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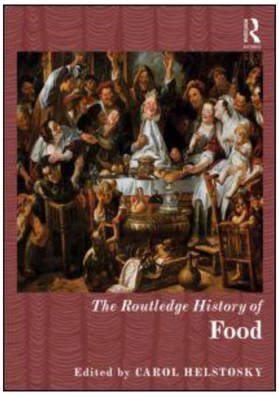

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7

STOLEN BODIES, EDIBLE MEMORIES

The influence and function of West African foodways in the early British Atlantic

Kelley Fanto Deetz

Williamsburg, Virginia, 1767

Before sunrise on a hot summer day, Sukey Hamilton, the governor's enslaved cook, began melting butter for the day's meals. This task, while seemingly simple, required constant attention and a delicate hand. Hamilton had likely been taught the following technique:

> Nothing is more simple than this process, and nothing so generally done badly. Keep a quart tin sauce-pan, with a cover to it, exclusively for this purpose; weigh one quarter of a pound of good butter; rub into it two tea-spoonfuls of flour; when well mixed put it in the sauce-pan with one table-spoonful of water, and a little salt; cover it, and set the sauce-pan in a larger one of boiling water; shake it constantly till completely melted, and beginning to boil. If the pan containing the butter be set on coals, it will oil the butter and spoil it. This quantity is sufficient for one sauce-boat. A great variety of delicious sauces can be made, by adding different herbs to melted butter, all of which are excellent to eat with fish, poultry or boiled butchers' meat. To begin with parsley-wash a large bunch very clean, pick the leaves from the stems carefully, boil them ten minutes in salt and water, drain them perfectly dry, mince them exceedingly fine, and stir then in the butter when it begins to melt. When herbs are added to butter, you must put two spoonfuls of water instead of one. Chervil, young fennel, burnet, tarragon, and cress, or peppergrass, may all be used, and must be prepared in the same manner as the parsley.[1]

Ms. Hamilton not only had to "constantly shake" the pan, but she also had to keep the temperature and consistency of the roux at perfect levels; melting butter, a simple sounding task, required skill, strength, and perseverance. The elaborate dinners put on in plantation dining rooms were produced in the kitchen, a space unique to enslaved cooks and separated from the public sphere of the main house. If the small gravy boat filled with butter required this much attention, what kind of labor and skill went into the rest of the meal? More importantly, what can written recipes tell us about the past, the people who cooked them, and their cultural influences?

Although the history of African Diaspora foodways has traditionally been kept in the minds of the cooks, until the nineteenth century, the written record missed such chronicling. The oral tradition was central to preserving the rich cultures of enslaved Africans, especially during the years of the slave trade. While geographical locations yielded specific crops, individuals brought their own style of cooking. This pragmatic assumption is the foundation of this chapter. The scarcity of written records describing early African influences on British food challenges scholars to use a more interdisciplinary approach. Traveler's accounts, diaries, letters and receipt books yield some information, but the absence of the specificities of cuisine and ingredients lead one to look elsewhere for supplementation. This chapter draws from written records as well as oral history, archaeological data, and architectural sources. It is through these diverse perspectives that one can triangulate the materials to create a multidimensional narrative that reveals the influences of West African foodways throughout the Atlantic world.

While much of the early written record[2] focused on European-inspired menus and excluded African-influenced ingredients and recipes, by the nineteenth century such food was recorded in the cookbooks of white mistresses. Seeing that enslaved cooks worked in the kitchens throughout the centuries, they undoubtedly cooked many African-influenced dishes during the early periods, but it took some time to formally remember them in writing. By 1824, Virginia housewife Mary Randolph chronicled such recipes, such as ochre (okra) and tomatoes, gumbo and Pepper Pot. She recorded the following recipe:

> Boil two or three pounds of tripe, cut it in pieces, and put it on the fire with a knuckle of veal, and a sufficient quantity of water; part of a pod of pepper, a little spice, sweet herbs according to your taste, salt, and some dumplins; stew it till tender, and thicken the gravy with butter and flour.[3]

Such traditional African dishes were cooked in the homes of planters as well as in the field quarters. Their popularity is proven in the receipt books. Once a recipe makes its way into a cookbook, it passes a cultural test. It becomes more than a memory, but a requirement, a reminder that it must be cooked and eaten again. The significance of these West African dishes appearing in a published cookbook also speaks to the acceptance of African food and its importance as a signifier of socioeconomic class, national identity and pride. Literate housewives read these recipes and duplicated them in the ultimate performance of white womanhood—mimicking the plantation fare—one that is clearly a mixture of European and African food. The recipes that made their way onto the pages of published work are clearly not the only things that were cooked, but rather the dishes that were preferred. Therefore, there were undoubtedly countless more African dishes cooked, served, and eaten by colonists throughout the centuries. This chapter traces the history of enslaved cooks, from their ancestral homes in West Africa, throughout the middle passage, and into Anglo kitchens, where their talent became irreplaceable.

It is challenging to tease out the precise influences of West African foodways in the early Atlantic world. Colonists transferred a plethora of foodstuffs, some of which were West African in origin, to become part of the Atlantic cuisine. What historian James C. McCann calls the "Atlantic Circulation", also known as the "Columbian Trade," drastically transformed the global markets, which were previously semi-bound to land.[4] Black-eyed peas, okra, millet, and yams are some ingredients that directly transformed both the new colonies' crops as well as the dinner table. However, the essence of culinary influence is not simply found in these key ingredients, but rather in the techniques of the African cook, whose memories, creativity, and effort transformed crops into cuisine. African Diaspora foodways were complicated and diverse, stemming from enslavement, forced labor, and constant adaptation to new surroundings. Foodways exemplify the importance of food as culture, a way to maintain connections to the ancestors and to a land and people left behind.

Instead of simply looking at the edible influences that were brought by the enslaved Africans, this chapter seeks to discuss this transformation from the perspective of the diverse interfaces that occurred during colonization. For example, a traditional foodways approach would simply trace the ways in which African flavors altered traditional colonial fare. While this approach shows the significance of African foodways, it is from the perspective of the colonists and voids a holistic understanding of the ways in which adaptation and agency affected cuisine and dining as a whole and its intersections with race, class, and gender dynamics. The forced interactions created a complicated web of cultural, economic, and regional differences in food preparation, consumption, and culture. It is not the food that makes a cuisine, but rather the cook who creates and sustains it. This is the narrative of crop and hand, technique and utensil, memory and adaptation, and the transformation of dining in the English-speaking Atlantic world that began in West Africa and carried onto colonial Virginian plantations.

A brief demographic of the transatlantic slave trade

In 1482, the Portuguese built Elmina Castle off present-day Ghana, then the Gold Coast. Earlier Portuguese exploration brought interactions with the Congo Kingdom and long-term political, cultural, and economic relationships spawned the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. While slavery existed on the continent and throughout the world before the trade, this particular system defined a transition to racial slavery, a complex system fueled by war, greed, colonial desires, and a developing racial ideology. The transatlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration of humans in history.

Between 1500 and 1866 an estimated 12,521,336 enslaved Africans were captured and transported throughout the Atlantic world.[5] During the first fifty years of the trade, Spain and Portugal were responsible for the enslavement and migration of 64,126 West African people to Uruguay and Brazil. By the 1550s Great Britain joined the trade, followed by France in the 1570s, and lastly the Netherlands in the 1590s.[6]

The European colonists took the land from indigenous populations to develop plantations and mines. These early colonies relied on slave labor, specifically that of captive Africans and native populations. These settlements were established without the assurance of success and oftentimes yielded a troublesome environment. Native American slaves worked alongside enslaved Africans and often these groups outnumbered the European slavers. There were many failed attempts to enslave the indigenous populations. Scholars have debated as to why this was so, but it is agreed that enslaving native populations was less likely in the British colonies than in the Spanish and Portuguese ones.[7] Parts of Brazil and most of Spanish America relied on an integrated labor force, which in turn affected their foodways. Spain and Portugal forced over a million West Africans to labor in the Western hemisphere. Between 1501 and 1700 Spain brought 266,232, and Portugal 1,265,383 enslaved laborers to work on their lands, compared to Great Britain, which shipped 430,184 Africans to its colonies. The later centuries brought even more slaves. Between 1701 and 1800, Portugal increased its import of human subjects, enslaving approximately 3,378,386 Africans over this hundred year period. Similarly, Great Britain was responsible for an estimated 2,975,481 men, women, and children being stolen and shipped to European colonies.[8]

Roots and culture

The 12.5 million captive Africans came from a diverse continent with a plethora of kingdoms that spanned hundreds of centuries. West Africa was home to thousands of ethnic groups, linguistic families, and rich cultural traditions. Just as in the rest of the world, complex social structures led to wars between groups and prisoners of war were often the victims of battle. As the European traders made contact with West African kingdoms, they began exchanging merchandise for prisoners of war, cloth, gold, ivory, and iron.[9]

These captive West Africans brought little with them in terms of material items—as they were often prisoners of war and/or kidnapped from their homes. Aside from the minimal objects kept on their bodies, they retained their memories and notions of self. Their distinct cultural practices were often meshed together with other ethnic groups' customs. The transatlantic slave trade forced Ibo, Akan, Yoruba, and others to become *African*; an identity forced upon the victims of the trade. While scholarly work has shown the significance of ethnicity in trade preferences, the distinctness transformed as more and more generations were sold into the Diaspora.[10]

Edible memories: food as culture

West African societies depended on the fertile land and skilled farmers to maintain a stable food source. The diverse geographical and geological landscapes yielded rich agriculture and farming traditions were essential to survival and the development of a nutritionally rich and flavorful cuisine. Wild grass grain (rice), fruit trees, tamarind, watermelons, yams, millet, eggplant, onions, garlic, cucumbers, pumpkins, okra, bambara groundnut (similar to peanuts), sorghum, cabbage, and black-eyed peas were all commonly grown throughout the region before and during the era of Atlantic circulation. For centuries the trade routes from Asia and East Africa brought varieties of foodstuffs: rice, coconuts, and spices, all of which became staples for West African cuisines. The introduction of American maize (corn), chili peppers, peanuts, and sweet potatoes blended with the established flavor profiles. West African food transformed alongside European and Native American, all within the liminal space of the Atlantic rim.[11]

During the transatlantic slave trade era, the West African diet consisted mostly of foods from crops as well as from hunting and fishing. Many West Africans kept bees and livestock for both sustenance and trade. Meat (cattle, wild game, sheep, goats, dogs, camel, and poultry) was consumed although not as an essential part of the diet. More typically, daily diet consisted of vegetable (cabbage, onion, garlic, pumpkin, turnip, and eggplant) stew-type dishes served with rice, chickpeas, lentils, and/or legumes. Rice and barley-based porridges, also called puddings, were common. Meat was typically reserved for kings and special occasions like religious ceremonies or rites of passage.

Wheat, millet, and sorghum flours provided ample starch for bread making. Records show the baking of bread in Mali in the sixteenth century, which was sold at markets for iron and small currency. Little honey fritters were often cooked and sold at these markets, described with high praise by a sixteenth-century traveler, as being cooked "by a skillful

Negro woman."[12] Fruit trees bore apples, figs, pomegranates, plums, lemons, oranges, dates, and grapes. These foods would be preserved, added to stews, eaten fresh or dried and kept for future meals.[13] Grains and fruits were also used to make beers and wine.[14]

As mentioned previously, meats were not essential to West African cuisine; however, the importance of meat in keeping with religious ceremonies insured the consumption of flesh at certain points throughout the year. Many West Africans practiced various types of ancestor worship, which required the sacrificing and consumption of animals. The preparation of meat varied depending on the availability of foodstuffs and the season. The West African diet included goat, chickens, crocodiles, turtles, snakes, wild game, and beef. These meats were often salt-cured, ground up, dried with a butter sauce, or roasted and flavored with Sudanese spices. Africans, depending on their proximity to water, also ate a substantial amount of fish and seafood. The seafood was often salt-cured and/or cooked in butter or oils.[15]

While geographic and environmental distinctions favored certain crops, there was still a diverse culinary style throughout the regions and between different cultural communities. The commonality was the style of food—the vegetarian stews flavored with spices and thickened with okra, lentils, and served with grain starches. Fish and meat might appear in the stew, or on the side, but the pot remained diverse and rich with flavors, regardless of the exact ingredients. It is this "one-pot" meal that sustained the people of West Africa before the Europeans came, and continued to do so throughout the Diaspora. Foodways continued to survive without much loss. The brutality of the trade was not enough to strip Africans of their memories of home, especially that of edible nature. However, the middle passage grotesquely changed their sacred traditions of food consumption. Africans went from eating as nurture, or ritual, to being force-fed on slave ships. The Atlantic Ocean became a world in itself. Coastal edges became the liminal spaces between the indigenous, the colonists, and the captives. The waters carried human cargo and foodstuffs, providing the colonies with a new cultural drama.

The British colonies: Africans in Virginia

The colony of Virginia was established in 1607 after King James I issued a charter authorizing the Virginia Company of London to settle somewhere in North America. On May 14, 1607, 104 English colonists arrived on Jamestown Island and established Britain's first successful colony in North America. The Virginia Company continued to bring new male settlers to the Island.

Food was merely a function of living for the early colonists, and not part of any sort of cultural expression. These settlers ate what they could: rats, vermin, and grains. By the winter of 1609 they began starving to death and this lack of food resulted in over 400 settlers dying.[16] Later in 1620 the Virginia Company of London sent ninety unmarried women to Jamestown, followed by more the next year. This diversification of the gender ratio signified the transition from a satellite settlement to a long-term colony. The creation of family life is recognized as the beginning of a Virginian domestic space.[17] The early settlers, now accompanied by women, wives, and indentured servants, focused on building homes on plantations and farming tobacco. As the colony began taking shape, so did the labor market.

The influx of black labor into the Old Dominion began early. Virginia's black community is almost as old as the colony itself. The distinct Afro-Virginian experience began in 1619 when a Dutch ship dropped off "20. and odd Negroes" in Jamestown, Virginia.[18]

Their status as free or enslaved was not recorded, but their presence in Virginia marked the beginning of an African, and later African-American, presence in the new English colony.[19] The seventeenth century brought turbulent times to the English settlers and laid the foundations for a plantation society. Early Virginia plantations were constructed along the James River to enable easy access to transportation and movement of their crops. These early plantations focused on tobacco production and relied on both indentured servants and enslaved Africans to plant, grow, process, and transport tobacco.[20] Settlements such as Kingsmill (est. 1619), Flowerdew Hundred (est. 1619), and Shirley Plantation (est. 1613) were some of Virginia's first tobacco plantations and were considered the models of success and wealth in early Virginia.

This early period in American history has been referred to as a "society with slaves" rather than a "slave society" and reflects the early stages of racial caste in America.[21] Towards the end of the seventeenth century, plantation owners began preferring enslaved Africans over indentured servants since their life-long status and African-derived agricultural skills were superior to those of indentured whites with a mere seven-year contract.

While the first generation of Afro-Virginians were likely indentured, the following generations were undoubtedly enslaved. In 1625 there were twenty-three Africans in Virginia and by the middle of the century there were as many as 300. By 1640 some Africans had been bound to a life sentence of servitude and, within two decades, Virginia put statutes in place, known as "Slave Codes" that began to formalize the legality and preference for enslaved labor over indenture. These laws not only applied to adults but also to their children, who would be born into a life-long sentence of enslavement.[22] By 1705, Virginia passed a series of slave codes that governed the actions and status of enslaved blacks, and solidified a race-based caste system of slavery.[23] It was during this period when the early plantations were constructed and the formation of Virginia's domestic realm took place. The role of enslaved cooks began to take shape.

Britain's Royal African Company was responsible for shipping over 1,000 enslaved Africans every year to Virginia during the late seventeenth century. By 1708 there were 12,000 Afro-Virginians compared to 18,000 whites, and by 1756 the Afro-Virginian population grew to 120,156 compared to 173,316 white Virginians.[24] In 1790 there were 292,627 enslaved blacks in Virginia, roughly 39.1 percent of the total population. Thirty years later, in 1820, the population almost doubled, with 206,879 enslaved women, 218,274 enslaved men, and four-fifths of the enslaved population lived on rural plantations. By 1860, there were 241,382 enslaved women and 249,483 enslaved men. On the eve of the Civil War, the vast majority of the 4,308 plantations housed 20–40 enslaved people and 1,355 plantations had 40–100 enslaved people each, working and living on their land. Lastly, there were 113 plantations in Virginia that housed between 100 and 300 enslaved people each. Thus, at the very least, these 114 plantations were the most likely to have a designated enslaved cook who performed specialized tasks.[25] These high numbers reflect a larger plantation that equated wealth with a particular level of cultural production.

By the early eighteenth century, over half of Virginia's African population consisted of people from the Igbo from Nigeria. As the century progressed, more enslaved Africans were brought from Bight of Biafra and Angola and, by 1739, they comprised 85 percent of newly enslaved subjects.[26] Noting these ethnic affiliations is important in understanding the skills of Virginia's enslaved Africans, specifically their knowledge of foodways, medicine, and poisoning. While Igbo were preferred field hands, there is no doubt that with their high population percentage in the eighteenth century, many of them cooked in the main house.[27]

Plantation society took on many characteristics over the three centuries. Seventeenth-century plantations were smaller and the planter often worked alongside indentured servants, enslaved Africans and African Americans. White women labored in the field too, and cooked, cleaned, and took care of the domestic space. By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, changing ideas about race and class began to transform plantation culture. The increase in tobacco profits caused an influx of Englishmen to relocate to Virginia. These Englishmen brought with them an elite cultural standard.

With this influence a new patriarchal plantation culture formed. The planter was the head of household; however, he was often disconnected from the direct management of his laborers. Overseers were hired; often they were poor whites or sons of planters, who were to manage, control, and punish the enslaved. The planters' wives remained in charge of the domestic sphere and coordinated formal functions such as dinner parties, balls, and dances, but stopped laboring alongside enslaved bodies.[28] This lavish lifestyle was only possible due to the heavy reliance on skilled enslaved laborers. Blacksmiths, brick masons, farmers, laundresses, butchers, seamstresses, and cooks were some of the many positions enslaved Afro-Virginians held on these large plantations and it was their forced labor that made Virginia's plantation culture thrive.

Enslaved laborers typically worked in the fields and lived in the field quarters or they resided in close proximity to the main house as domestics. Some neighboring plantations would be close enough for the enslaved populations to interact with each other and they often took advantage of proximity in order to maintain a sense of community. By the middle of the eighteenth century, race and status were melded and a caste system was firmly in place. Therefore enslaved people had to be issued a pass by the overseer in order to travel away from a plantation. This made visiting neighboring plantations a stressful, cumbersome, and illegal experience.[29] A rich, vibrant African American community developed within the confines of enslavement and influenced many aspects of American culture, especially its food. Many scholars have explored this phenomenon, although less attention has been paid to the culture of those enslaved people living and working within the planters' homes.[30]

Peppering the pot: food as cultural survival

The British colony of Virginia was home to a rich and culturally diverse enslaved population. Early slave quarters often housed diverse groups of linguistic and cultural families. In the formation of pidgin English or Atlantic creole, common words were found, creating a communication style that paralleled creole foodways. Just as there is a grammar to language, there is a grammar to culture and specifically food preparation. Grammar, as a set of rules that organize and formalize a process, can be applied to cooking. West African food, as mentioned previously, had a common profile, or grammar, even if the ingredients were not always the same. Having a pot filled with varieties of seasoned vegetables and sometimes meat, rice, and possibly an additional starch (sweet potato, flatbread, or foo foo), was grammatically specific to much of West Africa. Once the African captives were placed onto plantations, they were typically given a large pot to cook in and this was often large enough to cook communal meals.[31]

With the labor demands of plantation slavery, many enslaved persons were not allotted much time to cook anything with too much attention. In the Chesapeake region, Native Americans taught English and Africans to catch bear, fish, deer, and small animals and these skills helped supplement their diets. Larger plantations had designated cooks for the field hands as well as one or more for the main house. Smaller farms differed in that enslaved persons would typically have to cook for themselves and the planter family, as well as work the fields. The size, location, and culture of the plantation dictated how exactly these relationships worked and every plantation environment differed.

Archaeological evidence as well as oral history tells us that the field quarter communities typically had a central pot that was used for communal meals. This pot was kept on the hearth and the daily and weekly rations would be shared with the group. Corn meal and animal fat were the basic provisions, accompanied by bits of meat or vegetables. Gardens were kept to supplement these minimal supplies, and hunting and fishing were also common. Slave cabins typically had gardens adjacent, as well as chicken coops. Archaeological research shows that while chicken was undoubtedly eaten, the enslaved populations in Virginia used chickens more for their eggs than for their meat.

After laboring in the field from sun up to sun down, the hands would return to the quarter where the cook (typically an older person, with the help of children) was finishing supper. The iron pot that was on the fireplace, filled with rations, vegetables from the gardens, and whatever meat was available, acted as more than a container for food. It was in this pot where enslaved Africans recreated their culture within the confines of slavery and the unfamiliarity of Virginia's land. This pot typically held African-inspired stews and allowed for a sense of home in a foreign land. Field quarters recreated many traditional West African dishes such as gumbo, stewed vegetables, roasted meats, all seasoned with hot peppers and spices to signify and sanctify their edible qualities. Fried foods, cooked in oils and butters similar to those in West Africa, were also manifestations of the African culinary grammar.

It was not simply the ingredients or cooking techniques that emulated West African culture, but also the utensils used to eat such stews. Archaeological evidence shows clear patterns in the dishes that were used to eat such stews. Handmade earthenware ceramics were built in the shape of semi-shallow bowls. These vessels, a form of what archaeologists refer to as colonoware, were made by enslaved Africans and made in a familiar fashion to mimic both the form and function of West African dishes.[32] These sorts of ceramics exemplify the transference of both African cuisine and material traditions to the English colonies.

Peppering their pot: food as presentation

The value of West African foodways wasn't apparent solely in the field quarter. By the start of the eighteenth century, most plantation cooks in Virginia were enslaved African or African American, and held a significant role in elite plantation culture. Behind every meal and in the shadow of the mistress was an enslaved cook, whose responsibility was to create lavish meals. These cooks existed within a complex social space, created by racialized and gendered ideologies and fueled by the domestic wants of the mistress. This environment, similar to a stage, relied on props, actors, and performance of domesticity and stringent social class mores. The relationship was built on status roles, negotiations, and a constant threat of violence. Enslaved plantation cooks performed strict roles that created the essence of plantation social culture.

Since food was such a critical part of plantation mechanics and success, enslaved cooks were highly valued and sought after. In order for a mistress to have a proper home, she needed to inherit or purchase a skilled cook. Virginia's newspapers were filled with "for sale" ads, containing everything from land to enslaved blacks. Cooks were some of the highest valued and promoted slaves within this realm. Among thousands of eighteenth-century ads, cooks were clearly a commodity. For example, in the March 3, 1770 issue of the *Virginia Gazette*, a sale at the Amelia courthouse is advertised as having, "ABOUT 20 very likely *Virginia* born SLAVES, chiefly men and women … and one of them a very good cook."[33] Other ads read, "I have for sale a negro woman that is generally thought of by those that know her an exceeding good COOK"[34] and "TEN likely Virginia born NEGROES, all under 20 years of age but one, which is about 38, a good cook, and as handy a wench as any in the colony." The promoted value of slaves was rampant within these sale ads and spoke to a particular audience, one that wanted the status of a skilled cook within their household. Age also carried a particular level of worth in that skill was accumulated; while field hands might get weaker with time, a cook only gained talent.

Chattel slavery created a particular kind of labor structure, where both the mistresses and enslaved cooks held unique positions in the plantation household. Elite white women functioned within the patriarchy but carved out gendered space in a highly organized and segmented household. Within this space, they found power to control enslaved domestics and relied on their labor for their social elevation. Just as Sukey Hamilton was a highly skilled and professionally trained cook, so were many of the cooks in the British colonies. They cooked up a combination of European and African inspired dishes, like okra stew.[35] Stew is not unique to West Africa, however ingredients like okra, a very distinct vegetable that thickens broth without the need of flour, undoubtedly changed both the texture and flavor of the dishes, making it more similar to West African consistency than a French inspired roux-based stew. Lastly, okra naturally thickens broth, while roux takes remarkably long to perfect. Slicing okra and letting nature take control of the thickness is far less time-consuming than stirring a vat of fat and flour. This surely provided the cooks with more time to do other things. Okra functioned as a means of cultural inclusion and a labor adaptor.

There was a network of domestics that contributed to putting food on the table. This larger "catering network" was essential for the output of a meal and the cook was at the center of production. The kitchen as a backstage provided a space for the cook and mistress to negotiate their relationship behind closed doors, as well as a center for production. Enslaved plantation cooks were kept on tight schedules, performed precisely timed duties, and had strict deadlines, compared to other laboring positions. Their skills were manifold, and their role was central to both plantation dining and the larger enslaved community.

Enslaved cooks encompassed incredible skill and technique that separated them from the larger labor pool. Cooks were accountable for the full production of daily meals, catering of banquets, and presenting a caliber of dining that made Virginia known for its hospitable nature.[36] This specialized role came with distinctive training, responsibilities, hardships, and perks. Enslaved cooks and mistresses had a unique relationship which revolved around the labor and production of food, all tangled in the web of power, oppression, violence, and negotiations.[37]

Backstage: food preparation and techniques

With multiple meals being prepared on both short- and long-term schedules, the kitchen was an active space. Plantation recipes reveal the breadth of items being prepared at a single time. For example, if the day's menu consisted of morning biscuits, eggs, smoked meats, jams, mid-day breads, roasted meats, soups and evening game, stews, vegetables and desserts, the cook would prepare some items that day as well as prepping long-term items such as breads, jams, wines, dairy, head cheeses, and sausages. Thus cooks strategically scheduled their days, and what they prepared on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly schedule, including the smoking of the meat, milking of cows, and butchering of meat.

While many different factors helped flavor plantation cuisine, the Igbo's use of okra is one of the most prevalent legacies in Southern foodways.[38] Used as a thickening agent, enslaved cooks relied on this ingredient and one can assume it became a good substitute for a roux. Presumably enslaved cooks had knowledge, either first-hand or passed down, of making certain foods from their homeland. For example, palm wine was a common staple in many parts of West Africa, as was fried foods and stews. Their organic culinary knowledge was easily transferable to the needs of elite plantation culture.[39]

Virginia's cuisine was also heavily influenced by both British and French cuisine. Depending on the plantation, mistresses favored one over the other and made sure their cook was up to par. Every plantation served bread, which, like the melted butter, is simple, yet easy to ruin. A common recipe for Family Bread called for the following:

> 2 quarts of flour.
> 2 tablespoonfuls of lard or butter.
> 2 tablespoonfuls of salt.
> Enough sponge for a two quart loaf of bread.
> Mix with one pint of sweet milk.
> Make into rolls and bake with very little fire under the oven.[40]

Precise measuring and counting was required for the proper chemical balance of this typical dietary staple. Not only did the cook have to be precise in his/her measurements but she had to be able to control the temperature of the Dutch oven and fire. In addition, most recipes called to "knead the bread for half an hour without intermission."[41] For an item prepared daily, this labor-intensive food relied on both craft and the physical strength needed to constantly knead a ball of dough for thirty minutes.

While the bread was being prepared, the cook had other short-term items in progress. Fish was consumed on a daily basis and was prepared in multiple ways. For example "Fish-a-la-crème" and stewed halibut were Virginian favorites. The following recipes were some of Virginian classics prepared by enslaved cooks:

> Fish a la Crème
>
> Boil a firm fish, remove the bones, pick it to pieces. Mix one pint cream or mild with two tablespoonfuls flour, one onion, one-half pound butter (or less), and salt. Set it on the fire and stir until it is as thick as custard. Fill a baking-dish alternately with fish, cracker, and cream. Bake for thirty minutes, use four crackers.[42]
>
> Halibut
>
> Boil one pound halibut, then chop it very fine and add eight eggs well beaten; pepper and salt to taste, then one cup butter. Put it in a stewpan and cook until the eggs are done sufficiently. Serve very hot on toast.[43]

While the halibut recipe is fairly straightforward, the fish-a-la-crème involves some skillful techniques. Depending on the type of fish, the bones are anywhere from large and easy to pick to small and cumbersome. Picking the bones out of a catfish or small local shad, perch, or bass would require excellent eyesight and command of the fish's anatomy. Making the fish meat into custard over the hot fire is yet another challenging task, as the use of dairy provided a wildcard in hearth cooking. The consistency, temperatures, and timing must be precise; otherwise the dish would burn, curdle, or not set correctly.

In addition to fish, enslaved cooks used oysters in many Virginian dishes. Eighteenth-century tutor Phillip V. Fithian mentioned eating oysters in some fashion almost every day while living at the Carter family plantation. Oysters were readily available in the adjacent rivers and were caught by both enslaved men and plantation gentry. Similar to enslaved cooks, enslaved fishermen were often sold separately and at higher rates than field hands.[44] These fishermen would spend the days in Virginia's waterways catching fish and oysters for the main house. Fishermen and cooks worked together to put seafood on the plantation table. While catching seafood is at times a challenging task, so was preparing it for the guests. Oysters, more than other seafood, required immediate cooking and intense labor. For example a basic "Oyster Sauce for Fish" called for the following procedure:

> Scald a pint of oysters, and strain them through a sieve; then wash some more in cold water, and take off their beards; put them in a stew-pan, and pour the liquor over them; then add a large spoonful of anchovy liquor, half a lemon, two blades of mace, and thicken it with butter rolled in flour. Put in half a pound of butter, and boil it till it is melted – take out the mace and lemon, and squeeze the lemon juice into the sauce; boil it, and stir it all the time, and put it in a boat.[45]

This sauce was one of many served at a plantation dinner. Approximately 30–60 oysters compile a pint. This means the cook had to first shuck them, which requires a hard, sharp tool, a firm and steady hand, and finesse to shuck without getting shells in the meat. After forcefully prying open dozens of oysters, the cook would then have to sear them over a hot fire, push them through a metal sieve (making a oyster mush), remove their individual beards and add items such as floured butter (which, as seen previously, took its share of labor) and anchovy liquor (another complex recipe). This entire process could have taken over an hour if not more. In addition, oyster soup was a common meal consisting of the following techniques:

> 100 Oysters
> 1 teaspoonful salt.
> 1 tablespoonful black pepper.
> ¼ pound butter.
> Yolks of three eggs.
> 1 pint rich milk, perfectly fresh.
> 3 tablespoonfuls flour.
>
> Separate the oysters from the liquor: put the liquor to boil, when boiled add salt, pepper and butter, then the flour, having previously made it into a batter. Stir all the time. When it comes to a boil add the eggs well beaten, then the milk, and when the mixture reaches a boil, put in the oysters; let them also just boil, and the soup is done. Stir all the time to prevent curdling.[46]

Similar to fish preparation, the cook's attention was constantly focused on the pot, as a slight distraction or mistake would result in a curdled soup, a waste of time, ingredients, and an upset mistress.

Performing the Virginia tradition

As the woman of the house, the planter's wife was in charge of the house servants, and constantly negotiated her power and control over the meals and labor within her household. However, the success of a meal, especially when guests were entertained, depended heavily on the cook's ability, and in some sense willingness, to perform a professional task like putting on a formal or "proper" dinner. With all the constraints of enslavement in place, some cooks were able to put off special dinners and banquets until they felt ready to perform such a task. Records show that enslaved cooks worked long hours, often more hours than those in the field. Cooks had to wake before dawn in order to cook the family breakfast, start supper, and tend to any sort of baking, spirit making, or menu planning. There were instances where enslaved cooks reported being ill, and mistresses writing to cancel suppers and postpone events due to such sickness.[47] One might assume that the cooks knew their social currency and banked on that to negotiate their labor demands. While records also show the long-standing mental and physical abuse endured by enslaved people, it is also clear that slaves would often fake illness in an effort to rest. These moments of agency were wrapped up in their skill set, one that fueled the mistress's respectability in her elite social world. Nonetheless, their role was to produce sophisticated plantation fare, influenced by British and French cuisines and managed by the plantation's mistress. "The matrons of the Old Dominion [had] enviable reputation for their superb cooking and their delightful housekeeping."[48]

The reputation of the plantation mistress was connected to her success as a housewife; reputation was also instrumental in the performance of white womanhood. Even in the nineteenth century, housekeeping books praised this archetype: "Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies … She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness."[49] Proper white domesticity was valued above jewels and, as such, it was the ultimate goal of many of Virginia's mistresses.

Virginia's plantations were self-contained social spaces, and sometimes painfully isolated. Many white women were often confined to their homes and complained about chronic loneliness. The physical distance of a plantation from the center of town sometimes spanned over sixty miles, which created a seclusion based on both distance and the patriarchal desire to protect white womanhood. The planning of social events became for some the only time they were afforded public interaction. While occasional trips to the market or daily letters connected mistresses to the happenings of the colony, their world consisted primarily of the household, which acted as a public and highly social venue for Virginia's elites.[50]

The food served at dinner and suppers were similar to each other: a variety of meats, game, vegetables, salads, and stews. Typically the earlier meals were of a smaller scale, as fewer guests were present at lunchtime. Suppers (also referred to as dinner) were the ultimate venue for showing off the mistresses' hospitality and domestic ability as well as her cook's talent. These spreads consisted of multiple kinds of roasted, boiled, smoked, broiled, salted, and stewed meats, European-inspired sauces, jellies, head cheese, vegetables, and breads. "Meats usually smoked or salted for preservation. Never know how many people would show up for dinner … Ham was perfect for this occasion."[51]

These plantation dinners were the pulse of Virginia's domestic pride and reputation. Tutor Phillip V. Fithian fondly remembered these grand suppers: "we were rung into supper. The room looked luminous and splendid; four very large candles burning on the table where we supp'd, three others in different parts of the room: a gay, sociable assembly & four well instructed waiters!"[52] Fellow Virginian Ms. Helen Coles also described these meals: "we sat down to dinner drest in our best, and looking as though we had never thought of anything more pleasant than to simply taste the various delicacies placed before us – such a dinner was customarily served by placing a variety of dishes on the table, which was latter cleared for the dessert course."[53] Coles also commented:

> We were entertained in a most sumptuous fashion … the table was spread with double table cloths and the first course consisted of beef, mutton, oysters, soup, etc. The first cloth was removed with these viands, and the clean one below covered with pies, puddings, tarts, jellies, whips, floating island, sweetmeats, etc. and after these we came to the plain mahogany table. Clean glasses were brought on and a lighter kind of wine with fruit, raisins and almonds … a typical first course would include a large standing cold ham wrapped in a linen napkin at the top of the table balance by a hot saddle of mutton, leg of lamb, roast beef, turkey or goose at the bottom of the table … the centerpiece might be a mock turtle, a huge meat pie, a haunch of venison, or a "made dish," a complicated composition of meat, sauced and garnished with such ingredients as eels, chicken livers, mushrooms, oysters and coxcombs.[54]

These culinary spreads were influenced by both British and French culture. Elite Virginians, mostly of English descent, had their own traditions, whereas French cuisine and rituals were popular. Eating in the French fashion meant the consumption of sauces and condiments that made each dish superbly delicious. In addition, "sugar from the West Indies gave rise to desserts. Upper-class Anglo-Americans thought French cuisine was superior to their own."[55] French culinary influence began in the eighteenth century and grew into Virginian cuisine by the 1800s. Eating in the "French fashion" also meant having a large variety of food, but only eating some. This tradition marks a transition from eating for sustenance to eating as a performance of elite "cultured" ways. It also shows a connection between wealth and waste. The food, as such, became essential "props" within Virginia's plantation society and an overt style of conspicuous consumption. What they ended up with was French-inspired food, with heavy West African accents. British Atlantic food, cooked by enslaved Africans with techniques and flavor profiles that resembled not the "old country," but rather a complex sophisticated fare, one that had the presumed sophistication of France's kitchens with the richness of West African food.

The formal African–European interface: special training

In 1784 James Hemings traveled to Paris to learn the art of French cooking. He was the head cook at Monticello while Jefferson was governor of Virginia. This extraordinary opportunity was unique considering he was Jefferson's slave. Hemings spent three years in Paris training under some of France's most notable chefs. While experiencing temporary free status, he managed to negotiate his own freedom upon his return to Virginia. James passed his knowledge of French cooking on to his enslaved brother Peter and as a result he was manumitted on September 15, 1793. While Monticello might have been the epitome of the planter class, many other well-to-do Virginians invested in their cooks as well. Chefs were appraised at significantly higher rates than the rest of the domestic laborers. William

Marshall of Fredericksburg described his cook as "an excellent cook about 35 years of age, and inferior to none."[56] While James Hemings was able to travel to France, gain formal culinary training, and ultimately free himself, his story was not typical. Formal French training, while presumably highly desired by planters, was risky. The free status gained by traveling to France in the nineteenth century welcomed escape. However, the potential for escape didn't outweigh Jefferson's desire for a French trained chef, and played to both Hemings' and Jefferson's needs.

Many of Virginia's enslaved cooks were formally trained on the plantation, either by the mistress or the head cook. Plantation papers reveal a system in which cooks were trained and promoted within the kitchen hierarchy. In 1858 Dr. Richard Eppes' cooks, forty-five-year-old Susan and seventy-two-year-old Harriet, ran the kitchen.[57] Records reveal that, by 1859, former field hand Ursula Sanders was recruited as assistant cook and was tipped $0.50 for good coffee on top of her $1.00 Christmas present. Susan and Harriet, who were the head cooks, received $5.00 Christmas gifts, which was only second in value to the butler, Madison Ruffin, who was given $10.00. By 1860, Ursula was still apprenticing under Susan and Harriet and receiving $1.00 for Christmas.[58] This record shows not only the hierarchy within the kitchen roles, but the fact that slaves were chosen from the entire plantation community and did not simply inherit the position. Therefore, while family members lived within the kitchen walls, they were not necessarily next in line for "Head Cook."

Secondary literacies

Some enslaved cooks were taught how to read by their mistresses. This was a pragmatic solution to dealing with recipes and food production. Because mistresses found themselves in the kitchen teaching cooks the particularities of certain European dishes, they relied on a level of understanding and performance from their cooks. It is unlikely that the mistress stayed in the kitchen for long periods of time or walked the cook through every step of preparation. Instead, the cook would be taught recipes and either memorized them or possibly read them as reminders. There is no record of this; however, cooks undoubtedly learned to read. The currency of proper food was so vast that the teaching of very basic reading could have been an essential aspect to guarantee culinary delight.

In addition to sometimes learning basic phonetics, enslaved cooks also had to know basic math. Counting, fractions, and arithmetic proportions are all essential aspects to cooking and are in the recipes as such. Knowing how to double or triple a recipe was essential for large-scale plantation cooking. Especially for baking, precise measurements were imperative in order for the bread to rise, for biscuits to bake, and for cakes to form.

In addition to basic reading and math, enslaved cooks learned general anatomy from the butchering and cooking of animals. If a recipe called for a calf's heart, the cook was forced to become familiar with not just the location but also the anatomy of such organs. Much of Virginia's plantation fare included organs and heads, and relied on the proper butchering and preparation of these parts. These secondary literacies were gained via kitchen training and built upon their skill set.

Negotiations with the mistresses

Enslaved cooks often knew more about their jobs than their mistresses did.[59] While the mistress was proud of her cook, she rarely lingered in the kitchen or visited the smokehouse or other outbuildings.[60] Since the mistress did not cook the food, she was sometimes met with controlling demands from her cook. There are records of cooks telling their mistress to get out of kitchen, a practice only functional in a negotiated relationship.[61]

The only real control the mistress had was through her provisions. Mistresses handed out sugar, spices, butter, and were in charge of smokehouse provisions.[62] The smokehouse and dairy were part of white landscape, and thus, the mistress was in charge. This contrasts with the management of field hands who were looked over by an overseer. The role of sugar in the kitchen must have demanded extra attention. Contemporary knowledge of physical and emotional effects of sugar must have led to a cycle of craving food, desire, and control between the supplier of sugar (mistresses) and the producer of sweets (cook).[63] Cooks had the ability to "steal" items, such as raw materials or prepared food, for themselves and their family. The mistresses did not watch every movement of the cook, and as a result, there was room for inconspicuous consumption.

In addition to being able to sneak food from the white folk's groceries, cooks sometimes let things happen while turning a blind eye. On Monday December 14, 1857, Richard Eppes awoke to find a disturbing scene in his new kitchen well: "Much shocked this morning on opening the new well back of the cook's garden to find that some scoundrel had stolen a hog and pitched the entrails and ribs down the well. Could not find who did it."[64] Eppes' cook clearly would have heard a killing of a hog, or the noises associated with a quick butcher, and her silence represents a loyalty to other slaves. This account also speaks to the slave palate; this person clearly took the preferred meat, and left the intestines and ribs to rot. Or perhaps this person did not want to partake in the lengthy process of cleaning them for consumption. Either way, the cook, living adjacent to the well, must have turned a blind eye, or perhaps done it herself.

Not all household resistance was passive. As previously mentioned, the majority of enslaved Afro-Virginians were Igbo and brought with them knowledge of both poisoning and foodways.[65] Igbo were known for their knowledge of herbs and poisons, as well as their use and knowledge of supernatural powers. Tutor Phillip Fithian recalled an attempted murder by poison on a local plantation:

> Ben returned about seven from Westmorland court house–he informed us that Mr. Sorrels' Negroes had their trial there today, concurring their accusation of entering their master's house in the night and with an intention to murder him. It was proved (so far as negro evidence will go) that the brother of this Sorrels early last spring bribed some negroes to poison his brother and when that diabolical attempt could not succeed he has since tried to persuade them to murder him![66]

The idea of poisoning goes hand-in-hand with food production and consumption. While the "servants" were not cited as the cook, they nonetheless had to have access to the victim's food. Similarly, in April of 1849, an enslaved man named Billy was charged with poisoning his owner Thomas Wilcox, at North Bend plantation in Charles City County. Ten years later, another house servant was charged with poisoning Wilcox's son.[67] Although rare, this was one of the many modes of resistance practiced by enslaved Afro-Virginians. The role of feeding one's enslavers begs for more understanding as to why more cooks didn't poison their masters. Clearly, they had access to poison, food, and trust—the ideal situation for murder. Perhaps their role as cook provided them with enough collateral power to negotiate their living conditions and treatment. So much of the mistress's reputation was based on the cook's labor and this relationship had a particular level of negotiation and invited covert power struggles.

Some enslaved cooks were not willing to stay within bondage, even with their unique position, and ran away from their plantations. Enslaved cook Rachael, belonging to Mr. John Aylett, ran away after three months of cooking for Mr. Aylett. A runaway ad was placed in the *Virginia Gazette* reading:

> THREE months ago I purchased, from the executors of *Littlebury Hardiman*, a negro woman named RACHAEL, formerly Mr. *Hardiman's* cook, since which I have not seen her. I am informed she has a husband at one of Col. *Carter's* quarters on *James* River, through whose benevolence I imagine she is now harboured. Whoever brings her to me, at *Drummond's Neck*, near *Cowels* ferry, shall receive 30s, or 20s if conveyed to *Charles City* prison. I am determined not to dispose of her, and will sue any who entertain her.[68]

Rachael obviously was sold away from her family and was not able to negotiate her placement as some others were able to. It is clear by the ad that Mr. Aylett valued her skills and would go to great ends to capture her again.

The birth of Afro-Atlantic cuisine: the ultimate functionality of foodways

Foodways are more than food, but rather the uses, functions, and performance of cuisine. West African foodways were dispersed throughout the Diaspora and functioned in a multitude of ways depending on the interface. Food acted as memory, a connection to the past, and a signifier of one's ancestral roots. Cooking as a skill gave enslaved cooks avenues to negotiate their position and navigate the power dynamics of chattel slavery. West African foodways *became* American food. It is hard to imagine an American summer BBQ plate without watermelon, or the absence of gumbo in New Orleans, or the lack of Southern cuisine on the whole. It is due to the strength and perseverance of the millions of enslaved Africans who brought with them the memories of home, the techniques and culinary grammar of West African food, and transformed the culinary grammar of the new colony.

Some people chronicle their lives through writing, but cooks do so through recipes. Enslaved cooks not only provided a sense of home for their enslavers, but also made that sense of place one that was flavored by West Africa, and which undoubtedly helped the enslaved community remember their homelands. Cooks were key historical actors in a complex structure of bondage, survival, and negotiations. Their legacy speaks to their perseverance throughout enslavement, and the cultural potency of their work. The smells, tastes, textures, and sights of traditional West African cuisine made their way into the meals of the African Diaspora and as a result permanently transformed Atlantic cuisine.

Notes

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24 Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 66.

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