



Spirit & Place

STORIES



Soul Food: My Legacy

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THERE ARE BETTER THINGS IN LIFE

Food is nourishment for the body, a stimulus for the mind, but it is often more importantly food for the soul. This is especially true when food is a unique part of a culture and bridges the gap between generations. This is the case with me and my ancestors from Africa and from the South. In the transition and acculturation of African people from their homeland to the southern states, their love of “soul food” has survived intact.

This cuisine has continued to be the most accepted fare in my family for many years, and it’s true with most Black people from the South who belong to my generation. Food is a symbol of love and was used in my family to celebrate every special occasion from birth to death. These traditions are so deeply embedded in my family that our favorite foods richly deserve to be called “soul food.”

As a small child I came to understand the importance of food to my family because it was never wasted, and whatever was left over became a part of the next day’s meal. I became an early member of the “clean plate club” and knew that whatever Momma put on my plate, I was expected to eat it. I was never asked if I liked it, I was never allowed to complain about it, and I never questioned my mother about its nutritional content.

Holidays were great times for our celebration of “soul food.” My mother and her older sister would compete to produce the most food and the tastiest desserts at Thanksgiving and Christmas. My husband was amazed the first time he attended a family Thanksgiving dinner because of the enormous amount of food that had been prepared for our combined families of only about twenty people. My mother’s specialty was pies and cobblers; my aunt specialized in cakes.

Food was also important because that was one of the ways that both my mother and my aunt were able to earn money. They were in great demand because both were excellent cooks, so their talents were well known. They were also the two persons that were always responsible for cooking the church dinners—a real treat even when it was a funeral dinner.

It was at our special celebrations that I was able to eat what I desired, rather than what I was given. It was truly a moment that I treasured, so I usually ate as much as I could. I had no idea that eating my mother’s fried chicken, collard greens, and cornbread, topped off with a generous portion of peach cobbler, had anything to do with my weight. I just loved every moment of my freedom of choice.

When I became a teenager, I noticed that there were other girls who were slender and looked great in the tight skirts and pants they wore. I suddenly realized that I was fat! I knew that my cousin Dorothy was fat, because she had been teased since we had been in grade school. I was in a dilemma, not knowing what to do and certainly knowing that I could not ask my mother. All the females in my family were fat and considered it normal. Any attempt to be different would have met with resistance.

I was a freshman in college when I learned that there was a direct connection between my “soul food” diet and my weight. Thanks to the vast expanse of the Bloomington campus and the dormitory food, which was real culture shock, I lost 30 pounds that year and finally felt like a normal female. My mother was not happy with my new figure and was certain that I was ill. I was back to Momma’s table, but I now understood that I didn’t have to eat it all. I had other things to celebrate besides food. I had the determination to leave my old habits behind as I looked forward to my career as a dietitian. It didn’t seem likely that I would be a good example to others if it was obvious that I couldn’t control my own weight.

The traumatic event that occurred to underscore my decision was the early death of my cousin Dorothy at age thirty-five. She had been my closest companion and playmate during my childhood. Her death made it clear to me that there are better things in life to celebrate than food.

Though “soul food” was a symbol of love and celebration, it too often destroyed our health. My hope is that my grandchildren, who have no idea what traditional “soul food” is, will not become victims of obesity. May they learn to savor food as nourishment for the body as well as the spirit of family and community.