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4/16/2015

Down Home Delicacies: The Origins and History of Southern Food

America is a melting pot. A brood of more cultures than one can count. A country founded by immigrants undoubtedly has a culture as diverse as its citizens. There are even sub-cultures within our American culture. We have different accents all throughout our country, different styles, different music, and, probably most noticeably, different food. Food can shape a culture. Food is as much essential to survival as it is to identity.

One of these sub-cultures within the United States is the South. Undoubtedly most people will know what and where the south is. Today most people consider the South to be South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, and Florida. The South like the rest of America is, in its own right, a melting pot of different cultures. These different cultures have had a profound effect on not only what we think of Southern people, but what we think of Southern food. The South is home to down home cookin'. Hearty meals of fried chicken, black eyed peas, gumbo, grits, and corn bread. But the Southern food didn't become the Southern food overnight. It was shaped over the centuries by settlers and food from all over the world.

There are three main contributors to what we know as Southern food. The first group is the Europeans. British, French, and Spanish immigrants, explorers, and colonists settled states that we now know as Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Another group that had enormous

role in shaping the food of the South was the slaves brought from Africa. They were spread all through the South East as they worked on plantation and farms for the colonists. They, like the Europeans, brought over plants and recipes from their homeland and adapted them to fit their circumstances and limited ingredients. The third group that had a hand in the development of the food culture of the South was the Native Americans. They had been living off the land for centuries. They knew what to plant and when to plant it. They helped the colonists as they struggled to survive in a new world. Over time these three cultures, the Europeans, Slaves, and Native Americans, blended their food together to give us what we have today. We can see that many different southern dishes have their roots in these three cultures. As we look into the history, culture, and culinary contributions of these three cultures we can come to find the history and origins of modern day southern food.

Probably the most influence of the three groups is the Slaves from Africa. The first African Slaves arrived in the Southern United States in 1620s. The voyage from Africa to America, called the middle passage, was incredibly long and difficult. As a result foods that had a long shelf life were selected as food for the slaves on the journey from Africa. Because of the similarity in climate and the Slaves desire for food from their homeland many of the plants that were transported to America flourished in the humid climate of the South East. Some of these plants include rice, okra black eyed peas, kidney beans, lima beans, yams or sweet potatoes, and bananas, and peanuts. (Addison et al. p. 1, 14) When the African Slaves reached America rations were used as a powerful form of control over them. For example some of the most undesirable cuts of meat were made available to slaves such as pig's tails, feet, ears, jowls, liver, and intestines, also known as chitlins (Wolff para. 3). To mask the poor flavor from these cuts of

pork many slaves used an old African recipe of red pepper mixed with vinegar, which are now common ingredients in most barbecue sauces (qtd. in Regelski para. 8). Many pro-slavery Americans argued that the slaves had more food than people in other parts of the world. James Madison said:

They are better fed, better clad, better lodged, and better treated in every respect...

With the respect to the great article of food particularly it is a common remark among those who have visited Europe that it [slave diet] includes a much greater proportion of the animal ingredient, than is attainable by the free labourers even in that quarter of the Globe. (qtd. in Regelski para. 3)

This Information is provided to show how the African Slaves functioned and contributed to Southern Food culture even though their circumstances were the harshest of any of the other mentioned contributors. Although slaves were limited by rations placed upon them, many supplemented their meals by hunting, fishing and gardening (qtd. in Regelski para. 4). As a strategy they purchased seeds that would constantly produce rather than just getting one batch. One example is collard greens, just as much a staple now as it was then in southern food. Collards, as they are called, grow year round, and are very nutritious (Addison et al. 11).

Majority of the slaves came from Western Africa and many influences from that area are seen on Southern food. Some would say that the colonies would have failed without the slaves. Because of free labor yes, but also a huge boon was due to their extensive agricultural knowledge. Many slaves were familiar with rice farming which is a major part of modern day Southern food. There are lots of dishes that can be traced back to Africa in some way or

another. Eggplant, for example, came from Africa and was actually called Guinea squash in Colonial America. One major ingredient that is eaten around the country but has most of its popularity in the South is Okra (Harris p. 13-14). Okra is a seed pod that somewhat resembles a pepper. It is prepared in many different ways; fried, pickled, sautéed, but most famous is Gumbo, an Okra based stew that often has rice, local vegetables, and seafood or sausage. Another contribution that cannot be overlooked is the peanut, brought from Africa. The peanut is not only a southern favorite but it is the crop that saved the south. During the early 20th cotton was the cash crop of the American South. Around this time there was a massive bollworm infestation that destroyed many cotton crops. In an effort to save their economy many farmers started planting peanuts. Still a cash crop to this day the peanut is considered to be the savior of the south. In fact every year there is a national peanut festival in Dothan, Alabama.

The African Slaves not only brought over vegetables but cooking practices as well. Some include frying in deep oil, toasting in ashes, steaming in leaves and one-pot stewing. (Harris p. 14) It is interesting to note that many of the dishes often eaten by the African Slaves are now considered the core of Southern food. Just a couple examples are fried chitlins, black eyed peas, collard greens, fried chicken. Today in the African American community this food isn't something to be ashamed of but to be proud of. They have even given it its own name: Soul Food. Soul food is a homage to the African Slaves and, "celebrate[s] the ingenuity and skill of cooks who were able to form a distinctive cuisine despite limited means" (Wolff para. 1). It has even been said all Soul food is Southern food, but not all Southern food is Soul food (Addison et al. 12).

Undoubtedly Native Americans played a huge role in shaping Southern food. When all of these different cultures settled in this rugged, untamed, new world they looked to the hospitality and knowledge of the Native Americans to help them survive. There were many local tribes in the South East that were thriving when settlers arrived. Some of them include the Catawba, Cherokee, Creek, Coushatta, Choctaw, Seminole, Timucua, Chickasaw, Alabama, and other tribes (History of Southern Food para. 5)

The Indians provided the settlers with cooking knowledge, taught them to dry meats and vegetables, and showed how to make jerky and preserves (History of Southern Food para. 7). The Native Americans did a good a good amount of hunting and farming. The forests of the South East provided deer, raccoons, bear, opossums, squirrels, rabbits, and birds. Because they lived so close to the Ocean or fresh water lakes, rivers, and streams, many of the tribes attributed a good amount of their diet to fish, clams, and turtles. Often times they smoked meats over a low fire so they could be stored for long periods of time, like winter. They also roasted over open camp fire, or cooked in large pots. Undoubtedly the biggest contribution that the Native Americans gave to Southern Food is corn. "Corn could be eaten fresh or dried, and dried corn could be stored for months. The dried kernels were often ground into a flour or meal. In this form, it was boiled into puddings or made into bread" (History of Southen Food para. 8). This is referring to the popular Southern dishes, corn bread, and grits. Grits are considered to be mainly a breakfast food; porridge like dish made by grinding corn into a course flower and boiled for a time is often eaten with butter, sausage, eggs, ham, hot sauce, or cheese. That is unless you are a "Yankee" in which case you eat your grits with cinnamon and sugar on top. This is considered to be an abomination anywhere south of the Mason Dixon Line.

The word 'grits' comes from the Old English work 'grytt' meaning coarse meal. Many times the corn was ground by stone then passed through a screen, the finer meal going to make bread and the coarse meal going to make grits. Today, "three-quarters of grits sold in the U.S. are predominantly in the South, stretching from Texas to Virginia, which is also known as the "grits belt." The state of Georgia declared grits its official prepared food in 2002." Grits are about as Southern as it gets (Tobias para. 4-10). Along with grits, cornbread was and is another popular Southern dish. It was a staple in the Native American diet as well as the diet of the European settlers. It was made in a variety of different ways, the most basic being a mixture of water, corn meal, and salt. This mixture was cooked in a flat frying pan or on the back side of a hoe which made flat dense bread called a "hoe-cake". If left on its own before cooking, corn bread will rise without the aid of yeast making it a good alternative to regular bread. Again, like grits, Northerners decided it needed sweetening up and they started adding things like sugar, molasses, and honey. Whereas most Southerners prefer their corn bread cooked in bacon fat or lard. Corn bread gained much of its fame during the Civil War as corn was plentiful and cheap. As a result it was often used to feed troops on the battle field. Since then corn bread has become less of a major part of a diet to a Southern favorite that accompanies almost every meal (Corn Bread para. 1-5).

The third group in Southern food lineage is the Europeans. Many different groups have come to the South East from Europe, the majority coming from England, France, and Spain. Each of these three has added a great deal to what we call Southern Food. The first settlers from England came in 1585 under the direction of Sir Walter Raleigh. On the east coast of the United States they established a township in present North Carolina called Roanoke Island. This

group of colonists eventually disappeared without a trace but a successful colony was established at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. From here expeditions were sent out to North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia (History of Southern Food para. 14). One Southern favorite we can thank the English for is pound cake, along with many other desserts like fudge and pie. The English are also credited with introducing dairy cattle to America (History of Southern Food para. 19). Some vegetables that the British brought to America include spinach, turnips, and radishes.

The French also had a very profound effect on Southern food culture. The main region the French settled was Louisiana. The territory was claimed in 1682 when French explorer La Salle sailed down the Mississippi River with a group of Canadians. They made camp at the mouth of the river and thus New Orleans was born. Later on in 1763 the Acadians, who lived in Nova Scotia, Canada, were ejected by the English. After being deported to France, one large group of exiles immigrated to the southern shores of Louisiana (A Brief History of Creole and Cajun Cuisine para. 9). After awhile the name Acadian was corrupted and changed to Cajun. This is where we get the term Cajun food, a sub-set of Southern food most recognized in Louisiana (History of Southern Food para. 19). Southern food didn't happen overnight however. Coming from France many settlers were used to having their usual cuisine. The colonists weren't used to the limited diet and lack of proper French food, particularly French bread. They desired food from their home land, as anyone would. Their solution to this sub-par food problem was this:

The woman staged a “culinary coup d’etat”, marching on the French governor’s house clanging pots and pans, demanding better food- a protest historians later called the Petticoat Rebellion. Sieur de Bienville, the governor of French Louisiana at the time instructed his cook, Madame Langlois, to teach the women how to cook with local ingredients. (A Brief History of Creole and Cajun Cuisine para. 3)

These are actually the first recorded cooking classes in North America. Madame Langlois taught the woman how to make corn bread and how to prepare many of the meats and vegetables introduced by the Native Americans. The French woman started using local ingredients and put a Southern twist on it and overtime a new food culture was developed that we know as Cajun food. Many Cajun foods have retained their French names to this day; etouffe, jambalaya, and remoulade are just some examples of how the French have put their stamp on Southern food (History of Southern Food para. 19).

Along with the English and French, the Spanish had a massive influence on shaping Southern food. In 1539 Hernando De Soto landed in present day Florida. He had over 600 men, 200 horses, nine ships, and one of the biggest influences seen in Southern food even to this day: pigs. The Native Americans living there had never seen a pig or tasted pork before De Soto’s arrival. Once they had a taste they were hooked. Pigs reproduce rapidly so after a short amount of time pigs were plentiful in the American South (History of Southern Food para. 11). Whereas beef is considered to be the king of barbecue in the rest of the United States, in the South the pig reigns supreme. For example in Dothan, Alabama there is “Pork-tober Fest”. An

annual festival where people from all over come to taste the best pork the south has to offer. There is pulled pork, roasted pork, fried pork chops, and even a contest to see who has the best barbecue.

Of course there were other European influences on Southern food. For example in the early 1700s many German farmers immigrated to modern day Louisiana. The main contribution to southern food made by Germans is sausage, often seen in jambalaya, gumbo, and low country boil. Another contributor is the Italians. They introduced tomatoes, red gravy, artichokes, and peppers. As well many Scottish brought over chickens, which were easy to feed and maintain (A Brief History of Creole and Cajun Cuisine para. 4, 10). The Irish added a part as well. During the nineteenth century nearly two million Irish immigrated to the Americas because of the potato famine. Many of them settled in the south and became overseers on plantations because of their farming experience. They gave us foods such as salted beef, cabbage, and of course, the potato (History of Southern Food para. 15, 19).

The contributions of these three groups (African, Native American, and European) can be seen clearly in many southern dishes. Sausage from Germany, Potatoes from Ireland, Crawfish from the native coast, and corn from the Native Americans are all thrown into a big pot of boiling water and are enjoyed together as low country boil. Black Walnuts from the Native Americans in English Fudge are a mixing of two cultures to make one southern favorite. An okra based gumbo with rice, vegies, fish, is thanks to French and African settlers. Pork chops are a combination of the pig from Spain and deep frying from Africa. Fried Chicken came from Scottish immigrants and African Slaves. The list goes on and on. Southern food has developed

an identity over hundreds of years through exchange mingling, and the combining of three distinct culinary traditions. Because of we have gained a food that separates itself from any other. We don't know them as different flavors in one recipe, but simply as one dish, as southern food.

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