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# Book Review: A Place at the Table

The tangled story of how African-American cooking has changed the national palate.

*By Rien Fertel*

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‘I believe I know how food should taste,’ Edna Lewis wrote 30 years ago, in a simple but proud, provocative yet entirely accurate pronouncement. Born in 1916 in Freetown, Va., a black farming community co-founded decades earlier by her newly emancipated grandfather Chester, she learned as a child to forage, farm and cook. Wanderlust eventually led her to New York, where she entertained a cross section of the city’s culturati, first at her own table, then at Café Nicholson, where Eleanor Roosevelt, Truman Capote and Marlon Brando were regulars. She turned to writing late in life, compiling four cookbooks that preached the virtues of pursuing flavor as she saw it, highlighting seasonal Southern recipes from her ancestors on both sides of the Atlantic who taught America how to eat.

The re-release of her third cookbook, **“In Pursuit of Flavor”** (Knopf, 319 pages, \$29.95), first published in 1988, is cause to sit down and savor. It not only traces one woman’s curious palate but subtly weaves the story of how rural black cooking became known as “Southern food” and in turn transformed American taste: cooked greens, whipped cornmeal with okra, buttermilk biscuits and lard-pie pastry. Inside, recipes double as memoirs in miniature. Her recipe for Brunswick stew recalls protecting the family garden from pests: “When I was young, there were squirrels all over the place, usually raiding the corn field. . . . Whenever we went to pick corn, my brother always took along his rifle.” Roast wild turkey becomes a lesson in fellowship: “It used to be something very special if a hunter bagged a wild turkey during hunting season and shared it with neighbors and friends.” Fried eels are inextricable from childhood: “Everyone caught eel when I was a child, and I never thought one way or the other about it.”

Lewis’s cookbook begins, as does her earlier, magisterial collection of recipes



Collard Waffles With Brined Trout and Maple Hot Sauce, from Todd Richards's cookbook 'Soul.'

PHOTO: CAITLIN BENSEL, GREG DUPREE AND VICTOR PROTASIO, FOOD STYLING BY MARGARET MONROE DICKEY, PROP STYLING BY THOM DRIVER AND MINDI SHAPIRO

“The Taste of Country Cooking” (1976), with an elegiac evocation of the past, her birthplace and its people. “I grew up in Freetown,” she writes in the introductions to both cookbooks, before unspooling reminiscences of foraging, canning and baking alongside her kin. This opening motif, Rafia Zafar writes in **“Recipes for Respect” (Georgia, 137 pages, \$24.95)**, her study of black culinary literature, “echoes the incantatory ‘I was born’ of countless slave narratives.” Like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs before them, black cooks, housekeepers and hoteliers endeavored to “elevate their social status, attain civil rights, and present a dignified professional self to the public.”

A scholar of African-American literature, Ms. Zafar covers an immense

swath of history in less than 100 pages. She opens with a series of hospitality guides published by men who navigated the tension between their entrepreneurial drive and the lure of abundant jobs supporting the luxurious lifestyles of white consumers. In his “Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeepers’ Guide” (1848), Tunis Campbell, a butler, hotel manager and self-described “anti-slavery lecturer,” nevertheless encouraged black readers to embrace “mutual dependence” and “feel their identity” as servants in whites-only establishments. The first wave of post-Emancipation cookbook authors felt less compelled to appease. In “A Domestic Cook Book” (1866), the earliest known cookbook written by an African-American, Malinda Russell details a life punctuated by racism and violence, while hoping that her recipes will earn enough to “enable [her] to return home” to Tennessee.

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## Books

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PREVIEW

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Though cookbooks reflect their eras, some, like great works of art, transcend time. Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor's "Vibration Cooking" (1970) still seems radical and refreshing today. "A Zora Neale Hurston of the culinary set," in Ms. Zafar's estimation, Smart-Grosvenor's manifesto-as-menu decries the supermarket segregation of ethnic foods, dismantles culinary imperialism and pokes fun at white foodways. "White folks act like they would starve for sure if

they couldn't have a hunk of meat," she writes. "Eating neck bones don't bother me."

Of course not everyone warms to the promise of neck bones, whether roasted, smothered or stewed. In a pair of books, the historian Jennifer Jensen Wallach paints a deeper portrait of black foodways. "There is not a single African American food story," Ms. Wallach writes in "**Getting What We Need Ourselves**" (Rowman & Littlefield, 217 pages, \$36), but a multiplicity of narratives, lineages, myths and prejudices.

Ms. Wallach begins in Africa, where the Atlantic slave trade forced a vast diversity of cultural backgrounds to depend on "amalgamation and compromise." Adaptability was key. Local ingredients like palm oil, chickpeas, yams and red rice became common culinary threads. New World imports like capsicum peppers, cassava, maize and peanuts, brought by slave traders, further creolized the West African diet. The enslaved and their captors transported these foodstuffs and others, including sesame, sorghum, black-eyed peas, watermelon and okra, to the

Americas, where they flourished as symbols of resilience in “memory dishes” like gumbo, Hoppin’ John and perhaps even tamales.

But for enslaved Africans, food could be a source of suffering as well as sustenance. Force-feedings were common during captivity, diets contained far more carbohydrates than proteins, hunger strikes were not rare. Food, Ms. Wallach writes, “became a battleground,” and not for the last time.

In **“Every Nation Has Its Dish” (North Carolina, 248 pages, \$34.95)**, Ms. Wallach reframes, in less reader-friendly academic-ese, the second half of “Ourselves.” Here, she focuses on the first hundred years post-Emancipation and how African-Americans strove to claim their place at the national table through cooking and eating what she deems the “cuisine of uplift.” Unsurprisingly, Booker T. Washington ranks as one of Ms. Wallach’s prime uplift eaters. At Tuskegee Institute, Washington enforced what he deemed “civilized” dining-room rituals—formal dress codes, tablecloths, napkins—and fed his students “clean, fresh” beef and wheat bread rather than pork and cornmeal, ingredients he considered slave foods.

Washington’s intellectual rival, W.E.B. Du Bois, likewise sang the praises of the uplift diet. “The Hot Biscuit is a lovely institution” if limited to once a week, he wrote in the NAACP’s official magazine, the *Crisis*. But above all else, “the deceitful Pork Chop must be dethroned in the South and yield a part of its sway to vegetables, fruits, and fish.”

But by the 1960s, Ms. Wallach writes, a new wave of civil-rights activists practiced racially specific culinary coding over the “foodways of inclusion” touted by the passing generation. The idea of soul food was born, an idea with as many definitions as dishes. “The Negro Almanac” defined soul food as “the traditional food of southern Negroes.” Princess Pamela, a Manhattan restaurant owner, called it a “loving art.” Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor simply knew it as “a feeling,” the act of “eating with the right people.” Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, on the other hand, dismissed soul food as “going slumming” for the black bourgeoisie, a “mocking slogan.” Edna Lewis agreed, labeling soul food as “hard-times in Harlem—not true Southern food.”

But for chef Todd Richards, soul food is the key to understanding the way America eats. Soul food, “born from an involuntary collision of cultures,” is “a pidgin cuisine” that moved with the Great Migration “until it stood firmly on its own.” In his cookbook “**Soul**” (Oxmoor House, 366 pages, \$35), Mr. Richards, a Chicago-born Atlanta restaurateur, provides an ingredient-by-ingredient journey through his pantry, starting with a chapter on collards and ending with roots. The recipes might be dubbed nouveau pan-Southern: grilled peach toast with pimiento cheese, collard-green ramen, Nashville hot chicken-fried lamb steak.

Whether this qualifies as soul food is up for debate, but Mr. Richards’s own pursuit of flavor is as soulful as Edna Lewis’s. “This book is my homage to the cuisine of my family and ancestors,” he writes. “These are the ingredients of my people. This is my sermon about my Soul food.” Preach on, and eat up.

—*Mr. Fertel is the author of “The One True Barbecue” and, most recently, “Southern Rock Opera.”*

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