritual powers in their drumsticks, when it was believed a rooster's crowing scattered nocturnal ghosts.

Without any formal knowledge of nutrition, blacks in the South have been meeting nearly every dietary necessity for over a century. And though the reference was made more to the subtle flavorings of her dishes than its nutrition, one observer was heard to say, "You know, Miss Laura never went to no cooking school!"

But no one is claiming soul food is health food. "The food is good because it's highly seasoned, and it's a juicer meal," says caterer Audrey Richard. "It's a meal in which you're using the fat the best way for taste. And we know the fat has a lot of calories."

"You can compare soul food to fast food in many ways," says Oraomer ethniC cuisinel1a'sJ're sou 0

THE CAJUN-SOUL CONNECTION

Some food critics believe soul food is soul food, that what you order at a soul food restaurant in Jackson, Miss., is exactly the same as what you'd receive in San Francisco. But in South Louisiana an abundance of natural foodstuffs and the dominance of another ethnic cuisine has helped soul food become even more refined. Captain's Inn Owner John Freeman believes the terms Cajun, Creole and soul have become virtually interchangeable.

"It's all intermingled," he says. In Acadiana, to characterize soul food as simply because they ingest a high sodium diet."

Soul food cannot be condemned, because it's an important balanced meal, says Zinn, but she would recommend that some dishes be cooked differently.

The Heart of Soul

Her name was Mary and, as was customary at that time, we never learned her last name because she was black and my friend's housekeeper. And even though they loved her as they loved a member of the family, not being told her last name was a silent reminder that she was not.

She couldn't read or write, but she spoke fluent French and sent every one of her children through college. I used to imagine her at home with all her friends, or in church meetings or political rallies, for I understand she was a pillar of the black community in Lafayette when it had a social caste system and The Block was a nice place for blacks to visit.

Mary had been with the family since long before I made their acquaintance and she was indispensable. She was the maid and the nanny and the cook. I think they would have died starving in a filthy house were it not for her. And Mary could cook. Red beans and rice every Monday. Fried chicken on Tuesday and then cold for lunch on Wednesday. Gumbo that sang to you from the bowl. Mustard greens that she promised would make our cheeks rosy, and her own special blend of coffee and chicory served to the children in a tall glass of milk.

I didn't know at that time that what I was eating was soul food. I knew it was different from what we ate at my house and I knew that I lived and breathed by the divine right of Mary's fried chicken. When the old man of the house died, nobody mourned more than Mary, because nobody had loved her cooking more than that old man. She swore on the day of his funeral that she would never make fried chicken again to hold faith in his memory. And she never did.