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-Music Intro-

Laurie March

Hi, listeners. Welcome back to Heart To Table, the podcast where we approach food and cooking from a different angle. I am Laurie March, remodeler, on-camera host, producer, and now explorer of the culinary arts.

Laurie March

You know, February is one of my favorite months, Black History Month, my birthday, and Presidents' Day. So I thought I'd tap in to the deep well of wisdom from my friend, Adrian Miller, who is a food scholar, to learn a little bit more about this delicious intersection.

Laurie March

Thanks for joining us.

Adrian Miller

Glad to be with you.

Laurie March

I feel like the list of accolades and things that are going on in your life is so long, but I want to kind of rattle off a couple of them here. James Beard Award-Winning Book, Certified Barbecue Judge, lawyer, special assistant to the Clinton White House. Is there anything you can not do my friend?

Adrian Miller

No, I think I can do everything.

Laurie March

I'm so curious, what made you decide to study and really write about and explore people and food?

Adrian Miller

The short answer is unemployment. I had just finished my stint in the Clinton White House, it was at the end of his second term. At the change of a presidential administration, political appointees, as I was at that time, write out our letters of resignation to the incoming president. And then it's up to that incoming president to decide whether they want to keep you on or not.

Adrian Miller

Shockingly, George W. Bush accepted my resignation, so I was out of a job. And at that time in my life, I wanted to be the Senator from Colorado, so I fully expected to leave D.C, move back to Colorado, my native state, I grew up in Denver, and start my political career, but the job market was really slow. So, I was at home watching a lot of daytime television, I'm not even going to tell you what shows-

Laurie March

Come on.

Adrian Miller

And I said... Ah, nope, and I said, "You know, I should read something." I went to the bookstore, and I'd always love to cook, so I'm browsing the cookbook section and I see this book called Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History, written by this guy named John Egerton. And the book was about 14 years old when I picked it up, and I just flipped through it. And then seriously early in the book, he wrote that the tribute to black achievement in American cookery has yet to be written.

Laurie March

Wow.

Adrian Miller

I thought that was interesting, so I just emailed him cold and I just wrote, "Hey, you wrote this 14 years ago. Do you still think this is true?" And basically he said, "Some people have addressed parts of the story, but there's always room for somebody else to tell that story. So, why not you?" And so with no qualifications at all, except for eating a lot of soul food and cooking it some, that started the journey.

Laurie March

Wow. I love that you just heard the call from a 14 year old book that like it just leapt off the page at you.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. And you know, when I first read that, I thought, "Well, somebody has done it." So, the next year or so was just trying to track down if somebody had already done that. And you know, to my surprise, nobody had really tried to tell the complete story at that point. Some books come out later, but when I started, nobody had really done it yet.

Laurie March

It's really fascinating for me because I have now read your two books that are out. I know there's a third one that's cruising rapidly in our direction. One of the things that I kept coming back to was the power of food that brings diverse people together. And I think in *The President's Kitchen Cabinet* book, we're really talking about a diverse collection of people. You have the people who are working in the kitchen and working in the White House and the presidents and just international... Like tell me a little bit about what that means to you and how that relates to *The President's Kitchen Cabinet* book.

Adrian Miller

In the context of the White House, it's interesting because again, I just never really thought about this, but the White House has been, in terms of the kitchen staff, multi-racial and diverse class representation from as beginning. On the earliest kitchen with President George Washington, you had enslaved people working alongside indentured servants, free African-Americans and free whites, so all of that in the mix. And you see that at least in those first decades of the presidential kitchen, first with George Washington and then moving to the White House, because people often forget, but George Washington never lived in the White House, it was being built during his presidency. So, it's really John Adams who moves in there first.

Adrian Miller

And the interesting thing is that the White House kitchen was kind of in the middle of the basement, it's always been in the basement, but it was in the middle. And just given the way that the White House was built, early visitors to the White House could actually look in on the kitchen. So you could say, "Oh, okay, that's what we're having for dinner tonight." Fast forward to Abraham Lincoln, it was really Mary Todd Lincoln, who decided to move the White House kitchen away from that central part of the basement to the northwest corner of the basement, where it is now. And the other thing that people don't know is that White House kitchen is very small, it's only 26 feet by 32 feet.

Laurie March

Yeah. And it's not really a show piece from what I keep reading, it's really an exceptionally functional space. And the people who work in it, work their tails off.

Adrian Miller

Yeah, absolutely. And would it help to get like a sense of the White House staff in the kitchen?

Laurie March

Yeah. Tell us a little bit about the various roles of who's coming in and out and kind of their jobs.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. People are not there the whole time, so they usually work in shifts. A typical staff is going to be the White House executive chef, and then there's a pastry chef. Now, that pastry chef may have an assistant, but most of the time and they don't, there's just the pastry chef. And then there's anywhere from say three to five assistants who work in the kitchen. And some of them are longtime staffers, who hold on from administration to administration, and then others cooks are actually on loan from the US Navy because there's a whole separate space in the White House, it's kind of an elite dining club for senior staffers. It's called the White House Mess. That's not a political statement, that's just what it's called, because that's a military term for dining space.

Laurie March

Mess.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. And so the US Navy staffs that. And so to help out with function, sometimes the US Navy will loan chefs to the main kitchen.

Laurie March

And there's a lot of cooking going on in the White House. There's various staffers whose meal is a part of their jobs. Tell us a little bit about that, and also a little bit about what happens for major events. I know your book doesn't specifically cover the huge gala events, but how does that work?

Adrian Miller

Yeah. So yeah, you're right. There's a ton of different cooking going on. You have some chefs who are on the staff who are dedicated to making meals for the resident staff. Depending on the presidency, there's anywhere from like 100 to 150 people just working in the White House residents part. These are the butlers, the maids, the carpenters, the people running the floral department, all of that. Some people make their meals, although a lot of White House staffers will go off the grounds, because there's a lot of restaurants kind of right around the White House.

Adrian Miller

Then you've got kind of a second floor kitchen where if the first family wants it, they could have their own private chef make meals. The Obama's did that, President Trump has not done that, but before the Obama's, the last president to really have a private chef to cook for them in the second floor kitchen, was Lyndon Johnson.

Laurie March

Wow.

Adrian Miller

For the most of the White House history, the White House chef, executive chef, has been in charge of that. Just a quick thing to clarify, White House executive chef as a term, did not exist before 1961. Jacqueline Kennedy created that, before that they were just called their first cook or the head cook or just White House cook or White House chef. And that second floor kitchen and dining area was also a creation of Jacqueline Kennedy, because the first family would often eat in the state dining room and

she just felt it was too cavernous, and so she wanted a more intimate dining space. And then you've got the White- Oh, go ahead.

Laurie March

No, I was going to say that makes so much sense because I feel like this house is enormous and there's so much business happening all around you and politics. I imagine it's really important to feel like you have a personal space to stay connected. I'm assuming over meals is probably one of the ways that the first family sees their actual family the most.

Adrian Miller

Yep. And then I mentioned the White House Mess. You've got this kind of elite, private dining space for senior staffers. The US Navy cooks for that part of that dining facility. And then they also cater office events in the White House complex. And so in terms of the basement kitchen, so they work in shifts, and so you've got assistant chefs who come in and they'll handle breakfast for the first family or for any guests, if there are breakfast meetings. And then the White House executive chef usually comes in late morning to get lunch and dinner going. And it really just depends from president to president.

Adrian Miller

We've had presidents who are very punctual, they communicate clearly what they want from the kitchen. Chefs love that. We've got presidents who are late all the time or they would arrive with surprise guests, and that's a nightmare for the kitchen staff.

Laurie March

Yeah. I imagine that's a lot of trouble, yeah.

Adrian Miller

Yeah.

Laurie March

What happens if there's a midnight snack need? Is there somebody there to address the midnight snacks? I mean, is there a 24 hour a day food presence in the White House?

Adrian Miller

Yeah. There's always somebody on call to meet the first family's needs. And so the White House butlers usually will handle late night food requests. Nowadays it's unusual for a chef to be on, just there in case they have to wake up and cook, that's kind of unusual. Usually, there's a butler there that can meet immediate needs and they pride themselves on meeting those needs. The way that the butlers get really upset is when a first family believing they're being humble, or whatever, insist on doing something on their own.

Laurie March

Yeah, that makes sense. Tell me a little bit about some of the famous inhabitants of the White House and their connection to their food team. I know in the book you had a better term for that. What do you call the food staff together?

Adrian Miller

Oh, I just called them culinary professionals, but I don't think there is a collective, a good collective term. Some memorable people would be like I think of Thomas Jefferson as one of our earliest foodies, although George Washington was a foodie as well, but Jefferson had enslaved cooks, and so Sally Hemings, if you've heard that name, one of her older brothers, a guy named James Hemings, Jefferson when he becomes Minister to France, he has them trained for three years to become a classical French chef.

Laurie March

Wow.

Adrian Miller

Yeah, James Hemings ends up cooking for Jefferson at his apartment, right off the Champs-Élysées, right on the eve of the French Revolution.

Laurie March

Wow.

Adrian Miller

But he does not end up becoming the White House chef. When Jefferson becomes president, he has got a white French dude as the main chef, but then he's got two enslaved women who are the sous chefs, Frances Hern and Edith Fossett. And the thing that's messed up is they were forced to stay at the White House all year long. And if you've ever been to D.C, you know it's made out of reclaimed swamp land, so in the 19th Century, there were reports of White House workers getting tropical diseases.

Laurie March

Crazy. Because they were in the basement, right?

Adrian Miller

Right.

Laurie March

They were living in the basement?

Adrian Miller

Right. And during the 19th Century, the White House basement would flood periodically if there was a heavy enough storm. And we have reports of the husbands of these enslaved women escaping Monticello, where Jefferson was from, just to be with their wives, but Jefferson would always intercept them and send them back to Monticello. So, it just brings into sharp relief kind of the human tragedy part of this. We put such a pristine veneer on the presidency, but there's this other side that's pretty tragic.

Laurie March

Yeah. It seems like it plays out a lot in... You mentioned that some of the earliest people who are cooking in the White House, we're not calling them chefs yet, but many of them are enslaved and they're coming as a part of their relationship with the person who became president and brought them along. I feel like the sort of like whitewashing and disappearing of this conversation, it's really sad, but I loved reading through the book and just understanding a little bit more about the lives of the people who worked in the White House. And I was surprised to see so many women, maybe I just didn't process that, but I was really surprised to see how many women were in this position of power.

Adrian Miller

Right. So yeah, you're right to point out that the road to the White House kitchen was pretty much accidental for most of White House history. They were just people who were already cooking for that person who became president in private life. And yeah, if you were, until recently, if you were just to look over the stretch of history in the White House in the kitchen and look at the typical cook, it would be an African-American woman.

Laurie March

Wow.

Adrian Miller

And it's really only recently that African-American kind of dominance in terms of numbers of staffers in the White House, it starts to wane in the 1960s, but before that, most of the staff was African-American.

Laurie March

Can you tell us a little about, maybe there's a story or two in here of a particular recipe or food item that a president was really into? I feel like in the book there was one example about the apple pie?

Adrian Miller

Yeah. President Taft was really into apple pie, but President Taft was a hefty guy. One of the longest running cat and mouse games in presidential history is the president usually arriving in office in not so great health, and it's a stressful job as you said, so they crave comfort food, but then you've got the first lady and the White House physician trying to keep the president on a diet. And so the cat and mouse game is trying to keep the president on the diet, but the president because is the president, they're always going to get the hookup.

Laurie March

Oh, my gosh, the power of it all. I mean, honestly, these people are really the first celebrity personal chefs.

Adrian Miller

Yep. Yep. And I have another funny story, it's a drinking story though. Are you okay with the drinking story?

Laurie March

Definitely. And I'm sad I don't have a whiskey to meet this story with. Carry on.

Adrian Miller

All right. Harry and Bess Truman loved old fashioned. And you know, what's in an old fashioned? Why don't you go ahead and tick off the ingredients. Do you know what's in an old fashioned?

Laurie March

I'm kind of just sort of a straight bourbon and whiskey drinker, but I believe it's whiskey and there's a cherry in it. And I think it also has the orange peel.

Adrian Miller

Yep.

Laurie March

There's something else I'm missing, aren't I?

Adrian Miller

Simple syrup?

Laurie March

Yeah, that's right.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. There was a long time butler named, Alonzo Fields, who had been in the White House since the Hoover administration. And in White House history, the butlers are usually the ones in charge of the drinks. And so the first night they asked for, the Trumans asked for an old fashioned, and so he makes it like he had been for presidents before, right? Bess Truman takes one sip and doesn't say anything, so now he knows something's up because usually there's a comment.

Adrian Miller

Sure enough, the next morning, First Lady Truman said, "Fields, can you make our old fashioned less sweet? We're just not used to having them that way." He's like, "All right." He reconfigures the recipe, the next time they have one, Bess Truman takes a sip and says, "These are horrible. They taste like fruit punch."

Laurie March

Oh, no.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. Now, Fields has an attitude, so the next time they ask for an old fashioned, he just gives her straight bourbon and two ice cubes, and Bess Truman takes one sip, looks at him and says, "Now that's how you make an old fashioned."

Laurie March

I would be great at making an old fashioned, is what you're saying?

Adrian Miller

Yep. Oh, you know what? The one ingredient we forgot is bitters. There's also bitters in

Laurie March

That's right.

Adrian Miller

Yep.

Laurie March

That's right. It's funny that the butler is the bartender.

Adrian Miller

Yeah, I know. Yeah.

Laurie March

It's interesting the roles though, I noticed that the word steward was in there a lot. And it seems like an absolutely massive job because the steward appears, from what you said, to have been responsible for everything in the home, the procurement of goods, even the people who are in the building. What a massive job and what an intersection and just powerful connection of diverse people, this person is very often African-American. I don't know, were any of them ever enslaved while they were the steward?

Adrian Miller

No. The interesting thing is, like you said, these stewards, you had to have a going on because you had to be in charge of everything that was going on in the executive residence, from the household side of it. They were very trusted people, they were bonded, meaning that they could get money in short order and do things without having to really check with anybody first, and so you really had to trust a person that could do that.

Adrian Miller

Most of them were biracial, and so it kind of played into the stereotype of trusted servants being biracial, right? They needed to have some kind of white blood in them.

Laurie March

Interesting.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. It just played into the whack stereotypes of the 18th and 19th Century. All of them were free and that makes a lot of sense because of the things that they had to be able to do.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. Their liberties would have been circumscribed as enslaved people. And yeah, so a number of them have been African-American, and today we no longer call that position steward. I think the closest analog to it is chief usher. That's what they call that now.

Adrian Miller

And so yeah, it's a very powerful and important position, and you've got to keep everything moving in on time and orderly. And as the White House has transitioned from just kind of like a simple household to almost like a boutique hotel, you can just imagine the magnitude of running that. And I think that's why most of the ushers that come on usually have hotel experience.

Laurie March

One word that you used a lot ~~in the book~~ was a foodway. Can you describe what a foodway is?

Adrian Miller

The way to think about foodways is, what is the whole world that surrounds food? It's not just about the food itself, it's about the material culture, how's that used to make food, it's about the people, what do they bring to that food? How do they value that food? What is the context for it? And it's about the culture, why is this food valued in this culture? What occasions is it cooked? What meaning does that give? It's really just kind of looking at the world that surrounds the food and not thinking of food just as fuel.

Laurie March

I love that. And it puts the people into the food as well, just really the personal identity. In terms of foodways and connections, one of the things that I have really enjoyed about your content is truly the conversations that you have about soul food. Can you, I feel like this is the ultimate foodway in this chat too, can you tell me a little bit about the origin of the phrase, soul food, and maybe just sort of give us an overview of what soul food is if somebody's never heard it before?

Adrian Miller

Yeah. This is probably going to be an explanation you have not heard before. When people talk about the origin of the term soul food, they usually point to the 1960s, these strong expressions of black identity, black is beautiful, black power, but the earliest joining of the word soul and food in the English language actually goes back to Shakespeare.

Adrian Miller

In Shakespeare's first play of The Two Gentlemen of Verona, there are two female characters named, Julia and Lucetta, talking about this really sexy guy named Proteus. Proteus walks by in one scene and Julia says to Lucetta, "O, know'st thou not that his looks are my soul's food? Pity the dearth that I have pined in, by longing for that food so long a time." One takeaway from that is even back in the late 16th Century, not unusual for two girlfriends to get together and describe a guy's yummy.

Laurie March
Chatty.

Adrian Miller
But yeah.

Laurie March
Chatty.

Adrian Miller

Chatty, but for the next 400 years, soul food really had a religious connotation. It pops up in English, meaning anything to edify your spiritual life, so listening to a sermon, reading scriptures, singing hymns. And fast forward to the 20th Century, it takes a musical term. You've got these African-American jazz artists who are pretty miffed because white jazz artists are the ones getting the best gigs, just all the publicity and stuff, and getting them a little shine.

Adrian Miller

And so these jazz musicians decided to take the music to a place where they thought white musicians couldn't mimic the sound, and that was the sound of the black church in the rural South. And so that gospel-tinged jazz that emerges in the late 40s, early 50s, they started describing as soul and funky. And then soul just started getting slapped on to other aspects of the culture. So, it really was soul music first, soul brother, soul sister, soul food. We could easily be calling this funky food, but that's not very appetizing, right?

Laurie March
It doesn't have quite the same ring to it as soul food.

Adrian Miller

For somebody who's asking what soul food is, I tell them that soul food is just one of the West African heritage cuisines in the United States because a lot of times soul food becomes the shorthand for all black cooking in the US, and I think that's a little unfair, because I think the Creole food of Louisiana and Mobile, Alabama, I think that's different, I think the Lowcountry cooking of the Carolinas and Georgia, that's different, but those are all influenced by African-Americans.

Adrian Miller

To me, soul food is really the food of the interior south that black migrants took to other parts of the south. Which sets up the question, what's the difference between southern and soul? And they're related-

Laurie March
You beat me to it.

Adrian Miller

Okay. Well, they're related because there's a lot of overlap. And what I often tell people shorthand, the short version is that soul food tastes better, but then if they give me a little more time, it's just like I think of southern food as the mother cuisine and then soul food is the condensed version that emerges when people go to a new place that they don't have access to all the ingredients of the old country or back home. That's why when people think of soul food, and there's a whole bunch of beans that are eaten in soul food, but people use black-eyed peas. And I know I said black-eyed peas, but they're called black-eyed peas, but they're actually a bean. It's the reason why in soul food the most popular greens are collard, kale, mustard, turnip, cabbage.

Adrian Miller

And so by the way, if you discovered kale in the last five to 10 years, welcome to the party, we've been eating it for about 300, but in the south, you've got all kinds of greens. You've got Polk salad, you've got watercress or what they call creasy greens, you've got rapini. You know, there's a whole bunch of greens that people eat. And even in the south in terms of beans, the category of field peas that are available is astounding. It's not just black-eyes, but they're like pink-eyes, purple hull, cream, all kinds of bean things.

Adrian Miller

I try to reframe soul food as the migrant cuisine and have people think of it as an immigrant cuisine. And the reason I do that is because if you think about immigrant cuisines in this country, most of what we think of as their food is really the celebration food of the old country, because people move from one place to another, they usually arrive poor, and they make the best living they can, but once they prosper, they remember the good times food from the old country and they start having that on a more regular basis. That's the story of soul food. The fried chicken, the glorious cakes, the barbecue, that was celebration food.

Laurie March

Right. I feel like the thread that goes through it too that you reminded me of while you were talking was the church. And in some ways, the time off for everybody on Sunday, the ability to get together, have community, I think there was a lot of pride there from what I've read and from what I've seen. That you're coming together, you're bringing your best dish, and it's something that maybe took way too much time to do during the week, so you had the time to do it on the weekend, you were able to bring it to church, and there's so much pride in just putting forward your best work and there's just so much joy in that sharing and watching other people eat your food.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. During slavery, the typical day for an enslaved person once you got up at dawn and you had a breakfast "of crumbled corn bread with butter and milk in a trough," you had to either eat with your fingers or some kind of seafood shell, because a knife or fork was a potential weapon. And so a slaveholder was not going to let you have that.

Adrian Miller

And then for the midday meal, it was seasonal vegetables. If there was meat, it was usually meat to just season the vegetables, so the idea of an entrée that's not happening, and then water. And then supper was just leftovers from the midday meal. It was really only when you got to the weekends or special

occasions that things slowed down enough where you could cook these grandiose dishes. You could take the time to make fried chicken. I mean, we don't think about that now because it's so easy to get fried chicken today, but you had to kill the chicken, you had to pluck it, you had to butcher it, and then cook it. So yeah, all these things took a lot of time.

Laurie March

And I saw you used the phrase gospel bird, which was sort of all about the Sunday experience. Could you tell me a little bit about where the sort of like fried chicken and the gospel bird came from?

Adrian Miller

Yeah. Gospel bird is a nickname for fried chicken and also is sort of known as Sunday cluck. And so the idea is that for a lot of households for a long time, when it came to that special occasion meal, fried chicken was the meal of choice. And it made sense because if you're cooking for your own family, a chicken's about the right size. Barbecue does not make sense because unlike the way we think of barbecue today, back then it was whole-animal cooking.

Laurie March

Right.

Adrian Miller

So, you know, you have to feed a lot of people when you cook an animal like that, and there wasn't any refrigeration or anything. So, you know, fried chicken became the choice. So, fried chicken has a or chickens have a lot of meaning in black culture even going back to West Africa. And so a lot of this is kind of the momentous status that chickens had in West Africa, it gets translated in different ways in the Americas. Fried chicken becomes an honored dish, and it was a way to honor other people.

Adrian Miller

We have reports that when Union troops were liberating plantations, enslaved cooks would offer them fried chicken as a big thank you. After slavery ends, after emancipation, when the church is developing and establishing itself, preachers would often get paid, because they're preaching to poor people, they often got paid by going to somebody's house afterwards for a meal..

And then typically, the meal was fried chicken. And the preacher always got the first choice because that was the person of honor, and so the prestigious parts of chicken have been known as preacher parts.

Laurie March

a lot of soul food isn't about using parts and making do with the things that they had. These are people who don't have a lot of money and they're making it stretch, they're sort of extending what they've got. Tell me a little bit about that.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. You have to understand that in this country there has been the, I guess, the dominant theme is that black people have a certain place in society. And so food was often used as the way to reinforce the inferior status of African-Americans, so lack of access to prestigious foods, things like that. Often African-American cooks had to show their ingenuity by taking these things like pigs' feet, ham hocks, turkey tips,

wings, and figuring out how to use them to season food and also how to make those things delicious as well.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Adrian Miller

So yeah, that is just the, and we call these variety meats now, but that is a strong current in soul food. In addition to what I mentioned, like pork necks, things like that, pig ears, all of that stuff, is part of the cuisine. And so to take things like that and make them delicious, just shows you the virtuosity of these cooks, given the circumstances that they were in.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Adrian Miller

And then over time, that has changed somewhat as African-Americans have done better in stump situations, we see that the food habits change as well, but for a lot of people they're still in that status. I think one big difference now is instead of grubbing on soul food, people are loading up on fast food and convenience food.

Laurie March

Yeah. because it's also a lost heritage too. Just sort of that this is a story, a food story, and as you sort of pull the thread through it, it's you realize this is what people they grew in their own backyard, what they could make work. The love and attention it's not the chicken breast, it's the feet, and so how to make it palatable and delicious, it's usually a lot of attention and cleaning and sort of making... someone's putting a lot of love and energy into making that so delicious, and then it sort of become, it's like you don't want to lose the story.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. The adept use of seasoning is key. So yeah, a lot of that stuff goes on into making something delicious. And so, one of my big things is just making sure that people really understand the contributions of African-Americans. And in a way, the contributions have been so significant that we don't even think about them now because they're so foundational to the way that we eat. And the only analog I can think of is just how African-Americans have affected black culture. Like a lot of the way we speak, dance, sing, all that stuff is heavily influenced by African-Americans to the point that we just think it's normal singing. I don't know if you're a music fan, but the way that most people sing now for popular music is heavily influenced by black people.

Laurie March

Yeah. How do we amplify that? That feels like such an important element here. How do we turn the volume up on that?

Adrian Miller

I think we just have to have more people saying it, because one thing that I've told people over and over again is, if you look at all aspects of black culture and some of the things I listed, the way we talk, play sports, entertain, dress, move in the world, has gone global except our food.

Laurie March

Right.

Adrian Miller

And I think that's just because we don't have enough cheerleaders for our food.

Laurie March

Yeah. Right. And also that it's an immigrant food that perhaps has just not fully had the zenith of like rising all the way into our consciousness that way. You know, we think pizza and hot dogs are American food, and they really are not, they came from other places and they became a part of our story here in the country. And just sort of wondering if the West African cuisine just has not fully become an incorporated immigrant food that we're familiar with?

Adrian Miller

No. West African food is still I think unknown. What's interesting now is you have some emerging chefs who are either directly from Africa and they immigrated here or they're first generation US citizens, and they're reconnecting to their roots and they're trying to introduce West African food. I think what I just don't know, well, let me just say this. For a long time I thought West African food might be hard to sell because it just might be too weird in the way that it's presented, but then I thought, "Well, Ethiopian food is popular and that's not..."

Laurie March

Sure. It's different

Adrian Miller

Yeah, it's just different. I think we just need to have more people making West African food and getting people to try it. And then there are chefs doing what I call a diasporic dinner. What they'll do is they'll have multiple courses and they'll start with West Africa. And then actually through the food, show you the journey of African-American people.

Laurie March

Wow. That's so neat.

Adrian Miller

Yep. Start with an African dish, and then maybe have a Caribbean dish, and then have a Southern dish, and then maybe Creole or something else.

Laurie March

I would love to hear from you, if you are sitting down to a soul food meal, what's on the plate?

Adrian Miller

Yeah. The way that I wrote my soul food book is I created a representative soul food meal, and I write a chapter about every part of the meal, explaining what it is, how it gets on the soul food plate, what it means for the culture. And I include recipes. I'm going to go through that meal, and if you want to clap or say a man or whatever, feel free to do that.

Adrian Miller

Entrées would be fried chicken, some kind of fish, usually fried catfish, and then chitlins, which full name is chitterlings. And for the uninitiated, chitterlings are pig intestines that are either stewed or fried. So, they're not for everyone. And then we have greens, black-eyed peas, candied yams, which are really sweet potatoes, and then mac and cheese, then some kind of corn bread and then hot sauce. Then some kind of red drink, because I believe red Kool-Aid is the official soul food drink.

Adrian Miller

Now, you have to understand, in soul food culture, red is a color and a flavor. African-Americans, we don't really say that that's cherry or strawberry, that it has hints of cranberry, it's just red.

Laurie March

Red.

Adrian Miller

There is a generational shift happening though, there's a lot of youngins that like purple and blue, and as I write in my book, I do believe that children are our future, that we should teach them well and let them lead the way, but not on Kool-Aid because they're messing it up.

Laurie March

Has to be the red.

Adrian Miller

Yep.

Laurie March

Is there a celebration behind the red? Is that symbolic?

Adrian Miller

Well, I think that red Kool-Aid is a nod to ancestral West African drinks that crossed the Atlantic during the slave trade. And you've had both of them, you may not have noticed, but kola.

Laurie March

Yep.

Adrian Miller

Kola nuts are white or reddish, native to West Africa. In some countries, you would get a kola nut tea as a hospitality drink. You get some water, you put the kola nuts in there, and sweeten it to taste. And those kola nuts would turn it red.

Laurie March

Cool.

Adrian Miller

Hibiscus is also native to West Africa. Comes across the Atlantic. I think it first shows up in Jamaica, where it's called sorrel, it's a Christmas time drink, but again, you take the flower petals of the hibiscus plant, which are red, and either in dried form or fresh form, you put them in water and sweeten it to taste, and maybe add some other things. And so that sorrel starts making its way around Latin America, where it's called Agua de Jamaica. When you go to a Taqueria and you get Jamaica, you're drinking a West African drink.

Laurie March

Cool.

Adrian Miller

I think red Kool-Aid is a nod to those drinks.

Laurie March

I love it, and celebratory-

Adrian Miller

Yeah.

Laurie March

Welcoming, I guess.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. Yeah. If you go back through newspaper accounts of social gatherings of African-Americans, more so after emancipation, because we just don't have a lot of detailed reports, but you see red drinks all over the place.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Adrian Miller

Red lemonade, red soda pop, bread punch, different teas. They are all over the place.

Laurie March

Somebody wants to try soul food, is this something that you could be cooking at home simply? Is it better to go, obviously, in terms of restaurants and going out experience, this is a weird era for that, but can you just go try to make some soul food at home and succeed?

Adrian Miller

Yeah, you can, but I forgot, I didn't give you the desserts. Let me just go through the desserts real quick for that.

Laurie March

Oh, yeah. Very important.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. They could either be banana pudding, peach cobbler, pound cake, or sweet potato pie. I think those are the top four-

Laurie March

So good.

Adrian Miller

But people argue with me about German chocolate cake or red velvet cake, that kind of thing. Yeah, so soul food is easy to make, elements of it. Like to make the vegetable preparations is really easy, and I'll just tell you, I'll give you the recipe right now. All you do is you're going to use meat. Whatever meat you're going to use to season it, you put it in a pot with an onion, cut the onion in half, add some garlic and some red pepper flakes, put enough water to cover up that meat, and then just do a boil until the meat is tender. And then turn down the heat to like medium low, and putting your vegetables, and you just let it simmer.

Laurie March

And what veggie would be in that pot for you?

Adrian Miller

That's the way I cook my greens and that's the way I cook my black-eyed peas.

Laurie March

Is a lot of soul food, are there elements of sort of smoking something or pickling it or putting food up? I feel like there's sort of a natural connection to the various ways that people would preserve food before we had all the opportunities for refrigeration.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. The experience of most African-Americans in this country, it was agricultural. Even though there were certainly African-Americans in urban areas, often their experience was shaped by the agricultural cycle.

Adrian Miller

And then you've got like people would salt and dry fish or smoke fish as well, depending on where you were. And so, yeah, preservation, the flavors that come from preservation are hugely important in soul food. Now, it's not so much the case now because soul food is transitioning from the traditional forms to more of a healthier vegan vibe. And so-

Laurie March

Vegan soul food.

Adrian Miller

Oh yeah, vegan's the high trend in soul food.

Laurie March

Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Adrian Miller

Yeah. Well, this is an example of back to the future. If you go back and look at what enslaved Africans were eating and later enslaved African-Americans, it's very close to what we call vegan today.

Adrian Miller

Because the prestigious stuff, white flour, white sugar, certain meats, they were considered off limits for black people because they were "inferior", and so we were often eating the whole wheat flour, buttermilk, things like that. Lately though, and there's always been kind of a healthy vibe, because there's always a presence of vegetables. I mean, if you go to any soul food joint, there's always going to be a vegetable plate on the menu. And so, it's part of our tradition. And so lately, the last 20 years, you've seen a lot of black vegans emerge.

Adrian Miller

Most soul food restaurants are vegan in terms of their side dishes, even in the south, because they used to just use pork, but then in the 80s or so, they started getting customers showing up with health problems and saying, "Hey, my doctor is saying I need something healthier," and so a lot of restaurants switched to smoked turkey at that time. And then lately, they've just gotten rid of all the meat together.

Adrian Miller

It makes sense if you're a business person and you're thinking about, "Hey, how can I get the broadest reach of customers?" Having no meat at all will allow you to do that. Now, the trick is you have to know how to season your vegetables, because if you season your vegetables well, you don't even miss the meat. One example of capturing that kind of smoky profile is you're finding a lot of people who take the meat out, they're using like smoked paprika or other smoked spices just to get that flavor profile right.

Laurie March

If you're making some collard greens, what is the seasoning that makes that good?

Adrian Miller

I just love the combination of garlic, onion, and red pepper.

Laurie March

Yeah. Is that a trinity right there?

Adrian Miller

Yeah, it is in a lot of ways.

Laurie March

It's pretty close.

Adrian Miller

Yeah, I pretty much use that for all of my vegetables. When I'm doing black-eyed peas, I throw some thyme in there or/and a bay leaf, but other than that, yeah, that's pretty much my basic seasoning.

Laurie March

Is cornbread, is that a soul food, is that a southern food?

Adrian Miller

Cornbread is one of those examples that's both. Like fried chicken, I would say it's southern and soul. Now, well, there is a dividing line though. A lot of African-American cooks put sugar in their cornbread. And for a lot of white southerners that is verboten because they're saying, "Well, if you put sugar in cornbread, you're turning it into cake."

Laurie March

Right.

Adrian Miller

But every soul food recipe that I've seen for cornbread includes sugar, and that's another hallmark of soul food is that the lines between savory and sweet are often blurred. Seasoning is paramount, usually like more intensely season than say southern foods. I think of southern food as kind of the bland mother cuisine and then soul food as the highly spiced variant.

Laurie March

Okay. Got it. If you had to pick three seasonings to live with until your dying day, what do you got on the list?

Adrian Miller

In terms of like seasoning, definitely red pepper.

Laurie March

Okay.

Adrian Miller

Granulated garlic, since I have to do it as a seasoning.

Laurie March

Yep.

Adrian Miller

And then sugar.

Laurie March

Sugar, yeah. I guess that makes sense.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. Other than that, maybe like an onion powder, just so I can have my three flavors going, if I'm going to make vegetables.

Laurie March

Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about the... First of all, I really appreciate all the time you've taken to talk with us today and just explain so much of this. I feel like there's so much fun food discovery that I plan on making in this category. I'm an avid gardener, and so the veggies for me always inspire me. And so I think I'm going to launch pretty deep into some of the veggie flavorings and just that speaks to me so much. Can you tell me a little bit about, on the way out here, what's the importance of representation and heritage in soul food and what does it mean to you?

Adrian Miller

Oh, so I think it's hugely important because one, I'm just a big cheerleader for my traditional food. And one of the reasons why I do the writing that I do is I'm just looking around, I'm like, "Well, why is that group's cuisine celebrated and not mine? Why is there so much haterade for my traditional food?" So, I'm a big cheerleader for that and I just don't think people appreciate how much African-Americans have shaped American food, not only the Creole, Lowcountry and soul food and southern food, which are some of the most popular cuisines right now, but barbecue, African-Americans had a huge role in shaping that.

Adrian Miller

Here's the difference though. Today's corporate cultures locks down these cooks so much that I don't know if they get a chance to influence what's coming out of the kitchen. They probably have a chart in front of them, they're like, "Make it exactly this way."

Laurie March

Right.

Adrian Miller

100 years ago, black cooks I think had a freer hand because we see these reports of certain things being added and you're like, "Okay, that's an African-American influence." Like for instance, the addition of

red pepper, like there would be some fine dining places where the cook would take a red pepper and cut it and then just trace the plate with it, so you had like pepper juice on the outside. So things like that.

Laurie March

It's very creative too.

Adrian Miller

Yeah. Yeah.

Adrian Miller

I think the future of soul food is a little uncertain right now for this reason. Because of the pandemic and other things, there's a lot more home cooking going on, but I don't know how much people are reconnecting to the home cooking of their family traditions and they're just getting into this gourmet/weird stuff that you see on the internet.

Adrian Miller

I don't know to what extent people are cooking, but if home cooking is thriving once again, I think that pretends well for soul food, but we're at a generational moment where a lot of soul food joints that were around for decades are on the precipice of closing because the people that opened them up are either dying or retiring and the kids are not interested in taking that on because running a restaurant is hard.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Adrian Miller

The bright signs that I'm seeing at least in the fine dining context is that I'm starting to see more fine dining chefs say, "Wait a second, we shouldn't be hating on soul food. In fact, there's a lot of glorious stuff here." And so they're incorporating it into the fine dining context. I think it's mixed, I hope like there'll be more people like me who are cheerleaders for soul food so that people will be willing to try it and they will understand its complexity and understand that they can get a lot of healthy stuff when they eat African-American and West African food. I think we just have to have a lot more education, and we need cheerleaders. That's what we need.(00:47:30)

Laurie March

I love it. I look forward to trying out some soul food sides myself straight out of the garden, and to being a cheerleader of this kind of food and your work. And I really want to thank you so much for being with us today, Adrian, it was amazing to have you.

Adrian Miller

Thank you so much. Peace.

Laurie March

And I also want to say a huge thank you to all our listeners, I'm so happy that so many NEW friends are joining us! On the next episode, I'm talking with the Chef and owner one of New York's "go-to" boutique catering companies, Vanessa Cantave. She can put together an outstanding meal for 10,000 guests at an NFL Tailgate Party, but her six year old is still her biggest critic..

Vanessa Cantave

It's definitely harder. My son who's six, he's really picky. And I'm just like, ugh, because I... your mom is a chef! But at the same time, I work within what he likes, I introduce things slowly and when I can. If he like something new, I get super excited.

Laurie March

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