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The culture of the South has a long and rich history, much of which was formed during the beginnings of the country as a whole. It was sharpened during the pre-Civil War era when regional tensions arose between the North and the South. One unintentional cultural impact on the South came from a group who were deemed unworthy of influence, the enslaved population. Even though slaves had a tremendous impact on the economy of the South, the most lasting effects of slave culture have been in the arts, music, and food. Jessica Harris accurately states that “for centuries of forced and voluntary migration, the food of Western Africa has had an influence on the cooking of the world”(Harris 9).

Food has been important to all peoples, but within the enslaved community, food preparation was especially influential because it was one of the main ways Africans could pass on their heritage to their children and grandchildren without getting in trouble by their masters, Jessica Harris discusses this in her book, *High on the Hog*(Harris 13) . They brought nothing over with them from Africa except for their knowledge and memories from their home. They couldn't bring any cooking implements with them, and what food slavers brought over wasn't given to bondsmen for their own use. Another reason food was so important to the enslaved people of the South was that meals were one of the few times they were all together as a group who otherwise lost their sense of community during much of the day to day enslaved life. They came together to eat and talk about what had happened that day out in the fields and tell stories and folk tales that often communicated more than the words used to tell them(Harris 85). Over time, the enslaved community formed a new culture across previous tribal lines. People no

longer belonged to individual tribes from West Africa, but were united in their bondage, and shared a cultivated heritage that eventually outlasted their oppression. This new culture blended methods from different regions of West Africa, such as rice cultivation from Senegal and okra from north Africa. They utilized everything in the creation of cuisine, and melded different methods and ingredients together to form something completely new.

The mixture of different West African societies and the expansion of foods that were available birthed this new culture and cuisine. Many of the new dishes that slaves created emerged out of necessity. Initially slaves had to make do with what they had, often the worst offerings and the leftovers from their masters' tables. They created many new dishes that had never before seen anywhere else in the world.

It's important to consider how slavery has had an influence on the food of the South since before Europeans forcibly removed slaves from Africa, and transported them to America. Throughout their entire period of enslavement in America this people group created dishes still cooked across the south today.

The cross culture influences on food had significant impacts even before any slaves were taken from these areas. When Europeans explored and settled portions of West Africa, they brought with them new crops and farming methods. West Africans hybridized these European cultivation methods with their own, and created far more efficient ways to farm crops. This was shown by the introduction of grain submergence methods that the Chinese taught European explorers. Judith Carney discusses this in her book *Black Rice* (Carney 13). Europeans observed how these methods impacted the economies of West Africa, and these significant impacts were instrumental in the introduction of rice to the Americas.

Each of the three regions of west Africa specialized in a specific crop, largely due to topography, that influenced the flavors of the South in different ways. Niger and Senegal contributed rice, Cameroon brought familiarity with yams and root vegetables such as the American sweet potato, and Sudan contributed millet and sorghum.

Historians believe some West African tribes cultivated relationships with Europeans over time in order to sell rival tribesmen and women into bondage. Upper Guinea was the earliest source of bondsmen and women. Today this area is known as Niger and Senegal. Because this region was the closest to the coast, it was one of the first areas of west Africa Europeans extensively explored. The coastal plains' fertile soil was very conducive to growing rice. They also grew sorghum and millet, but these crops didn't grow as well and spoiled if stored for too long. Rice could be stored dry for a long time with very little decrease in nutritional value. The people there combined their traditional methods of farming rice with the European methods brought over during exploration. In her book: *Black Rice*, Judith Carney described how rice was an attractive crop to the Europeans because it was affordable to everyone. When farmed in the right climate and conditions, it was easy to harvest, making it inexpensive for the lower members of society. West Africans increased harvest yield by the implementation of European water control and grain submergence.(Carney 13). These people groups also used rice in the majority of their meals, along with sorghum and millet, but rice formed the centerpiece of their cuisine. This meant they were larger, stronger, and generally healthier than the other groups that lived around them. In *Rice and Slaves*, Daniel Littlefield described the attributes plantation owners looked for in slaves as being "skilled, complacent and obedient"(Littlefield 13), while among traits that made slaves undesirable were "small, slender, weak, and tended towards a yellowish

color”(Littlefield 10). Their proficiency at rice cultivation along with their physical attributes made the West Africans who came from these regions very valuable slaves because they knew how to farm one of the South’s burgeoning cash crops. Additionally, this created a huge demand for slaves that were knowledgeable about farming rice with the combination of the Native African and European methods, and who were fit enough to begin making their new masters money upon purchase due to being strong and healthy.

These African influences increased the portions of starches on the southern plate, and in many places made the respective starches the main part of the meal. This laid the foundation for multiple Southern dishes, such as gumbo, which the Gullah community of the South Carolina and Georgia lowcountry used. This cooking method employed local seafood alongside rice of West Africa fused with the spices and vegetables that were cultivated and cooked by the Native Americans. Corn ground into meal or grits was another dish that fused many different cultures’ cuisines, as many of the cooking and grinding methods came from Africa but corn was native to the Americas.

Slaves that came from the Cameroon area knew how to grow yams, a rootlike vegetable similar to the American sweet potato, but slightly less sweet and with more of a barklike consistency. The conditions needed to grow yams successfully weren’t found in many North American colonies, so yams didn’t become as influential in Southern dishes as rice. The Native Americans who already lived in the South and across the New World had farmed sweet potatoes for hundreds of years, and they showed the settlers and their slaves how to cultivate them in the most efficient ways possible(Bon appetit) . Even though yams didn’t grow as well in the colonies, the native sweet potato grew under some of the similar conditions and had similar

harvesting methods. This made it easy to adopt many of the yam farming methods to sweet potatoes. Since many of the farming and cooking methods were so similar between the two vegetables, many sweet potatoes were mistakenly labeled as “yams”. The misidentification of sweet potatoes across the southern United States as yams referred to the similarities between the two vegetables, but eventually described a cooking style. Yams became sweet potatoes, slow-cooked in a sugary sauce with cinnamon and other sweet spices such as cloves. Sweet potatoes were an easy tuber to grow in poor soil, and for this reason they were very popular with the enslaved community. Slaves maintained their gardens near their living quarters, but they didn’t have much time for careful cultivation because the majority of their time they spent working. Gardening was done in the evenings so vegetables had to be hardy, minimally maintained, and easily harvested. Sweet potatoes met all of those requirements.

Slaves that were taken from Lower Guinea, now Sudan and Senegal, had grown up eating native cereal grains sorghum and millet. Because they were the farthest from the coast where European slave traders began exportation, they were among the last people to sold from west Africa. In 1807, the young United States government outlawed the import/export of African slaves. This was intended to weaken the slave industry and phase out slave labor, but the opposite happened. Slaves became more valuable, and intrepid owners started breeding plans in the attempt to preserve the most desired qualities due to the fact that there was no “new blood”. The cessation of the slave exportation and the lack of the semiarid climate needed to grow both of these cereals meant that slaves from the Lower Guinea region of West Africa didn’t have as large of an impact as did slaves and crops from the other two regions of west Africa(Harris 9). Because the conditions needed to farm millet were not found anywhere in the South, it never

caught on. Sorghum fared slightly better where conditions permitted but it never gained the momentum needed to have the same cultural impact as the other crops. The main application of sorghum in Southern dishes was sorghum syrup, distilled from sap squeezed out of the cane fibers of the sorghum plant. This sticky syrup was similar in taste and consistency to molasses. Like molasses, Southerners used sorghum as a source of nutrients due to the high concentration of minerals, magnesium and iron. They added sorghum and molasses to meals otherwise low in nutrition.

Slaves cultivated and cooked certain foods with American Indian techniques learned by European settlers. Most notably, this group of foods included corn and sweet potatoes. American Indians showed European settlers how to cultivate, harvest, and prepare corn in a variety of ways. As settlers realized the value of corn, it was exported to Europe and eventually taken to Africa where it became an integral part of their cuisine. This meant West African slaves were already familiar with how to cook corn as well as its' various dietary applications.

Europeans introduced corn to West Africa in the 16th century, which Africans learned to cultivate and cook. By the 17th century, all West African socio-economic diets included corn, and it was a very large part of their economy. Rebecca Powers revealed this in her article, *Cornmeal is Baked into the History of the Americas, and It's Time to Dust Off Those Roots*. According to Powers, cornmeal was enjoyed by people of every class in the New World simply due to its ease of preparation. Because corn was farmed in large quantities, it fed large groups of people cheaply. Ground cornmeal made it less susceptible to spoilage and increased its versatility. Both of these factors meant that corn, along with pork, was one of the most popular foods that masters supplied for their slaves. Cornbread was probably the most common use for

corn because it stored well and could be eaten while at work in the fields. It was relatively quick and easy to prepare, and while there were many variations across the South, they were all very simple recipes that tied meals together and provided the necessary carbs to fuel a long day's work.