The Global Roots

OF THE SOUTHERN DINNER TABLE

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS, ACADEMIC STUDY, AND RECIPES

by Dana Croy

“For as long as there has been a South and people who think of themselves as Southerners food has been central to the region’s image its personality and its character.”

-John Egerton

AN INDEPENDENT STUDY

This thematic map was my final project for Cartography 4380. I based my project on this study and attempted to visually show where each of the foods I would be including originated around the world.

Many years ago I began considering writing a cookbook for my children to share stories and recipes that are part of our shared family lineage. As I began to examine those recipes I began to ask many questions.

1. Why were my mother's recipes so similar or even the same as some recipes I was seeing in recipe books?
2. Where did the foods that are part of Southern cuisine originate?
3. Why is Southern food often synonymous with "soul food"?
4. How did the slave trade contribute to our food identity?
5. What other cultural influences and global foods fused together to create the Southern table?

My own research, ongoing experimentation in the kitchen, plus an understanding of migration and the exchange of culture through my pursuit of a degree in Human Geography at Middle Tennessee State University, has led to this independent study to document my findings. As I read books, journal articles, and other academic research I often came across stories that helped in cementing the understanding of this work.

In addition to this work, I created an Age of Discovery ArcGIS Storymap in my Historical Geography course which can be found at: https://arcg.is/1Ta1az and a hand-drawn 17x22 map indicating the global pathways of the foods for a Cartography course.

Initially I set out to create a purely academic presentation. However, no tale of Southern cuisine can be told without the authentic voice of the Southern storyteller. This is that story.

-Dana Croy

COLLARDS: A BITTER DELIGHT

There is perhaps no food more attributed to the unique Southern palate than a mess of greens. Be it turnip, collard, mustard, or even a pot of poke, greens invoke a sense of Southern cuisine like no other food. It is not unusual to find collard greens on the Southern Sunday table. How did this high nutrient and bitter but delicious food find its way to this fame?

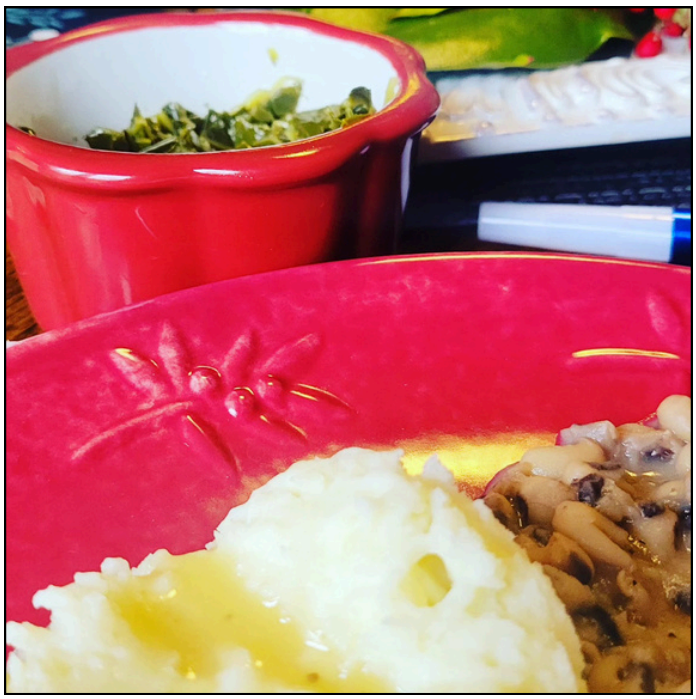
If you read food magazines, blogs, or even news stories featuring foods you will think collard greens arrived on the continent via Trans-Atlantic slave routes. I have read this story many times through the years. However, history tells us that while those forcibly moved to the "New World" may have perfected the cooking of collards, it was early British colonists who brought the first seeds to be planted in hope of survival. It begs the question of how so many writers have gotten it wrong. I have thoughts.

Fortunately for me, I found Michael W. Twitty and his work on food and the African diaspora via his website Afroculinaria. Twitty is a James Beard award winning cookbook author and food historian. He tells it like it t-i-s instead of falling back on stories often repeated but wildly inaccurate. It seems it is easier to tell stories that make us feel good than share the truth but his sharp wit and storytelling skills shed a light on this sometimes shadowy subject. While I had already read book excerpts and academic journals written largely by white academics. There was a part of me that needed validation from African American historians to be convinced there was no subterfuge in collard's origin.

Collard greens can be traced back to ancient Greece but like with some other foods, there is a question in its history. Some say collards or colewart originated in Greece and this is the most likely scenario. Some suggest they were from other parts of Europe inhabited by Celts and taken to Greece then dispersed. Regardless, we do know Greece was likely the source of spreading collards to the greater world and from there they were dispersed via trade, migration, and the sharing of culture.

The love of greens is fairly universal among cultures. The greens found on the American Southern dinner table are a wonderful example of the fusion of people and cultures. Collards crossed Europe and the English Channel and found their way across the Mediterranean and down the West Coast of Africa via the Atlantic Ocean to West

Africa and then to central Africa. Collards are a cool weather crop and easily grew in Germany and in England.This leafy green is part of the Brassica family and close cousins to cabbage, chard, and spinach. Eventually Europeans adopted cabbage as a more regular part of their diet though British colonists began to grow collards as more of a dietary staple.



My view of my plate at my Mother-In-Law's New Year's Day table. January 1, 2024.

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Despite not being native to the continent of Africa, collards were similar to greens foraged by Africans and used in many regions and many African cultures. Those with access to it in West Africa as well as slaves encountering it for the first time up and down the American coasts were able to easily adapt collards into their own diets. Later, collards became a crop grown in small patches outside of slave cabins to supplement their meager rations. Collards quickly became a staple throughout the new world and were even found in gardens of Cherokee women in areas where they lived close to settlers and those with slaves. And they were popular among poor white families, especially in the years after the Civil War when share cropping became prevalent across the South.

One part of the collard origin story we do know, potlikker is known to have originated from the slave food traditions of the South. Potlikker is the juice remaining after your greens, preferably collards, have cooked and are ready to eat. This juice is full of vitamins A, C, and K as well as iron. It is a delicious part of the meal that demands hoe cakes to be dipped into the juice then eaten!

My own story of collard greens is not as sweet as some of my other food remembrances. We had greens growing up. If memory serves, it was more often turnip greens, though I prefer collards as I have gotten older. I was a great eater and did not typically mind vegetables as our Mother insisted we have them at every meal, but my love of greens was more of an acquired taste. I was probably in adulthood before I really began to appreciate this wonderful food that is so quintessentially Southern and invokes such a warm feeling whenever they are simmering on the stove.

Collard greens have seen a resurgence in recent years. The popularity of Southern cuisine, increased interest in farming, growing desires to reconnect to cultures of origin in a world whose tapestries are threatened to be engulfed by the impulse of sameness - these things and more have put an emphasis on our past and an appreciation for foods that have shaped us. I mean, we can only eat so much Kale, right?

I like to serve collards in their own small dish, like this ramekin. It prevents the juices from spreading across the rest of your plate. This also preserves that rich "broth" so you can dip your cornbread right in!

THE STORY OF PEACHES: CHINESE ORIGINS AND TIES TO SEGREGATION

When I was growing up in Middle Tennessee we did not often get fresh fruits. Unlike today's grocery stores, the ones in my hometown had a small fruit and vegetable section. We could get bananas, apples, and grapes throughout the year, but we often truly relied on seasonable fruits. For some things it was largely canned items. During the holiday season we would receive baskets of tangerines or pears from my father's business associates and it was always a treat. But my favorite fruit, the peach, was a special treat purchased from roadside stands on the way home from our annual beach trip to Panama City Beach. I can still remember standing outside eating a fresh peach and the taste overshadowing the extreme discomfort I felt from the peach juices covering my hands and face. Those peaches were largely for eating fresh while canned peaches were used for dessert.

Not just any dessert, THE dessert. My favorite of my mother's dessert was peach cobbler. For years it was one of those desserts I was afraid to attempt. As I began my own food journey, the Southern food scene had not yet exploded. It was relegated to my monthly subscription of Southern Living. I was able to recreate some of my favorite foods from my childhood and those I could not I coaxed out of my Mother when she was well enough to give reveal secrets.

> "Peach in my hand, book in lap, sand underneath my toes, the stuff of fairy tales."
> -unknown

It took me a long time to recreate Peach Cobbler despite it being the simplest of desserts. Prior to finding my way I discovered the most delicious Peach Crisp recipe from my favorite and much dog-eared Southern Living Homestyle cookbook. Though we loved that dessert I still craved the cobbler of my childhood. There was much trial and error mainly in trying many other recipes, many who resembled Miss Truvy's recipe for Cuppa Cuppa Cuppa in the iconic Southern book and chic flick Steel Magnolias.

As part of my food pathways project for my Human Geography degree I knew the Southern Peach Cobbler must be part of the story. Why do peaches grow throughout Alabama, Georgia, and northern Florida? Who grew the peaches? How has their story become tangled in mine? In my search of the story of the peach, specifically the Georgia peach, I must have scoured 20 articles, journals, and book excerpts. The one that told the story in the most comprehensive way was a Smithsonian article that not only shared the food pathway of the peach, but the story of how it

became an icon in the South and the ties it has to the Civil Rights movement here in the United States. (Okie, William Thomas. “The Fuzzy History of the Georgia Peach.” Smithsonian Magazine, Smithsonian, 14 Aug. 201AD, www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fuzzy-history-georgia-peach-180964490. Accessed 28 Mar. 2024.) Agriculture historian, Thomas Okie, a native of Georgia, has best researched and told this story through his dissertation on the labor and the Georgia peach. Much like other parts of Southern history, it isn't an entirely pretty story, but we'll get to that.

The story of the peach does not begin in Georgia. It begins in China. Taoist writings have included the peach as a symbol of longevity for over 3,000 years though there is archeological evidence dating the cultivation of peaches as far back as 6,000 years ago. If you look at this image of Hsi Wang Mu from China, you will see she is holding a peach. She is one of the Chinese immortals and part of Chinese mythology. The Immortals are an important aspect in traditional Chinese Feng Shui and even today you may purchase the "Three Immortals", one of which is holding a peach to signify longevity.

With the exchange of culture via the famed silk road that began around 2,000 years ago, peaches found their way through the Middle East to Spain. This is where the story begins to connect with this Southern fruit. Spaniards took peaches to the new world, specifically St. Augustine, Florida. Spaniards arrived in the area in 1513 but did not create a settlement until 1565. It consisted of Spanish men, women, and children and soon grew to include Native Americans and Africans. There peach seeds were planted, and the famed peach orchards of the South grew from there.

In 1838 Mary Randolph included six peach recipes in her book The Virgina Housewife. Despite their proliferation and their love by all, including Thomas Jefferson as outlined by Monticello historians, it was not until the late 1800's when peaches began to play into the Southern growing landscape. The Civil War was over and there were many freedmen and women as well as poor white Southerners in need of work. Cotton was still king and in the space of seasonal work left by the cotton plantations, peach growers were able to supply black Southerners with orchard jobs. Though slaves had been freed through the pain of the Civil War, they continued to toil on Southern soil. These men and women were willing to work and were highly skilled at what they did as farmers on farms and in orchards across the South. They were paid up to $1.00 a day.

Cotton may have been king, but many Southerners wanted to create a new identity for the South. Farming would never entirely go away (nor should it), but many wanted to separate from the identity of slavery. Many progressives also embraced modernization though peach growing and harvesting remained a largely manual process. It was also a process that emphasized segregation. Orchard owners would maintain fields made up largely of black workers or poor whites while their packing houses were often filled with white middle-class people, including college students and schoolteachers who wanted a summer supplemental income. As part of the work to create new Southern identities, Georgia small-town politicians seized on the popularity of peaches and began to create festivals and celebrations of the fruit and cemented the state, but really the entire South as the home of peaches.

What about the cobbler? As with much of Southern foods, it is difficult to ascertain a recipe's origins. We know that much of our foods have come from various global sources and also know that many of the foods were perfected by black cooks either in a plantation home or in their own small kitchens as they eeked out an existence of rations and what they could grown for themselves. Cobblers are said to have originated from British settlers in the South who did not have access to some of their more traditional fillings and created this dish with what they had. Sometimes you will see oatmeal in the recipes, though I do not personally use it. Oatmeal was a common food among Scottish settlers who also migrated in large numbers to Southern shores. What we do know is peaches are another global contribution to the Southern table and that this recipe is a family favorite across the South.

Every Southern kitchen should have at least one piece of vintage Corning Ware. Every piece of Corning Ware should come with a story. This is one of my Mother's pieces. It is the Blue Cornflower. It always makes the best Peach Cobbler. Every time I use it for guests, they share their own stories as well.

Mama's Peach Cobbler

Ingredients

- 1 stick butter (1/2 cup)
- 1 cup self-rising flour
- 1 cups sugar
- 1 cup milk
- 2 cans sliced peaches in juice

Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 400.
2. While oven is preheating, place a stick of butter in a 9x13 pan and place in oven until melted. About 7 minutes.
3. Stir flour, sugar and milk together in a bowl.
4. Once the butter is melted, remove from oven and pour patter over the melted butter.
5. Place the peached in the batter.
6. Evenly pour the peach juices over the peaches and batter. Do not stir.
7. Bake at 400 for 35 minutes or just until golden brown.

CONCLUSION

When I began this work, which seems small at this point, I had no idea the breadth of material available on the subject. The study of foods goes far beyond the migratory patterns of the people who moved them from place to place. There are reams of journal articles and books regarding the botanical aspects of foods and the history of the discoveries of those aspects, which feature prominently in the story. There are archeological documents which are instrumental in dating the cultivation of foods, largely found in traces in ancient pottery. There are anecdotal stories and histories such as those surrounding peaches which show how they became a staple of Southern desserts. There are the people, the most important part of the story.

There is a resilience factor that is part of this work. Early peoples traversed thousands of miles spanning three continents and set in motion the movement of foods across the Americas. Mediterranean traders moved throughout Europe, North Africa, and Asia trading exotic foods that would take root in new homes. Adventure and opportunity seekers sought a new world also set into motion a series of events which impact us today in every way. Many Africans were forcibly removed, kidnapped from their homes and used as free labor, treated inhumanely, often cast aside as mere property, yet their resilience is pivotal to the story of the Southern table.

Approximately 80 hours, countless articles and book excerpts, newspaper articles, and even blogs read meant I have only touched on the tip of this work. My greatest challenge is spending too much time reading, adding too many books to my Amazon shopping cart for later reading, inhaling the stories which often found their way into even the most boring of botanical journal articles such as one documenting the discovery of wild beans in Argentina.

There is so much left to write. Beyond the vegetables there are the meats that feature so prominently in American Southern cuisine. For example, why are salmon patties (or salmon croquettes as my Mother liked to call them) found on every Southern table? To prevent malnutrition during the depression the United State government worked with fisheries in Alaska to get canned salmon to grocery stores across the south. It was an easily acquired and cheap protein with the omega 3's needed for good health. They produced recipes in newspapers and magazines, and salmon patties became a Southern staple despite the nearest salmon being thousands of miles away.

Thank you to my faculty advisor, Dr. James Chaney for his support, to Dr. Franis Koti for teaching an amazing Cultural Geography class which inspired me to change my major, and to the professors who have worked with me as a non-traditional student to see me through to graduation.

-Dana Croy

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