

Imagination and Food in the Black Diaspora

Rebecca Fils-Aime

ABSTRACT: The phrase ‘Food unites us’ has been used to insinuate that food helps find commonality among different people. While I generally disagree, I think this phrase astutely describes the connection between Black people around the world. The tragedy of forced displacement has been reimagined through food and medicine using certain key ingredients that still tie us together as descendants of African people. New dishes with an old, familiar feel were created with the historical knowledge of slaves who were transported against their will, and with the introduction of new ingredients, environments and techniques learned through colonization. Using various articles and books as resources, this paper will delve into a comparison of how different Black ethnicities adapted their respective African cuisines and plant medicines after migrating to new places.

Approximately nineteen genera from fifteen botanical families moved from Africa to the Americas through slavery in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, including millet, tamarind, hibiscus, sesame, okra, sorghum, watermelon, and cowpeas. Consequently, new plant medicines and foods were created as enslaved Africans culturally exchanged with each other and indigenous peoples. With so few of their staple foods being available, enslaved Africans incorporated old and new crops to their old techniques. I will discuss some ingredients by highlighting the foodways by which they were introduced to different countries.

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This paper will track four plants and traditions and their migration from Africa through the food and medicines of several cuisines and countries. First, we will look at how the transportation of knowledge transformed dishes like ‘sauce feuilles’ from Guinea and ‘konotmire stew’ from Ghana by comparing how the dishes both changed and stayed the same in the Caribbean and Southern United States. We will also investigate how the transport of rice to the Americas to feed enslaved peoples developed into Black people all over the world preparing rice and beans in similar but different ways. We look at how okra was used for food and medicine similarly and differently across cultures as enslaved Africans engaged with Indigenous peoples. Lastly, we will discuss how watermelon, a valuable source of water in Africa, became a staple in African American history and food.

The knowledge that our ancestors transported across the Atlantic is strongly represented in foods known and loved across the world. This paper will present a compelling contribution to the Symposium’s examination of imagination in food by highlighting Africa’s contributions to other cuisines. Africa’s contributions to food history tends to be undersold and under

told, with plantain being the notable exception. Black food and people around the world are connected by traditions and, while imagination helped adapt dishes to new surroundings, the cultural and medicinal history of our food will continue to feed us for generations to come.

The transatlantic slave trade defined and shaped many of the foods we know and love today. Africans from various countries on the continent were enslaved and sent to other parts of the world. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, consequently, approximately fifteen botanical families moved from the continent of Africa to the Americas¹. It is well documented that enslaved Africans and slave traders carried seeds and plants on the ships that took them from Africa. However, the transport of knowledge and traditions, and how they adapted to the foods of their new environment is less documented. In the past, Africans and people of the African diaspora were almost notorious for not writing things down for various reasons – not knowing how to write or speak in a language that everyone around them could understand, rules against sharing knowledge during colonization, and the intentional quelling of tradition to force assimilation.¹ As a result, new foods and botanical remedies developed as enslaved Africans exchanged with each other and Indigenous peoples. With so few of their staple foods and plants available, enslaved Africans were guided by tradition and imagination to create many African-inspired cuisines around the world. This paper will connect the dots between leafy greens, watermelon, rice and beans, and okra in Africa to various present-day cuisines around the world. All these countries have one thing in common; many of their present-day staples would not exist without the presence of descendants of African people.

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Leafy Greens

Boiling leafy greens is a central cooking technique in African cooking.² The evolution of the dishes '*sauce feuilles*' and '*kantomire stew*', from Guinea and Ghana respectively, can be seen in the Caribbean, Latin America, and the U.S. South.

Enslaved Africans were at the forefront of all cooking done in the home during the times of colonization. However, the foods they were not allowed to eat most of what they cooked for the plantation owners. For the enslaved people, meat was a rare occurrence. They were typically given meager pieces of meat scraps that slave owners did not want to consume or had to hunt for small wild game to supplement their meals. These small pieces of meat were then used to flavor the vegetables and vegetable-based stews that were made with the small number of plants they were able to grow for themselves.³

Sauce Feuilles - Guinea

'*Sauce feuilles*' literally translates to 'leaves sauce'. The dish is traditionally made with sweet potato leaves, red palm oil, aromatics, and cubed pieces of meat, or shrimp or crab for extra flavor. Vegetable stews popular in the Caribbean and Latin America can be seen as not-so-distant relatives to this dish.

When enslaved Africans were brought to what is now the country of Haiti, sweet potato leaves were not readily available. Instead, they used whatever leafy greens they could find, including a type of leaf called '*lalo*' or jute leaves, which is also found in present-day Guinea and every other country in tropical Africa.⁴ Due to French colonization, tomato paste was used instead of palm oil. The cubed pieces of meat and seafood used for the dish were usually crab with beef or smoked pork, although the dish was also served meatless.⁵ This is a perfect example of how a traditional dish from Guinea stayed the same in method and technique but changed due to descendants using substitutes that were readily available in their new location.

In the English and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, the dish is called '*callaloo*' and sweet potato leaves are replaced by a variety of indigenous leaves dependent on which country you are in. The green of choice used in the Jamaican and Guyanese versions of *callaloo* is amaranth, which is one of the most widely eaten boiled greens in Africa's humid lowlands. In Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and the Dominican Republic, '*callaloo*' refers to a dish made with taro leaves, dasheen bush or water spinach. Like Haiti's *lalo* dish, pork and crab are common additions, but it can also be served as a meatless dish.⁶

Kontomire stew (Palava sauce) – Ghana

Another technique that originated in Africa is drinking the juices from the greens. In many West African countries, '*Kontomire stew*' is a dish made similarly to 'sauce feuilles' with additional ingredients. Cocoyam leaves are used instead of sweet potato leaves and the dish includes ground bitter melon seeds or '*egusi*', aromatics, red palm oil, and is usually flavored with smoked fish and/or dried shrimp, although beef or chicken can also be present. There is also more gravy in this dish compared to sauce feuilles and as a result, it is served with pounded yam or boiled plantain to sop up the flavorful and healthy sauce. Due to the technique of simmering the greens in water, water-soluble vitamins and minerals like potassium, B vitamins, vitamin C, calcium, folate, and iron are present in the liquid left from the cooked greens.⁷ Sopping up the meat-based sauce ensures that these nutrients are absorbed in addition to nutrients in the leaves themselves, a clear showing of how African peoples and their descendants used food as medicine. This method of sopping up vegetable sauce may sound familiar to those familiar with greens from the Deep South in the United States.

In the United States, the Deep South is a subregion with its own distinct culture. The term was originally used to describe the states that relied on plantations and slavery the most during the transatlantic slave trade – Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, and Texas. For this paper, however, the Deep South does not include Texas and Florida, as the cuisines and cultures of large portions of these states have been heavily impacted by other peoples (Mexican/Indigenous and the Indigenous/Caribbean, respectively).

Most enslaved Africans brought by the slave trade and their descendants resided in these states from the time they were brought to the U.S. in the seventeenth century until the Great Migration of 1916 when six million African Americans moved out of the rural South to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West. As a result, most African American 'soul food' is seen as inherently southern. Greens are a staple soul food dish in this region. In the Southern U.S., 'greens' usually referred to simmered collard greens, although kale, beet leaves, turnip leaves, and greens common in some Native American cuisines like milkweed and marsh marigold were also commonly used then. Smoked meat is used to flavor the greens in the same way smoked fish or dried shrimp is used in 'Kontomire stew'. Since cooking greens for so long compromises some (not all) of the nutritional value, consuming the water-soluble vitamins in the remaining liquid is vital. In this region, that leftover liquid from cooking greens in water slowly for hours has a name – 'potlikker'.⁸ Usually, cornbread is served with greens to dip into the potlikker – reminiscent of how West Africans serve pounded yam, also called 'fufu', or boiled plantain with 'Kontomire stew' for the same reason. Potlikker is full of iron and vitamin C, showing one of the many ways Black people still intentionally and unintentionally use food as medicine. This is a drastic difference from how most food African in origin is portrayed in media; they are typically labeled as 'poor food choices', and foods that are inherently healthy are left out of national and international conversations about healthy foods and foods in general.

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Watermelon

Watermelons are large berries that originated in Africa. While the specific origins in Africa are hotly debated, a large amount of evidence points to it being from northeastern Africa. The original watermelon tasted much different than what we know now; they were less sweet, smaller and much harder, almost bitter. It was grown to be used as a portable water reservoir to provide relief from the heat and high temperatures in the area. Besides being high in water content, it is also full of vitamins like potlikker; Again, this shows how African descendants use food to support health. It is full of an amino acid called 'citrulline' that helps the body with heat-related stress. Through trade, the watermelon traveled to the Mediterranean, then India, China and later spread to Spain and the rest of Europe.

In 1576, Spanish settlers and enslaved Africans began growing watermelon in Florida and the plant spread across the eastern United States. The water content and nutritional makeup of watermelon made it very beneficial for the enslaved Africans to consume and cultivate. Naturally, African slaves were the ones who mostly cultivated watermelons back then.⁹ Today, watermelon is, unfortunately, associated with extremely racist tropes that have impacted African Americans, so much that many refuse to eat watermelon in public or at all.

How did we go from watermelon originating in Africa to watermelon being a racist trope in the U.S.?

Soon after the transatlantic slave trade ended, Black people were freed from slavery in the Americas. With racism still in full force, however, they had to find ways to make money on their own. As the main source of crop cultivation, they began to grow, eat, and sell watermelons – which became a symbol of their freedom. After the Southern U.S. lost the Civil War, which was fought over the freedom of slaves, to the northern U.S., many southern Whites felt that Black people were flaunting their newfound freedom in their faces. White people in the South who were threatened by this freedom responded by making watermelon a symbol of their various prejudices against Black people. Through plays, movies, minstrel shows, newspapers, and eventually television, they made watermelon a national symbol of uncleanness and laziness among Black people. This trope took over American popular culture with a vice grip, so much so that watermelons' origins are obscured.

Today, watermelon is still primarily grown in the Southern U.S. due to favorable weather conditions. Black people in the U.S. are underrepresented in watermelon consumption – we are approximately 13% of the population but only make up 11% of total watermelon consumption. Asian and Hispanic peoples, the two fastest-growing groups in the United States, eat the most watermelon.¹⁰ This demonstrates just how disconnected many of us in the African diaspora are from our heritage due to hatred and forced assimilation.

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Rice and beans

Beans and rice as a dish is common all over the world. However, there are thousands of different types of rice dishes specifically in the Western part of the world, and most are directly influenced by traditional African foods and techniques. The transatlantic slave trade played a big part in the history of rice and beans in the Caribbean, Latin America, and the United States. Not only did enslaved people bring a type of rice with them when they were brought from the continent, but when Spanish settlers brought another type of rice to various southern states in the U.S., the enslaved Africans were the only ones who knew how to cultivate it. Many of them came from regions that had been producing rice for hundreds of years and after this realization, slave traders went to African countries in this region specifically looking to take Africans who knew how to grow this crop. As a result, rice is extremely popular in countries that have heavy Spanish and African influences. In the United States, many rice dishes native to the country originated in the Deep South, where just over half of both African Americans and Black people from other countries currently reside.¹¹

Meat played a smaller role in traditional African diets; therefore, beans were used as a primary source of protein and additional nutrition. *'Waakye'* is Ghana's national dish, and it uses black-eyed peas in a method like the *'Hoppin' John'* dish from the U.S. South. The black-eyed pea came to the United States from the Caribbean by way of Central Africa.

Field peas or cowpeas – also native to Africa – were used in the original Hoppin John dish but over time, that changed to black-eyed peas due to cost and availability.¹² Some historians believe that the beginning of the successful cultivation of rice in the U.S. started when an enslaved African woman taught her owner how to grow the crop in the South Carolina Sea Islands. This area has a subculture of African Americans called the Gullah-Geechee, whose ancestors were some of the most proficient cultivators of rice in continental Africa. South Carolina was one of the richest colonies in the nineteenth century, due partly to the extensive rice cultivation being done by these enslaved Africans.¹³ In present-day, the Gullah-Geechee maintain strong ties to their West African roots, unlike many other African descendants in the United States. While they do speak English, they use similar words, ingredients, and spiritual traditions as their West African ancestors¹⁴. Rice remains an integral part of the Gullah-Geechee culture, which will be explained more in a later section of this paper.

A direct line can be drawn from West Africa to Haiti to New Orleans just by looking at a dish called '*red beans and rice*', which is quintessential in New Orleans cuisine today. Haiti has at least a dozen variations of '*diri ak pwa*', or rice with beans, using African techniques, and various beans that came from Africa or colonial influence. The kidney bean version went on to influence New Orleans' red beans and rice after free Black people from the country emigrated to French-speaking Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution. Coupled with White slave-owners who also fled Haiti around this time with their enslaved, the Black population in the city doubled, which contributed to many of the foods and culture popular in New Orleans today.

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The method of making rice and beans, sometimes flavored with small pieces of seafood or meat, is a perfect example of enslaved Africans incorporating foods they were exposed to due to forced colonization. In Puerto Rico, '*arroz con gandules*' or rice and pigeon peas is the national dish. The pigeon pea also comes from Africa.¹⁵ The enslaved Africans in this new land of Puerto Rico had to reimagine their rice dishes and therefore used the meat that was most easily attainable in their new environments. In Puerto Rico, that meat was typically smoked or cured pork. This is one of Africa's biggest impacts in the food world. Many, if not all, of these rice and beans dishes remain largely unchanged apart from subtle aromatics and choice of meat that again, vary by location and history of colonization. This re-imagining of old traditions by adapting to new environments is the crux of most Black cuisine throughout the Americas.

Okra

It is believed that okra was first cultivated in Ethiopia in the twelfth century BC. Okra was grown along the entire 3,500 miles of African coastland where most enslaved Africans were taken from. So, it was a common ingredient across tribes. As historian Michael W.

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Twitty states, “To the Wolof people it was “*kanja*”, to the Mandingo, “*kanjo*”, to the Akan it was “*nkruman*” and to the Fon, “*fevi*”.¹⁶ The English word ‘okra’ even comes from the Igbo language of Nigeria, where okra is referred to as ‘*okuru*’. It is also called ‘gombo’ in several West African languages and it is eaten across the continent of Africa, throughout the Caribbean, and the Americas. There were two historical preparations of okra, and both consisted of a peppery stew served with carbohydrate-heavy sides like rice, pounded yam, or millet. The difference was the addition of other ingredients – the stew was either made with onions and tomatoes in a sauce or boiled on its own.^{xvi} In present day, okra is still seldom cooked as a separate vegetable in cuisines impacted by enslaved Africans use of okra, with fried okra in the U.S. South and Guyana being notable and more recent exceptions.

Okra was first introduced to the Americas through Brazil in the 1500s, where approximately 5 million enslaved Africans were taken before the country abolished slavery in the late 1800s. Many of them came from West Africa and the Bantu region and they introduced okra to Brazil as a thickener and a vegetable. The Brazilian word for okra is ‘*quiabo*’, which comes from a Bantu language name for okra – ‘*kigombo*’. The oldest recorded African dish in Brazil, *caruru*, dates to the 1600s and describes a spicy stew made with okra, onions, peppers, palm oil (another ingredient introduced by Africans), and smoked fish or shrimp.¹⁷

Soon after being introduced to Brazil, okra was introduced to the West Indies by the same method in the 1600s where approximately 40% of all enslaved Africans were taken.¹⁸ Almost every Caribbean country uses okra in their cuisine, either in a soup or a stew as a thickener. In Haiti, okra is commonly boiled in its own peppery stew or boiled in a peppery stew with meat. The Haitian Kreyol word for okra is ‘*gombo*’, like the name in Angolan languages that call it ‘*ngumbo*’.¹⁹ The country of Barbados uses okra in its signature dish, ‘*coucou and flying fish*’ to help thicken cornmeal.²⁰ In Belize, okra, or ‘*okro*’, is commonly added to stewed beef or to oxtail. St. Martin, Trinidad, and St. Lucia each have variations of *callaloo* that use the boiled greens method referenced earlier in this paper and add okra to the dish. Both the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico prepare okra boiled in its own stew (‘*molondron guisado*’ and ‘*quimbombo guisado*’, respectively).^{vi} These examples show just a small piece of West Africa’s strong impact on the Caribbean cuisine so many of us know and love.

Historians guess that okra may have arrived in mainland North America in the eighteenth century. When okra recipes started showing up in the United States, the dishes were initially referred to as dishes from the West Indies. It is certain that Charleston and New Orleans were cooking okra early on due to their close relations with the Caribbean colonies. Many plantation owners moved from the West Indies to New Orleans and the coastal areas of South Carolina due to the similarities in weather.

South Carolina became one of the wealthiest states in North America in the late eighteenth century because of enslaved people who were cultivating rice in the area. In an area called Lowcountry in Eastern South Carolina and surrounding states, enslaved African

cooks, who were cooking for their slave masters, made dishes that were strongly influenced by Senegambia. The plantation owners living there mostly came from the Caribbean and were generally used to that kind of fare, including okra.²¹ As time passed and these dishes were made and tweaked, they began making African-inspired dishes that the region could call their own. A unique population of African descendants began to grow in this area who ultimately became the Gullah-Geechee. Simultaneously, New Orleans went through a similar 'Africanization' as mentioned earlier in this paper.

Both cities developed cuisines in which okra was a huge part. In Lowcountry, okra is cooked in a peppery soup with tomatoes, onions, and meat and served with rice. This dish, known as '*okra soup*', can be seen as the cousin to New Orleans '*gumbo*', which means okra in French. Okra is the star ingredient in traditional gumbo, serving as both a vegetable and a thickener in the peppery stew. Okra appeared in other recipes too – okra and shrimp and '*limpin' Susan*' in Lowcountry, smothered okra in New Orleans, as well as other versions of gumbo in other cities. There are versions of Brunswick stew from the Southeastern coast and burgoo from Kentucky that include okra, tomatoes, onions, and peppers. There is a version of okra soup from Baltimore, Maryland that adds crab to the mix to create their 'crab gumbo'.^{xvi} Once okra began to appear in American cookbooks in the nineteenth century, it was clear that enslaved African cooks had a major impact on white American housewives and their food preferences.

112 The history of okra also demonstrates how enslaved Africans and Native Americans interacted and shared with one another. Gumbo was originally made with okra as the thickener until some Black cooks were introduced to file powder made by the local Choctaw Native Americans. File powder is a thickener made by grinding up sassafras plants, which are indigenous to the Southeastern United States. While okra was readily available in the West Indies and South America due to favorable weather conditions, the weather in parts of the Southern U.S. was not as tropical year-round. It is assumed file became popular as a stand-in in recipes when okra was out of season.²² Enslaved Africans began using sassafras in traditional healing methods when okra was out of reach – boiling the leaves in water to use for skin conditions,²³ encouraging diarrhea and vomiting,²⁴ and as an abortifacient.²⁵ Conversely, the Choctaw began using okra as a thickener in place of sassafras occasionally after okra was introduced to the United States.²⁶

The use of okra as medicine across the diaspora also shows how strong the connection is to the various countries of the African diaspora. Both West Africa and the greater Caribbean are tropical, and they share approximately 85 floral families as a result.²⁷ Enslaved Africans were just as foreign to the land as the Europeans who forcefully brought them there. However, many Africans were already familiar with tropical weather, tropical plants, and tropical diseases in a way that aligned with Amerindian knowledge. As a result, enslaved Africans used flora familiar to them, or to their forebearers, and became experts in

the use of new plants learned from the Amerindians.²⁷ Historically, Egyptians used okra to prevent kidney stones. It was also used in other African countries to soothe skin conditions and the seeds were ground and used in food and as a coffee substitute. There is evidence of okra seeds being used as a coffee replacement in Continental Africa, the Caribbean and the U.S. South.²⁸

Okra, along with watermelon, was one of the few plants of their homeland that enslaved Africans grew for themselves to make up for foods enslavers refused to provide.²⁹ Despite being surrounded by Africans from various tribes who didn't speak the same languages, okra became a unifying crop that went on to solidify Africa's historical role in world history.

Many foods that are central to various cuisines and cultures can be traced back to African foods, plants, and/or traditions. Despite this fact, Africa, particularly West and Central Africa, is largely unvalued in the Western mainstream culinary world. The spread of watermelon and okra across the world occurred because they were important to African diets and, as a result, they are now important to the diets of many others. Africans from the more tropical parts of the continent were accustomed to cultivated rice in similar weather, which made them invaluable during the transatlantic slave trade. Now, rice and beans is a staple dish across the world. The traditional methods of boiling/simmering leafy greens and consuming the remaining liquid/sauce and the methods of cooking okra have been passed down across generations, from ancestors who have been cooking this way much longer than had been documented.

Food historians and chefs who descend from these various countries are continuing to highlight traditional foods with African roots at the forefront. In the future, I hope to see more recipes and plants get their proper accreditation from culinary professionals outside of the global Black community. If we start treating all foods and recipes with value, we can ensure that certain regions and cultures receive the historical and societal respect that they deserve.

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Notes

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