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The Multicultural Roots of Southern Cuisine



Southern cuisine is one of the most famously known cuisines in the United States and all over the world. There is a long and complicated history of how this cuisine came into existence and it is often overlooked by many. The popular traditional dishes include cornbread, collard greens, fried chicken, barbecue, gumbo, shrimp and grits, and Hoppin' John and are distinctly tied to Southern identity. Many people think that these foods have always existed in the same form of preparation, but on the contrary, these famous dishes all come from a blend of Native American, African, and European influences. Each culture contributed key ingredients, agricultural techniques, and cooking methods that would result in the modern Southern cuisine. Southern food reflects a long history of struggle, cultural adaptation, and creativity, showing that the South's most iconic dishes were created together by different communities over time.

Native Americans across the Southeastern part of the United States created food systems based on the crops and natural resources available in the region. In the article, "Indian Food and Cooking in Eastern North Carolina", based from National Park Service, it states, "The Indians were not only hunters and gatherers, but also farmers. Maize (corn) was their chief crop, for it grew well in the acidic soils of the coastal plain. But they also raised sunflowers, pulses (Harriot distinguished beans, perhaps kidney beans, from peas, but described neither thoroughly), and several kinds of pumpkin, squash, and gourd" (National Park Service). These Native American tribes in the Southeast built their diet around what the historians call the "Three Sisters" which was corn, beans, and squash. The three crops were essential to the Native Americans and would be adapted in many cuisines. These crops cultivated remarkably based on the soil and climate and it shows how the Native Americans were skilled and knowledgeable before the Europeans would arrive.

Corn would be the most important Native American contribution to Southern cuisine. Native Americans prepared corn in many different ways, such as grinding it into cornmeal, roasting it, and boiling it into hominy. Cornbread and grits are both iconic Southern staples and directly trace back to the Native American food processing methods. The term grits actually come from the Europeans and they would adapt it from the Native Americans. Cornbread was also adapted from the Native Americans and the Europeans would add milk, flour, eggs, and wheat in cast-iron cookware to create what we know as cornbread today.

Beyond the Native American influence of crops, they also introduced cooking methods to early European settlers. From the article, "Indian Food and Cooking in Eastern North Carolina", "The Indians of eastern North Carolina ate their great variety of foods in only four basic states-raw, broiled, stewed, and dried, with or without the aid of fire, then reconstituted with water"

(National Park Service). These methods would eventually be an influence on shaping barbeque traditions that would develop later. Native Americans knowledge of local herbs, roots, berries, and wild greens would be a major influence of flavor to these early dishes, well. Another major Native American contribution would be sassafras. They would dry and powder sassafras leaves to create a filé, which would be an essential ingredient to Creole gumbo. Native American food traditions were not just practical, but they were connected to cultural identity, spirituality, and an appreciation of the land.

Native Americans laid the foundations of Southern Cuisine, but enslaved Africans had the most impact on what is known as Southern food. Africans were brought to the American South from the Atlantic Slave Trade and would bring their influence of cooking with them. Many would come from West Africa with agricultural systems and one of the most influential was rice cultivation. In Judith Ann Carney's novel, *Black Rice*: *The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*, she states, "The multiple introductions of rice into South Carolina and Georgia would lead by the time of the American Revolution to the development of the high-yielding sativa variety known as Carolina gold" (Carney 150). Carolina Gold rice, the Lowcountry's signature crop, became such a staple crop because of the skill and knowledge of growing it from enslaved Africans.

African influence would extend from the ingredients that the enslaved people brought over from Africa. Okra, black-eyed peas, yams, and sesame seeds were some of the many crops that are all connected to African food traditions. Many of these ingredients would be used in iconic Southern dishes such as Hoppin' John, stewed okra, red rice, gumbo, and benne wafers. Enslaved Africans would use these crops in small gardens that the slaveholders would allow them to obtain. These gardens would be a big part of survival for the slaves because it would be a

major food source, while the slave owners would often times supply a short amount of food for them. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History article “Black Foodways and Cuisine” states, “During and after slavery, selling food has helped generations of women move up the economic ladder” (The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History). African American women would be such a major part of Southern cuisine and their traditions and knowledge of cooking would create such a great platform for them to be seen and heard. Southern cuisine would not be the same without the cooking of African American women.

African cooking techniques would also reshape the flavors of Southern Cuisine. They used methods like deep frying, slow simmering, braising tough cuts of meat, layering spices, and building flavor. Enslaved Africans would use these techniques with limited resources and would take it from an average tasting meal into a flavorful experience. Since most of the enslaved people on plantations were oftentimes cooks, the cooking of African slaves would shape the tastes of white families. The PBS program, “Basic Black: Food, Culture, and Black History”, states, “Black food traditions carry a history of resistance and resilience, rooted in the resourcefulness that African Americans had to develop under slavery and segregation.” (Basic Black, PBS). African Americans proved to be such a big part of Southern cuisine and they provided skills and techniques that would create some of the most popular Southern dishes.

European settlers also made important contributions to Southern cuisine that was centered around livestock, grains, and cooking tools. Europeans would introduce pigs, cattle, goats, and chickens, which would be key sources of meat. According to the New Georgia Encyclopedia, “The Spanish introduced pigs to Florida in 1539, and pork soon became a dominant feature of the Southern diet” (New Georgia Encyclopedia). Europeans would use pork fat to season vegetables, flavor stews, and enrich beans and greens. Pork would eventually be a

central to barbeque traditions and there would be influence of smoking from Native Americans, adding African spice blends, and the abundance of hog farming from the Europeans.

Wheat flour, dairy products, and baking traditions were all influences that the Europeans would introduce in Southern Cuisine. Biscuits, pastries, dumplings, and other varies baked goods would become staples in rural and urban Southern households. Europeans would introduce the cast-iron skillet that would be used for such things as frying chicken, cooking cornbread, and searing meats. These cooking techniques with the knowledge and ingredients of Native American and African influence would create a blend of cultural food that is now Southern cuisine.

Southern cuisine does not come from just one cultural group, but these three cultures blended together make up Southern food. The way these cultures interacted would sometimes be from cooperation or more oftentimes conflict throughout history. Many Southern dishes demonstrate multicultural blending and are very popular in the South today. A great example is Gumbo, which contains African okra, Native American filé powder, and European roux from the French. Rice dishes such as pilau and Hoppin' John have a blend of the tradition of African rice, European pork, and local vegetables. In each of these dishes, there is a visual of multicultural influences that provide creativity and influence from the Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans.

These blending of traditions did not all have the same outcome for each culture and the two cultures that had to overcome hardships were the Native Americans and Africans. The Native Americans would eventually be pushed off their land by Europeans. Africans would be enslaved by Europeans for many years before eventually being free people. Many European settlers would claim dishes as theirs, while much of the influence came from Native Americans

and Africans. Southern Cuisine would prove to be a powerful example of how there is cultural survival and resilience.

Food continued to shape the social and cultural lives of Southerners into the twentieth century into the modern era. For Native Americans in the Southeast, tribes are trying to revive crops and keep their history alive through land management and preservations. Food for African Americans is one of the most important parts of their culture and it one of the pivotal roles for freedom, identity, and equal rights. After emancipation, African American cooks would bring their cooking into Southern cuisine and culture. “Soul food” would identify as African cooking from the traditions of West African culture and the Black communities in the South. European communities would blend together old traditions and new traditions in the modern age of Southern cuisine. Appalachia would have a style of rustic and resourceful cooking, while Louisiana would develop Creole cuisine. The Lowcountry would be known for rice dishes, seafood traditions, and Gullah Geechee influence, which would be a blend of European and African American food culture.

Southern cuisine today is viewed as one of the tastiest cuisines in the world, but the history is also being told throughout more restaurants. Many prestigious restaurants in Charleston and Savannah, for example, have some of the best local ingredients and chefs, but the food also tells a story of multicultural blending. Carolina gold rice, sea island red peas, and African benne seeds have returned to the modern kitchen. There is a more appreciation for the Native American and African cuisines in the modern era which gives them a voice when it was not as present in the past.

Southern cuisine cannot be understood with the influences of Native American, African, and European influences. Native Americans introduced crop cultivation and the importance of

living of the land. Enslaved Africans would transform Southern cuisine through West African influence and ingredients that would be brought to the American South, while undergoing oppression. Europeans would introduce livestock, grains, and tools that would blend with African and Native American cooking customs. Together, these three cultures would create one of the most diverse cuisines in the world with a complicated and important history. Along with the wonderful flavors and ingredients of Southern cuisine, it also tells a story of cultural blending and how its influence is impactful to Southern history.

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