Where Settlers, Slaves and Natives Converged, a Way of Eating Was Born

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Where Settlers, Slaves and Natives Converged, a Way of Eating Was Born

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A hundred-plus Englishmen debark from three ships and set up housekeeping on the swampy shores of the James River. This year's 400th anniversary celebrations honor that event as the beginning of this nation, but let's also hail it as the start of Southern cuisine.

It's true the Spanish hit America's shores first, bringing pork to the New World and disseminating corn to other parts of the globe, but what we think of as quintessential Southern cooking -- country ham, hominy grits, black-eyed peas -- has its roots in the convergence of English, Native American and African American cultures in Jamestown beginning in the first half of the 17th century.

Those English settlers were ill-prepared, according to Randy Shifflett, a history professor at Virginia Tech: "The Virginia Company . . . told them it was a land of milk and honey, with naked savages wanting to trade for trash. They found instead that the locals were wary and didn't react kindly to exploitative negotiations."

Many of the provisions they had sailed with were either depleted or spoiled by seawater during the six-month crossing, Shifflett says. The men weren't particularly skilled at hunting and fishing -- leisure activities for landed gentry back in England -- or at farming, either. Perhaps if they had brought women (who didn't arrive in large numbers until 1619) they would have planted more kitchen gardens. Instead, they insisted on growing tobacco, a lucrative cash crop but not much use when food was scarce, which was just about all the time during those first years.

The New World offered the settlers such culinary riches as corn, squash and beans, often referred to as the three sisters. Before relations turned sour, the Native Americans showed them how to make corn pone and how to hull and soak corn kernels with lye from ashes to make hominy and then pound it into grits.

Archaeological evidence shows the settlers also ate a lot of squirrel, which was easier to obtain than deer or other larger animals without straying too far from the fort and risking an encounter with unfriendly Indians, Shifflett says.
Among Southerners, "there's all this controversy over who invented Brunswick stew" -- a dish traditionally incorporating squirrel and arguably named for Brunswick County, Va. -- says culinary historian Cindy Bertelsen, co-chairman of the Peacock-Harper Culinary History Friends, which oversees the collection of historic cookbooks at Virginia Tech. "But it's probably just what everybody ate back then: a stew with root vegetables, corn, beans and a little meat."

The waters offered up prodigious amounts of sturgeon, shad, oysters and turtles. According to one account of a dire period in 1609, the colonists subsisted on nothing but oysters for nine weeks -- some today might not consider that dire -- save for "a pint of Indian corn to each man of a week." Capt. John Smith, the colony's intrepid leader (and a man who might have stretched the truth some), writes of once being stung by a stingray while fishing in the Rappahannock River. He became so ill that the fishing party planned his funeral. He not only recovered but ate the dastardly stingray for supper.

The English had brought with them pork and cattle, both new to the Powhatan Indians. Some hogs escaped from the fort, soon turned feral and flourished in the woods, laying the groundwork for the Virginia ham industry.

The first slaves arrived in Jamestown in 1619, originally from what is now Angola. Their immeasurable contributions to Southern cuisine include okra, black-eyed peas and peanuts (the last brought to Africa from Peru by the Portuguese). Stops in the Caribbean brought hot pepper and other spices.

"Virginia peanut soup as we know it is a direct descendant of maafe," a peanut soup eaten by the Wolof people of Senegal and Gambia, says Michael Twitty, a descendant of enslaved colonial Virginians and a culinary historian who specializes in African American foodways.

The Jamestown settlers, slaves and Native Americans of the 1600s "all had what I call a common edible vocabulary," he adds. All three groups were used to eating mushes of some type: corn mush for the Indians, oatmeal for the English, millet porridge for the Africans. Ditto griddle breads cooked on cast iron in embers and called hoecakes or ash cakes.

"What the Africans had to go through to survive gave them an incredible instinct for flavor," says Twitty, who disputes the concept that the slaves ate only "what was thrown to them." They had kitchen gardens and were allowed to hunt and fish, he says. They sold their produce to their owners and at markets and used the money to buy their freedom.

Several historians credit slaves with adding greens and other vegetables to plantation owners' meat- and-starch-centric diets.

"There have been some studies done on the slave diet [that have shown] they may have been healthier than their white counterparts," says Nancy Carter Crump, author of "Hearthside Cooking: An Introduction to Virginia Plantation Cuisine" (Howell Press, 1986). "Meat and starches were heavier on plantation dinner tables, but slaves were eating more vegetables."

But Southern cooking is about more than components.

"It wasn't just ingredients, but style, that the English contributed to the culture," notes Barbara Haber, author of "From Hardtack to Home Fries: An Uncommon History of American Cooks and Meals" (Free Press, 2002) and a former curator of the voluminous cookbook collection at the Radcliffe Institute's Schlesinger Library at Harvard University. "The famously hospitable Virginia style" developed once supply ships started coming to the colony regularly, she says. The concept of who ate when, the order of the meal and the setting of the table would have been based on British customs.

The boats "would bring china and all these other amenities. Planters' dining rooms in early Virginia were very fancy, with many courses served," as households vied to replicate the ways of back home, she says.

Southern hospitality is British in origin? No wonder they never forgave us for inventing iced tea.
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Graphic

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