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SOUL FOOD: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE HISTORY, SIGNIFICANCE AND SOUTHERN ROOTS OF THE AMERICAN CUISINE

by
Sarah Bracy Penn

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
April 2015

Approved by

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Advisor: Professor Willard Rose

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Reader: Professor Curtis Wilkie

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Reader: Doctor Charles Mitchell

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For Cenell and Nadine, whose unwavering pride, unconditional love and collard greens showed me what “soul” really is.

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I'd like to thank the many culinary historians, journalists and masterminds who answered each and every question I threw at them. Your voices provide the power of this project.

Thank you, Susan Puckett, for showing me that food is much more than just something we eat. It is an incredible avenue to share intimate stories and personal histories. Without that realization, this thesis would not have come to fruition.

To Curtis Wilkie, Kathleen Wickham and Ellen Meacham, thank you for being sticklers for perfection. Under your direction, I grew to become a better writer than I ever imagined I could be.

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Finally, I am eternally grateful to Bill Rose, whose guidance and supervision as an editor and mentor have shaped me into a true journalist.

ABSTRACT

Soul Food: An Interpretation of the History, Significance and Southern Roots of the American Cuisine

(Under the direction of Willard Rose)

This thesis is a collection of stories in which I explored several facets of soul food, the hybrid cuisine of Africa and the American South. It uses soul food as a prism to view issues of race, class, politics, economics, history and social consequences. Rather than write an academic paper, I presented my findings in a series of articles based on live interviews with food historians, culinary writers, entrepreneurs and chefs. I also examined various books, articles and blogs written by these culinary writers.

This is not a comprehensive history of the cuisine, nor does it attempt to take sides with any of the groups that argue about the precise definition of what soul food is. Instead, this thesis explores those definitions, along with the societal issues that go along with them, in classic journalistic fashion.

In short, this thesis demonstrates that soul food has complex meanings far beyond its taste.

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Introduction

Soul food—it's one of America's most storied and emotionally charged cuisines. Despite its simple ingredients and preparation techniques, the food's underlying meanings and connections are utterly complex and at times, unexplainable.

Over the last two decades, it has picked up enormous steam, popping up on white-tablecloth restaurant menus across the nation and inciting a craze of foodie literature. Some writers choose to reinvigorate or, to the chagrin of champions of food justice, reinvent the cuisine altogether. On the flip side, some of the nation's legendary soul food spots, like in New York City's Harlem and Chicago's South Side, are closing shop.

For a food with such humble beginnings, soul food has traveled quite the journey. Its roots are in Africa, and later the food was adapted with cabin cooking techniques. Soul food is connected to a time when the American South was plagued by one of the most brutal institutions in history—slavery. But just as many people, at least in the South, are united on taste, food critics and historians can be bitterly divided on everything from soul food's origins to its future.

How can such a simple food engender so much disagreement?

This thesis confronts the many sides of the soul food debate. It seeks to shed light on that question by probing the origins of soul food, its evolution over more than 100 years and its highly charged emotional baggage. I have written a series of six stories composed in true journalistic fashion, gathering my research from African-American

historians, food writers and culinary justice experts.

Topics range from soul food's origins and contemporary interpretations of the cuisine, issues of acculturation and appropriation, the rapid shut-down of soul food institutions in America's metropolises, the food's power of social connectivity, healthy takes on traditional recipes and finally, the debate of soul food's ownership.

Through these stories, I have demonstrated the complexity of soul food, its tenacious ability to please the palate, its social importance, its ability to both unify and divide, and its key role in the history of the southern half of the country.

It is an old, old story, and it is far from over. If nothing else, soul food has proven once again that good food has staying power, no matter the disagreements that swirl about it.

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the History and Contemporary Interpretations of Soul Food

Growing up in Louisiana, the heart of my home was the kitchen. By design, it was made for congregation. More often than not, our dinner table spread included collard greens, butter beans, sweet potatoes and homemade cornbread. The smell of a browning roux was the all call to convene for SEC football on Saturday nights, while Sundays inevitably ended with grease stains spotting my church dress after a fried chicken luncheon. This was my soul food.

Once, in Cleveland, Mississippi, I dined at The Senator's Place, a Mississippi Delta icon that serves up home cooked soul food to locals and tourists alike. State Sen.Willie Simmons, the restaurant's namesake and owner, walked me through the buffet line of classic southern fare. I asked the apron-clad woman behind the line for a chicken drumstick, a dish of greens and a piece of cornbread. As I took the plate from her with a smile, I almost drooled with delight. This was my Sunday meal. It was like coming home. The senator then prodded me with a question, snapping me out of my momentary enchantment.

"I bet you've never eaten neck bones before," the senator said. "You can't have soul food without neck bones."

No, I had never eaten neck bones, and I'd eaten soul food my whole life from my grandmother's kitchen table. But in this realization came an even larger one—soul food

also symbolizes a people, a movement, a way of life which I did not, and could not, understand from my personal and familial histories.

As it turns out, there is much more to soul food than meets the eye.

To food historians, culinary experts and soul food aficionados who have sliced and diced the cuisine to reveal its many facets, soul food is what African-Americans had available to them when there wasn't much else. In the days of slavery, it epitomized the culinary genius and inventiveness of the African-American woman who could take the sparse leavings from the master's table and whip up a meal strong enough to sustain the family through the long plantation workdays. The cuisine then traveled north, where it steadily persisted in the kitchens of black migrants and then boomed within certain civil rights circles. Today, this simple food has endured to become the subject of scholarly work.

In recent years, foodies have churned out trendy books that suggest the evolution of soul food is a lens through which to view the evolution of the African-American community. As might be expected, not everyone agrees.

There's at least two sides, and arguably more, to the soul food debate. The sides are epitomized by the socially and politically constructed cuisine that links to civil rights and, on the flip side, an attempt to promote black cultural awareness through linking this food to necessity, survival and a triumph of culinary creativity in the slave cabin and later, in the homes of white employers.

For over 50 years, the dominant narrative of soul food defined it as a cuisine of necessity, the only food available. But there's one man who is striving to change that interpretation, and in doing so, has stirred up a new one.

Adrian Miller, attorney and self-proclaimed “soul food scholar,” published *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time* in 2013, a provocative revision of history that sent immediate ripples through the tight community of those who study such things.

His goal: to redefine the accepted history of soul food as poverty food.

The result: a following of readers who now see the cuisine as a celebration of the American South.

“The dominant narrative is that it’s poverty food. But if you actually go back through the history, most of this food is celebration food of the rural South,” Miller said. “I’m saying that, essentially, the black migrants who left the South during the Great Migration…this is the food they brought with them.”

According to Nicholas Lemann, author of *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, the Great Migration was “one of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements of people in history.”

From 1910 to 1970, more than six million African-Americans fled the rural South for urban areas of the north. Blacks on the Atlantic seaboard went north to Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York City and Boston. Natives of the Black Belt trekked to Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and Milwaukee.

Lemann attributes this mass exodus to the birth of the mechanical cotton picker, a narrative epitomized by the introduction of the machine at Hopson Plantation in Clarkdale, Mississippi, which “could pick a bale of cotton for $5.26” compared to the $39.41 it cost to pick it by hand.

It triggered an immediate revolution. Planters no longer needed to pay vast numbers of field hands to weed and pick their cotton. Almost immediately, battered old cars with Mississippi license plates started moving up Highway 61 and every Greyhound and Trailways bus station in the Delta was packed with black people headed north.

As they packed up their lives and moved toward better opportunities, southern blacks left behind the days of sharecropping and rural life. But there was one thing these African-Americans did not leave behind—their food.

That's not to say it was easy to maintain a diet of southern food in the urban north. In the pre-Great Migration era, the smaller number of black migrants often opted to eat the traditional larder of their new homes, Miller said.

His research suggests the ingredients necessary to create traditional southern dishes, such as salted pork fat and cornmeal, were more expensive than fresh red meat or flour. Thus, the integration of what we now call "soul food" into the urban blacks' diets did not occur until the Great Migration.

Until then, "black migrants made their food choices based on rational economic decisions that could trump tradition," Miller writes.

Cooking out of necessity was no new concept to these new urban African-Americans. For generations, southern blacks were forced to eat what was available—the master's leftovers, some say. "Chitlins," pork fat and pork neck were considered throwaways to planters and plantation owners but were often gobbled up eagerly in the slave cabin. When this first wave of southern blacks ventured north, those same survival techniques were used to create their new diet. They simply ate what they could get. And what they could afford.

But when the African-American masses flooded the North during the Great Migration, they longed for a taste of home. In *Soul Food*, Miller cites nutrition professor Jean Mayer, who claimed in 1972 "Southern-born Negroes tend to retain Southern food habits, often at great inconvenience and cost."

In time, black-run restaurants and grocery stores were cropping up throughout the urban north. Miller calls this era the "Down Home Cooking Period," a time when local restaurants and street vendors in black neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side and Harlem would offer "southern cooking" for the growing numbers of southern-born clientele.

For southern blacks, it was more than a meal that tasted like home. It was a place of solace for the soul.

"Eateries offered an oasis—a place where you could get familiar food in a familiar setting—albeit in an alien locale," Miller writes. "Getting some southern food into one's belly had to be a confidence builder and a cure for homesickness."

In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, published in 1940, Bigger Thomas brings his white employer's daughter, Mary, and boyfriend, Jan, to Ernie's Kitchen Shack on Chicago's South Side when the two whites want to dine "at one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places." Ernie's Kitchen Shack is a fictional representation of the dozens of small southern food joints where African-Americans congregated in those years.

In this sense, Miller argues that this southern food was a way African-Americans could celebrate and remember their roots in the South. However, poverty and necessity still played a role in "down home cooking" in the northern cities.

"It's a hybrid cuisine in a sense that there is poverty food as part of it, but a good part of it is also these prestige celebration foods," Miller said.

In *Soul Food,* Miller suggests that kitchens were a privilege for African-American families who lived in tenement housing. Thus, many black southern expatriates resorted to small kitchenettes where boiling, simmering or quick frying over a stove were the only ways they could prepare their meals.

It wasn't until the 1940s when the term "soul food" was introduced. It is generally believed that the term "soul food" was coined in conjunction with the civil rights movement and later, the Black Power movement, when the nickname took off in the 1960s.

Additionally, Miller notes that the term's roots are also documented in the Elizabethan Age when William Shakespeare wrote "O, know'st thou not his looks are my soul's food…" in his earliest play, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona.* The term also has ties to the church, where it was used to describe "the ways in which to enrich one's spiritual life, 'to feed one's soul,'" according to *Soul Food.*

Of course, there is a correlation between soul food and soul music. *A Pinch of Soul* is a soul food cookbook by Pearl Bowser. In it, she explains the beginnings of the cuisine.

"Soul food grew in the way that soul music grew—out of necessity, out of the need to express the 'group soul,'" Bowser wrote.

Donna Battle-Pierce is the food editor for *Upscale* magazine and the founder of BlackAmericaCooks.com. She is a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University and completing

research for an upcoming book on historic African-American cookbooks. She remembers the days when Black Power was on the rise and soul food found its beginnings.

"It was a time when I was coming of age. The time came from a celebration of our culture. It was just like Black Power—that's what it meant, exactly," Battle-Pierce said. "I think just like Black Power and just like the athletes that held their fists up at the Olympics, you know, it has the same kind of feeling and same kind of unity. [Food] was just one example of a culture that we were choosing to celebrate."

But soul food was only one of many ways that food was used as a means of propelling the civil rights movement. You can't forget the sit-ins at lunch counters across the South in the early 1960s, which helped inspire the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). These acts of non-violent rebellion led to restaurant desegregation in some southern cities, but in Mississippi, it took time.

In Leflore County, the Board of Supervisors put an embargo on surplus food provided by federal food assistance programs after SNCC organized voter registration drives and created community organizations. With scores of families facing near starvation, SNCC cobbled together "a successful food drive that symbolized a turning point in local racial politics," Miller writes.

Freedom Summer, a documentary by award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson, contains footage of the day SNCC volunteers unloaded flat after flat of canned goods and produce and shelled out the rations to sharecroppers. The film was released in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of Mississippi's Freedom Summer last year.

Further, soul food institutions in the North and South served as gathering places for civil rights leaders, similar to churches in the Deep South.

In Montgomery, Alabama, Georgia Gilmore was famous for her small soul food establishment operated out of her own kitchen. The story was uncovered by John T. Edge in an essay and later, by "The Kitchen Sisters," Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson, for their radio series *Hidden Kitchens.* Gilmore was involved with the Montgomery bus boycotts and served John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Martin Luther King in her own backdoor kitchen.

The iconic Atlanta restaurant Paschal's also fueled the civil rights movement, and a 2008 feature in *The New York Times* reported King was crazy about the vegetable soup. In fact, a 1968 report of King's assassination in *The Trenton Evening Times* reveals that the leader said "I want some soul food" just moments before his death.

Back up north, the soul food trend expanded beyond the African-American community and caught the attention of whites. In the March 1970 issue of *Vogue,* Gene Baro's essay detailed the latest fad food that was captivating the nation. Southerners of both races shook their heads at the North's sudden veneration of the food they had eaten their whole lives.

"The cult of Soul Food is a form of black self-awareness and, to a lesser degree, of white sympathy for the Black drive to self-reliance," Baro writes. "It is as if those who ate the beans and greens of necessity in the cabin doorways were brought into communion with those who, not having to, eat those foods voluntarily now as a sacrament. The present struggle is emphasized in the act of breaking bread."

Most periodicals that covered soul food in this era dubbed it a trendy, "exotic" food accepted by the white consumer. In *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 7: Foodways,* Edge and other food writers Toni-Tipton Martin and Margaret Jones

Bosterli wrote an essay titled "Soul Food" in 2007. In it, they reveal a slew of reporters who reviewed the cuisine when soul food was gaining momentum.

Craig Claiborne, notable *New York Times* restaurant critic and Mississippi Delta native, wrote a column "praising the chitlins and champagne offered at Red Rooster's in Harlem, and soon the droves descended, tongues wagging, upturned noses sniffing out the heady scent of long-simmered swine intestines," Tipton-Martin, Edge and Bolsteri write.

Soon after, features reviewing soul food ran, both touting and rejecting the cuisine, in *Seventeen*, *Esquire*, *Time* and *McCall's*.

For Miller and Battle-Pierce, the Soul Food Era lives on. The traditional southern African-American dishes that Miller dissects in his book—greens, sweet potato pie, chitlins and cornbread—are still considered soul food because they are celebration food.

"[Miller] was enlightening to me, or he brought some pieces of the puzzle together for me, by that. We all kind of bring our backgrounds and our own perceptions to everything, and his thesis, especially in pointing out even a phrase used by people who left the South as a celebration food, I agree with wholeheartedly," Battle-Pierce said.

On the opposite end, some believe the term soul food characterizes a specific food movement in the 1960s, but the term has lost relevancy in today's culinary landscape. Tipton-Martin, founder of the SANDE Youth Project and author of upcoming book *The Jemima Code*, believes the term "soul food" no longer wholly characterizes African-American food in this country.

"I think we have to acknowledge soul food in the period it was created, and the terminology of its specific meaning. Every aspect of what African-Americans cook is not

considered soul food," she said. "The problem is that we try to apply it universally across the board to African-American culinary experience, and that would be what makes it irrelevant or incomplete as a description."

Miller disagrees.

"I don't think it's lost relevance at all. I think [soul food] is still a powerful coined term in this sense. So many other cultures are copying it. I mean, you've got a book called 'Japanese Soul Cooking,' and everybody's saying this is 'Jewish Soul Food.'

"So no, I think it's a very powerful coined term inside the black community and outside of it. Now because I define soul food differently, that's maybe why I'm not agreeing with that statement. Because I think soul food is about what African-Americans are eating outside of the South," he said.

That's not to say Tipton-Martin does not believe the Soul Food Era was one of celebration. In the 1960s, African-Americans reclaimed the cuisine and began to see soul food as a unique food all their own. But in the 1970s, bothered by the knowledge that the cuisine was the product of the master's throwaways or the recipes meant for the master's table, they began retracing it back to the homeland—Africa.

Seeing it as the food of their African ancestors was much more palatable than being reminded of slavery every time they sat down to eat.

"So the African-American today in the relationship to those ingredients is one of celebration of a time period, of survival, of reminiscing. Maybe, you know, in some ways, like the Passover meal," she said.

While she still believes soul food is a celebration of a particular time in African-American history, Tipton-Martin touts the survival narrative behind the cuisine as a

source of empowerment and triumph for African-Americans. *The Jemima Code* reveals the culinary treasures of African-American cooks through the cookbooks they left behind. Tipton-Martin has collected over 300 rare black cookbooks and says they reveal the genius of these invisible women through the cookbooks they penned.

"There's one element that runs through it all that does not run through traditional southern [food]," she said. "That is the mechanism of survival. I don't see survival negatively the way other people do.

"I'm able to see survival as an incredible gift of adaptability. It doesn't mean poor. It doesn't mean garbage. It doesn't mean trash. It means wherever I go, whatever's available, I can figure out how to cook it," she said.

In 2014, Miller, Battle-Pierce, Tipton-Martin and culinary historian Michael Twitty gathered to participate in a panel at the Association of Food Journalists Conference in Memphis, Tennessee. With Miller as moderator, Battle-Pierce, Tipton-Martin and Twitty duked it out over their respected definitions and interpretations of soul food.

While each panelist had his or her own respective opinions about the interpretation of soul food's history and influence in today's culinary landscape, they each agreed of the importance within the African-American cultural experience.

"I think that there have been a lot of people with a lot of opinions, and I just respectfully feel that we all had a lovely coming together and respecting each other's perspectives," Battle-Pierce said.

Chapter 2: The Acculturation and Appropriation of Soul Food

There's a serious fried chicken jones in New York City.

In the East Village, chef David Chang, the James Beard award-winning mastermind behind the international Momofuku restaurant empire, pays homage to his Korean heritage at Momofuku Noodle Bar with a fried chicken feast, but it comes at a price. For a steep $125, customers can gorge on two of the fowl, one Korean-style, triple-fried and drizzled with a spicy glaze, and the other "southern," the batter prepared with buttermilk and an unorthodox Old Bay seasoning.

Chang's chicken has incited such a craze that a mere 136 parties of 4 to 8 can enjoy the meal per month. You can reserve your chicken in advance through a lottery system to avoid the line that snakes around the block, and if you cancel your meal less than two days before the feast, you're charged the full price anyway. Talk about an early bird special.

On the Upper West Side, Jacob's Pickles serves up six variations of the chicken biscuit, their most popular piled high with a mountain of shaved hot and sour pickles and clover honey.

In 2014, North Carolina-born chef Sarah Simmons launched her southern-style restaurant Birds and Bubbles, where, for $55, you can chow down on 48-hour brined and pan-fried bird with a split of top-shelf champagne.

A new meaning has been brought to "winner, winner, chicken dinner." But why,

after all these years, has fried chicken spurred such a fuss?

John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance and author of *Fried Chicken: An American Story*, attributes chicken and other southern delicacies' trendy moment to the nature of the restaurant industry. Chefs, in essence, make careers out of bringing working class folks' food out of the home and onto the white tablecloth.

But sometimes, it's not that simple.

"What becomes problematic is cooking someone else's food, especially someone of a lower social or class rank or a different race or ethnicity. In that negotiation, that's where the problem comes," Edge said. "It's not the commercialization. It's about appropriation."

The recent fame of fried chicken and other southern and soul food staples cuts both ways. For years, food justice crusaders and culinary historians claimed soul food was being ignored. Arguably, their work spawned this southern food revival.

Be careful what you ask for. Now the food is everywhere and, as is usually the case with cultural appropriation, acclaimed white chefs in fancy restaurants across the country are adding their own special twists to fried chicken and soul food and making a killing, all the while arguably obscuring the food's roots – the very thing that made it so meaningful to the people who birthed it. All of this can't help but grate on the nerves of some food historians. Others shrug it off as a complement to the food and an inevitable evolution of the original product.

"The food of working class blacks is being celebrated, and with that comes this," Edge said. "It's not a theft of food or of culture. It's the job of people like Toni [Tipton-Martin] and Adrian [Miller] and Michael Twitty and the Southern Foodways Alliance to

help people understand the complexity of the stories that underlie this food."

Tipton-Martin, author of upcoming book *The Jemima Code,* understands why young, hip American chefs are adopting the ingredients, not the recipes, associated with the cuisine into their of-the-moment dishes.

"They have made them very high-dollar menu items," Tipton-Martin said. "Things like pork cheek and bacon, which they're calling 'pork belly.' So the food certainly is continuing to live on in that vein, if you look at it only as a series of ingredients."

But she fears that the history of African-American culinary genius in the midst of poverty is both obscured and forgotten in the popularity of these pricey menu items.

"Because [soul food] doesn't look sophisticated, and because it is associated with food of poverty and survival, we have been unable to see that correlation between what a modern chef does with a new ingredient and what [African-Americans] did with a new ingredient," she said. "The fact that you can make something *edible* is just as provocative as making pork cheeks in a reduction sauce."

Over the last 20 years, African-American food has become widely popular outside the South. Now, it is no longer an oddity to find versions of that food on the menus of five-star restaurants.

"We've gone from the black food being the soul food, the poverty food, the fringe food, the thing we used to eat when we didn't have anything else, but the minute we add white people, or the minute the hard days of the South are over, then we started to pretty up southern food," Tipton-Martin said. "The nice, good, healthy, pretty, lovely food is new all the time, but the black food is always the same 12 dishes."

Donna Battle-Pierce shares the sentiment. She's the founder of BlackAmericaCooks.com and devoted her career to unearthing hidden African-American family recipes under the mantra "…because food is so much more than just something to eat." She described her surprise when hipster chefs "discovered" the many uses for bacon.

"Give me a break. That was after a long time of people saying bacon grease kept on your stove was absolutely a wonderful addition to add to your dishes for flavoring," she said. "All of a sudden, every white chef in America or southern chef is cooking with bacon, and bacon is the hugest deal and the whole world has gone crazy over it."

While *Bon Appétit* dubbed kale the trendiest vegetable of 2012, Whole Foods Market claimed "Collards are the New Kale" in 2014. These traditional vegetables associated with working class southerners—both black and white—have gone from a southern essential to the subject of a major rebranding by the massive corporation of health fanatics at Whole Foods.

Battle-Pierce sees food as history—as a way to remember your ancestors, your culture and the story of African-American history. This "food gentrification," a term coined by black feminist Mykki Kendall, is exactly how those histories get lost in the mush of food blogs, social media feeds and foodie literature.

"The disgraceful part is that people aren't even appreciating or understanding that there's a whole story behind what southern and soul food is. They're acting as if they've just discovered it," Battle-Pierce said. "It's also humorous, the fact that people think they've discovered something. The way we all think we've discovered something new."

Adrian Miller, author of *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine,*

One Plate at a Time, sees the craze over certain soul food ingredients, albeit a disregard of the ingredients' roots, as a way the cuisine can endure, to a degree.

"The places that are 'jazzing it up' will be around for a while because they're not even calling it soul food in the first place. They're reducing the stigma or eliminating it all together," he said. "It's kind of funny how all these things that were poverty food and the 'worst food in the world' 20 years ago are now cutting-edge and daring. So, you know, getting some oxtails, getting some neck bones, chicken and waffles, kale…they'll endure because they're being embraced."

Miller cited chicken and waffles as the quintessential example. The dish, which was reserved for special occasions in the urban African-American community during the Great Migration, has been identified with black culture for the last 80 years. Today, it's found more frequently in white chefs' restaurants than traditional soul food places. Boozy brunchers across the country gobble up the dish at places like Founding Farmers in Washington, D.C. and The Stanton Social in New York. It's even become a bite-sized hors d'oeuvre splashed on the pages of southern bridal magazines.

Other African-American foods have succumbed to the same trend, like Kool-Aid pickles, variety meats and most recently, variations of greens. As it shows, food is just the latest African-American trend that has drifted to the mainstream.

"I think what's happening with soul food is what happened with African-American music. So, you're finding white hipsters embracing it, repackaging it and selling it to the mainstream," Miller said.

It is not at all unusual for aspects of black culture to be taken over by the masses.

"If you talk about black culture, everything about our culture has gone global

except our food," Miller said. "The way we talk, the way we dance, the way we play sports, the way we sing, the way we dress, the way we wear our hair. But our food has not, except elements of the food are."

Today, white chefs are embracing the culinary aspects of black culture in the name of profits and creativity. While Chang, a Korean, is now known for fried chicken, a black chef may opt to leave the dish off his menu because of the stigma associated with it.

"I think that's unfortunate," Miller said. "It's to the point now where African-Americans are, I feel, the only culture that doesn't celebrate its own food. A lot of that has to do with the stigma of a lot of these soul food ingredients."

Chapter 3: Disappearing Soul Food

Where are all the soul food places going?

A Google search of "soul food restaurants closing" tells what many soul food champions consider a disturbing message. New York, Washington, Atlanta, Detroit, Seattle. Around the nation, the authentic soul food establishments opened by southern black expatriates in the 20th century are disappearing.

The sweeping closures are epitomized by the soul food struggle in Harlem in 2008. The predominantly black upper-Manhattan neighborhood was hailed "Soul Food's Capital" in the civil rights era. For decades, there was a soul food joint on every street corner.

But in the early 2000s, many disappeared.

Harlem was on the up-and-up. Real estate was skyrocketing. The white middle class moved in. Chain restaurants took the place of old-school soul restaurants and high-priced coffee shops opened on every block.

There was also a generational issue, according to Donna Battle-Pierce, food editor for *Upscale* magazine and the founder of BlackAmericaCooks.com. Just as Italian spaghetti restaurants run by generations of immigrant families are closing today, so are the soul food establishments.

"That's immigrants that came from a specific region in Italy, and a lot of those family's operated for generations, and you see a lot of old ones closing, or a new generation is not going to continue," Battle-Pierce said.

She believes the problem is twofold. Clientele began to move out of the neighborhoods, only speeding up the demise of these traditional locales.

"What happens a lot of times in Chicago and other cities I've been to, people have moved out of the neighborhood. I don't think it's because of a lack of appreciation of the food, I think it's because the people that met there and ate there have left the neighborhood. I think the generations of people that were keeping businesses going are now doctors and lawyers and teachers and all different types of things," she said.

Adrian Miller, author of *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of An American Cuisine*, *One Plate at a Time* shares the sentiment. With one significant exception.

Within the American South, Miller believes the cuisine will continue to thrive because of the cultural momentum associated with soul food. In the Delta, places like Cleveland's Country Platter and The Senator's Place, Tunica's Blue and White Café and Memphis's Orange Mound Grill are not likely to close anytime soon. Outside of the South, the Denver native is unsure of soul food's survival.

"So many chefs are running away from it, and more and more soul food restaurants are closing," Miller said. "I think it's a fading cuisine. I don't think it will ever completely die outside of the South, but I think it'll be almost exotic, because you'll have few places that serve it."

Miller, like Battle-Pierce, thinks younger generations of African-Americans are fleeing from their family restaurants.

"And as the generation of people who left the South and settled in these other parts of the country die off, very few people are carrying on the tradition. That's why you're seeing a lot of soul food restaurants close outside the South. *Traditional* soul food," Miller said.

These restaurants could survive if they were treated as an escape—a trip through history. But soul food restaurants can only be a destination eatery if there are patrons willing to dine there.

"Now that other parts of town have opened up and you have the civil rights laws and we have more access to society, you start to see a breakdown in this cohesion as people start to move to different parts of the city," Miller said. "So what used to be the neighborhood joint is now a destination place. And if you don't come back to support that place, it's not going to go on."

Food writer John T. Edge begs to differ.

Unlike Miller and Battle-Pierce, Edge believes soul food is on the upswing. As a frequent commentator on food, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance and a man who has consumed more than his fair share of soul food, Edge has seen a recent resurgence in meat-and-three and plate lunch joints.

"There is a spate of places closing, but I think it's kind of like when the federal office of management tells us there's been a recession, but they tell us a year after the recession's over. I think people are talking about these restaurants going out of business, but that's what happened five years ago, and now we're seeing that resurgence," Edge said.

When Edge is working on a piece in a small town, his first stop is the local library. He sifts through the vertical files in search of newspaper clippings and old advertisements about restaurants of bygone food eras. There will be articles about restaurants that still stand, like Peggy's in Philadelphia, Mississippi. But often, there's much more.

"There's always these teary pieces about a restaurant going out of business," Edge said. "The South is littered with restaurants that once mattered that are no more."

Across the South, a number of young foodies-turned-entrepreneurs are taking a new spin on the classic meat-and-three. In Atlanta, Bantam + Biddy serves up catfish battered with red pea and rice flour and the customary pork, although it's prepared in an unorthodox Austrian schnitzel-style. At Tupelo Honey Café in Asheville, North Carolina, diners chow down on plate lunches of fried chicken with fresh apple salsa and farm-fresh sides like glazed carrots, cheesy smashed cauliflower and carrot-kale coleslaw.

For Edge, soul food lives on. But like daily newspapers, it may not look the same.

The traditional restaurants that are still thriving today, like Bertha's in Charleston, South Carolina, survive because they are neighborhood institutions and locals have rallied to keep them alive. They're unpretentious, classic institutions hell-bent on authenticity.

But for newcomers in the soul food spectrum, shaking up tradition is the key to success.

"People talk about authenticity, but I think authenticity is a useless term. Cultures change. Cultures shift. What matters right now is arguably what happens in Walmart parking lots, and that's a hard thing for people to face because their romanticism for this

food is based in some past. The moment we begin to romanticize it is the moment the death of it comes," Edge said.

Chapter 4: Soul Food as a Social Connector

There’s no doubt soul food’s influence is far-reaching, felt by folks like Mississippi state Sen. Willie Simmons to renowned chef and TV personality Anthony Bourdain. Since the civil rights movement, soul food establishments have been spots for important conversations. Today, many of those institutions have closed shop.

But not in Cleveland, Mississippi.

Every morning around 3 o’clock, Jimmy Williams still fires up the stove. His traditional soul spot, The Country Platter, has been a Cleveland landmark since civil rights leaders escaped the Mississippi heat there in the ‘50s and ‘60s.

Sundays, he works extra hard because both the white church crowd and the black church crowd crave fried chicken and all the fixins’.

“On Sundays after church, you know whites get out early. There won’t be a seat in here,” said Williams. The black church crowd follows hot on their heels.

Just half a mile down the highway, Simmons holds court at The Senator’s Place, the hub of local politics. Black and white diners elbow in next to each other at the long tables, carrying on lively conversations almost as eagerly as they devour the turnip greens and black-eyed peas and that famous sweet potato casserole.

It’s like a melting pot. And in more ways than just race. Class, too, is eclipsed. Here’s the mayor with his secretary. Next to them are two construction workers. Families

with kids. Lawyers and doctors. Delta State University faculty. Farm workers in blue jeans and T-shirts.

Both places are owned by black men who are also local community icons. In the same Delta land where liberal Greenville newspaper editor Hodding Carter was once barred from the honor of reading the names of local debutantes at their coming out ball, Cleveland in 2010 made Jimmy Williams the first black king of the Junior Auxiliary Ball, the town's premier social event.

For 21 years, Simmons has easily held his Senate seat, courtesy of white and black voters. It doesn't hurt that his soul food place draws big biracial lunch and dinner crowds.

In the predominantly black Delta, churches, schools and country clubs are still largely segregated. But restaurants like The Senator's Place and The Country Platter are common ground. Political conversations spark camaraderie. They are the kinds of places where when you walk in the door, you don't recognize a soul but when you leave, you know everyone in the room.

Adrian Miller, author of *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine*, *One Plate at a Time,* has eaten at soul food dives across the nation. There's something different about the restaurants in Cleveland.

"I think in a small community like Cleveland, you're just going to have that bonding. So it's still going to be a space of social cohesion and connection. But when you get to the larger cities, you don't see it as much," Miller said.

"Most of the places who were like that, the owners have either died or retired, and there's no one really wanting to carry on the business. So those places close up when people have to go elsewhere."

Soul food establishments served as neighborhood nuclei during the civil rights struggle and later, as African-Americans were elected to public office. Over heaping plates of fried chicken and greens, activists and politicians congregated with constituents. In Atlanta, the black elite made big decisions at Paschal's. Eventually, white politicians discovered the secret and joined them.

"A lot of these soul food places served as that connector because as urban politics got going and it was still seen as a place where people could come together," Miller said. "It was more efficient, even if you lived in another part of town, if you were a politician, to go to that neighborhood and to that restaurant to get votes, to meet, to organize, to plan, you know. Do all kinds of things."

But it's more than politics, according to Toni Tipton-Martin, author of upcoming book *The Jemima Code*.

"Even in the North, white people were sneaking around and going in the back door; it's no different than the planter and his wife sneaking around and going to the slave cabin," she said. "So there is something about the *food* and what it conveys in the taste of it that drives people together."

Particularly in South. It's the food from your grandmother's table. And the grandmother on one side of the tracks was serving some of the same food being served on the other side of the tracks.

"It's what your mama wanted you to eat when you left home. When she sent you to college, she wanted you to go to the equivalent of Mama Joe's here in Oxford,' said John T. Edge, whose mama sent him to Chase Street Cafe in Athens, Georgia, because she "wanted me to eat well" when he went off to the University of Georgia.

In the Delta, a restaurant is arguably the easiest place for the two distinctly different cultures to come together in communion. Everbody's got to eat. Everybody has something to say. In the no-fuss, non-threatening environment of The Country Platter with its low ceilings and linoleum-topped tables, diners hear and see things from the opposite race that they don't see at their local country club or coffee shop. And the food is something they can all agree on.

The Country Platter has thrived on baked chicken, greens "picked and washed the old fashioned way" and smothered pork steak, which they serve 50 to 60 pounds of per day alongside rice and gravy.

"If we don't have that, we're closed," Williams said.

Taste reigns supreme for Williams and Simmons. Salt and pepper isn't needed. Williams jokes that if someone leaves something on their plate, he runs to kitchen to make sure everything is okay.

"We are a real soul food restaurant. We cook everything and we put our own taste in it. We don't fool with the canned stuff. We pick our greens. We made real homemade creamed potatoes. We peel our candied yams. We cook. Nobody in this area cooks like us. We are the last real soul foods in this area," Williams said.

Home-cooked food is always the draw.

"I want them to feel good, like they can go home to take a nap and watch TV and then come back," he said.

Simmons said his food is "more southern and soul, home-like, and they really love it."

When the senator opened the restaurant in 2003, he envisioned it as a "fast food catfish joint." He never imagined it would be a place of biracial congregation.

He cooked. They came. They ate. And then they came back. And kept coming. The same goes for the crowd at The Country Platter, which is now a stop on the Mississippi Blues Trail and hosts hungry clientele from across the globe.

"You can't just fix anything and expect that they'll eat it. Soul food here? It's amazing," Williams said.

Chapter 5: Healthy Soul Food

Battered and fried. Covered in cheese. Seasoned with pork fat. Doused in heavy cream. More often than not, these are the words that go along with many of the items on today's soul food plate.

It seems as if everything on it is a one-way ticket to heart disease, hypertension, diabetes or obesity. It doesn't help that the states of the Deep South, with Mississippi leading the way, are consistently ranked as the most obese in the nation. Naturally, an outsider would blame native southern foods, namely soul food.

To many in the black middle class, soul food is a fare of celebration, reserved for holidays, special occasions and family gatherings. But to poor blacks and poor whites, soul food staples like macaroni and cheese, fried chicken or worse, fast food, are on the dinner table every night. Critics have railed at soul food as one of the most unhealthy food genres in the country for decades.

Culinary historians have proved that soul food's beginnings were wholesome and nutritious. Researchers long ago found that pure African palm oil, found in many native African diets, produces a wholesome, healthy seasoning. And African yams are equally healthy. But that's not the soul food that most Mississippians are eating.

Obesity experts to state health officials to First Lady Michelle Obama have cited alarming statistics to show that fat-dominated soul foods can be toxic. In Mississippi, the state with the worst obesity in America, 42.9 percent of black adults and 30.7 percent of

white adults are obese. Twenty years ago, 19.4 percent of the state's adults were obese. Today it is 35.1 percent.

And obesity just feeds other killers. As of 2013, 12.9 percent of Mississippi adults had diabetes and 40.2 percent suffered from hypertension. The State Health Department predicts those numbers will nearly double by 2030. And it's not just the grownups. Fifteen percent of high school students are obese and Mississippi ranks first in the nation for childhood obesity – 21.7 percent. There is evidence that healthy food programs in the schools are starting to cut into those numbers, but only time will tell.

What a lot of people eat is killing them.

But it wasn't always this way.

"There's a lot of natively healthy things that I would consider soul food. Okra, lots of delicious, fresh okra cooked without a lot of fat added to it," food writer Donna Battle-Pierce said. "Farmers that are doing things even when they were enslaved with organic farming that were better than a lot of other dishes that you can have."

As Adrian Miller researched the cuisine's roots for his book *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time,* he had similar findings.

"There is a legacy of healthy eating, so all of those things that soul food gets criticized for, when you look into the history of it, you find it's a more complex story," Miller said. "If people knew that heritage of fish, vegetables and eating vegetables with seasoning and stuff, I think there might be more embracing of soul food."

Split between Nashville and Oxford, Mississippi, there's a duo that is trying to turn back the clock before soul food loses this connection all together. Alice Randall and her daughter, Caroline Randall Williams, wrote *Soul Food Love* to bridge the divide

between the current soul food plate and the African-American foodstuffs of old.

The book begins with a collection of essays chronicling 100 years of cooking in their black family, sharing tales of two great-grandmothers, a grandmother, a mother and a daughter, the latter two being Randall and Williams, respectively. The two share the story of how their legacy of family cooking went from hearty to harmful in one generation. Williams also shares over 70 recipes that reinterpret the foods of her family's past with eyes cast toward a healthier future.

The journey toward *Soul Food Love* began with an article titled "Black Women and Fat" that Randall published in the *New York Times* in 2012. The piece went viral and became the most-read article of the summer. But more importantly, it called for a "body culture revolution in black America" unlike any of its precursors. Randall claimed black women in this country are overweight by choice, and the pressures from black males to remain overweight far outweighed the health risks that come along with that lifestyle. She also promised she'd be "the last fat black woman in [her] family."

Randall changed her eating habits and began holding exercise sessions with her friends in the living room of her home in Nashville. Today, the weight is still off.

"Our go-to family dinner is sliced cucumbers, salsa, spinach and scrambled egg whites with onions. Our go-to snack is peanut butter — no added sugar or salt — on a spoon. My quick breakfast is a roasted sweet potato, no butter, or Greek yogurt with six almonds. That's soul food, Nashville 2012," wrote Randall, who serves as a writer in residence at Vanderbilt University.

Williams' recipes feature many classic African-American and soul food ingredients that vanished from the cuisine in the mid-20th century—the era when her

great-grandmother “Dear” never cooked. Dear’s husband prepared every meal, believing his wife’s presence in the kitchen was far too reminiscent of slavery. It was also the era when processed food meant progress, and with that, the nutritious foods of previous generations faded quickly away.

Soul Food Love brings back the sweet potato, the sardine and the peanut. Things are baked, rather than fried. Butter is traded for a dash of olive oil. It reinvents soul food how it was supposed to be eaten—not out of celebration, but in everyday life.

And it’s so good, documentary filmmaker Ken Burns ate three helpings of Williams’ spicy pomegranate sweet potatoes at her recent dinner party.

“All this was in the soul food lexicon, but was shaded by the macaroni and forgotten,” said Williams at a reading of *Soul Food Love* at Square Books in Oxford in February 2015.

Randall and Williams aren’t the only ones. Chef, educator and cookbook author Bryant Terry released his fourth book, *Afro-Vegan*, in 2014. In it, he reminds us of “Afro-diasporic foods” that have become invisible or marginalized in American food culture.

Terry hails from Memphis and summered in rural Mississippi. He knows southern food, appreciates it and cares enough about it to adapt southern food in ways to avoid the health risks associated with it. *Afro-Vegan* explores the many ways the larder of ancestral African cooking can be embraced in today’s culinary landscape.

By “keeping one eye on contemporary health concerns while presenting food that honors the flavors, ingredients and heritage of the African diaspora,” Terry brings us sweet potato and lima bean tagine, boiled collards and cabbage with heavy garlic seasoning and blackened okra, rather than fried. His interpretations are wholly vegan and

inspired by a blend of African, Caribbean and southern flavors. He encourages quality seasonings, fresh herbs and from-scratch cooking with high-quality produce.

According to Michael Twitty, founder of Afroculinaria.com and author of upcoming book *The Cooking Gene,* black people were the “original farm-to-table folks.” The agricultural processes of Africa are reminiscent of the trendy “Slow Food” movements, organic farms and locally sourced produce markets that have cropped up across the nation in recent years.

But this kind of culinary lifestyle is not feasible for many. The Delta is not only among the fattest but it also one of poorest regions in the nation. Ironically, in a region so economically dependent on agriculture, fresh produce is hard to find. Food deserts abound.

The Delta is where Williams’ soul food journey began. After obtaining an undergraduate degree from Harvard University, she trekked to the Mississippi Delta to work in the public school system with Teach For America. In the middle of a food desert, Williams had to get creative with her cooking habits.

Still, she came to school every day with a hearty and healthy meal. Her students, who more often than not ate dinner out of a greasy paper sack, did not understand how such a meal could be concocted in the area.

“My students would say, ‘You eat like a white girl,’” Williams said. “I would say, ‘No! I eat like an old black lady.’”

Williams created wholesome dishes from the shelves of the Walmart in Greenwood, Mississippi, many of which appear in her book. That’s why Randall and Williams made certain *Soul Food Love* would be sold in independent bookstores and in

Walmart supercenters, alike. Every ingredient used in the book can be locally sourced, bought at Whole Foods or, if need be, purchased at Walmart.

They're trying to start a real soul food revolution by posing lifestyle changes accessible for all, not just the middle and upper class.

"It represents food literacy. Every ingredient in the book can be purchased on food stamps," Randall said.

And they're not alone.

There's a black pastor in Memphis who has banned fried chicken from all church gatherings. Dr. Michael O. Minor, an undershepard of Oak Hill Baptist Church, has created faith-based initiatives to promote healthy living for his congregation and community.

Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign promotes changing the way we eat in order to raise a healthier generation of children. To promote her cause, the first lady traveled to Clinton, Mississippi, with celebrity chef Rachel Ray in 2013. "The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake," she said at the "Let's Move" launch in 2010.

For the *Soul Food Love*'s mother-daughter pair, the book was "a love letter of a will to live," according to Williams. But the project meant so much more to Randall, who used her daughter's recipes to shed the pounds and keep them off.

"Her recipes were a love letter to me," she said.

Chapter 6: Whose food is it, anyway?

Imagine your typical Thanksgiving spread. Turkey and dressing, green bean casserole, homemade rolls, sweet potato casserole. At my house, the macaroni and cheese is always the first to go. The dish is practically licked clean before it's scrubbed down and stored away until the next family feast.

When it's gone, it's really gone.

The game of recipe preservation is one in the same, which is why Donna Battle-Pierce has dedicated her life's work to preserving her family's recipes, as well as hundreds of African-American recipes found in archival cookbooks across the nation.

"You can talk to anybody of any race. Everybody's got a recipe that's gone. That's been lost. We want to save those. Everybody's got something they remember their mother made and they thought they could make," Battle-Pierce said.

Currently a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, Battle-Pierce is hunkered down in Schlesinger Library digging through scores of historic African-American cookbooks from the past century.

To encourage recipe preservation and recollection, Battle-Pierce has organized journalism workshops encouraging kids to interview their parents and grandparents about family recipes. Often, she interviews African-American elders in her community about their traditional family cuisines.

But with this scholarly and community work comes more questions. How does this food translate in the modern day? What does a particular ingredient say about the cook?

And namely, *whose food is it, anyway?*

Toni Tipton-Martin firmly believes the term "soul food" refers to the trendy foodstuffs of the civil rights era. The term cannot wholly define African-American food culture, ultimately because not all African-Americans grew up eating it.

But there's another problem that makes chronicling African-American culinary history even more complicated—traditional southern food has been directly influenced by the desires of southern whites.

"We don't have any other record untouched by white people. Meaning not translated on behalf of, not adapted on behalf of, not stolen and appropriated, or any of those things. If we can find a book where a black person published it on their own and said 'this is how we cook,' we might get close," she said.

It's common to associate the historic larder of southern blacks with the foods of survival. Tipton-Martin, Battle-Pierce and dozens of other food writers believe it was created with intelligence and unique technique and skill—the learned ways of improvisation and seasoning.

However, is the food recorded in historic black cookbooks, some of which date to slavery and even Africa, the meals Southern African-Americans *yearned* to eat? If given the same economic and social opportunity as whites, what would African-Americans have *chosen* to consume?

"We don't know *what* they would have chosen," Tipton-Martin said. "All we know is what they had to choose, or what they chose [to cook] when they were at work to define themselves."

In her forthcoming journal *The Jemima Code,* Tipton-Martin has cultivated over 150 recipes from a collection of 300 cookbooks dating back to 1827. She hopes to reintroduce the Jemima trope as a strong, savvy woman who worked outside her own home cooking and cleaning for other families with "the grace and skill of a professional," not as the cheeky, bandana-clad African-American woman reminiscent of advertisements and cartoons of segregation days.

Every recipe or cookbook that appears in *The Jemima Code* is based upon the food these women cooked at work. These recipes are the foundation for these women's reputations. It was what these women were known for, but it was still *their employers'* food. What, then, was *her* food?

"Is [celebrity chef] Bobby Flay's food what he cooks at home or what he reports on television? Because that's what he's known for," Tipton-Martin said. "I hope I'm helping us work some of this out by saying [food] is different things, to different people, at different times in different places."

According to Tipton-Martin, the food of Southern blacks was connected to their white employers up until the "soul food era," or the 1960s.

"Up to that point, African-Americans who published either had a relationship with a white woman or somebody in the mainstream who helped them get published, or they were of the middle class and educating people," she said.

There's also scholarly work that suggests the established black communities in Chicago, New York and Detroit initially scrunched their noses at southern recipes brought north by black expatriates during the Great Migration.

Tracy Poe writes that Chicago's black middle class was organized on a status scale, using a carefully crafted notion of "respectability" inspired by Booker T. Washington's integrationist philosophy. There was a list of "respectable" places to eat and recipes to cook, and southern food didn't fit the bill.

"The idea that was considered 'African-American' was a wide assortment of foods and it looked like there was a purposeful omission of all those foods that they left behind in the South," Tipton-Martin said.

"By the time we get to the '60s, there's this reclamation of foods associated with African-American living, but they forgot to include the African part."

Today, the debate still rages. Defining African-American food is no easy feat. And maybe there are just too many viewpoints and interpretations of history to pinpoint a simple answer.

In 2014 in Concord, California, the student body of Carondelet High School for Girls wished to celebrate Black History Month at a mealtime celebration. In response to the request, school administrators organized a lunch menu of fried chicken, cornbread and watermelon. Outrage and accusations of racial stereotyping ensued, prompting a letter of notice and public assembly on diversity to smooth over the cornbread controversy.

Perhaps the business of piecing together the narrative of African-American cooking should be left to the experts—at least for now.

Conclusion

The story of soul food is one of both tragedy and culinary triumph.

In its earliest form, the simple food's adaptability in the slave cabin and introduction in the "big house" kitchen associated the cuisine with serving the master. Later, the cuisine played a key role in civil rights and evolved into one of America's trendy foods. Today, soul food is certainly not reserved for blacks alone.

A battle still rages over the true definition of soul food—an argument that may never be resolved. However, what cannot be argued is its adaptability and staying power, just as slaves of the Old South had to adapt to changing conditions in a region that inevitably disintegrated around them.

Soul food, with all its emotional baggage, has become a food that transcends race, and in so doing, has worked its way into a dual role as both a chic, of-the-moment cuisine *and* an authentic southern staple for the poor and wealthy alike.

But just as race continues to divide in America, this debate roars on. In final analysis, soul food emerges as something different to different people in different spaces and at different times.

Take the opposing views of food writers Donna Battle-Pierce and Toni Tipton-Martin. Both women are educated members of the black middle class. Both are mothers. Both have dedicated their life's work to exploring issues of food injustice, preserving historic African-American recipes and digging deep into culinary history. However, these

women’s respective personal and ancestral histories have influenced them to accept totally different definitions of what soul food is.

And there are dozens of food writers and historians with their own ideas. But one thing is certain. Soul food’s taste is finger-lickin’ good.

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