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Recipes for Life: Black Women, Cooking, and Memory

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Abstract

In African American history, food has functioned as expression of colonial power and control, and as a source of Black celebration and liberation. Cookbooks written by Black women from the mid-eighteenth century to late twentieth century reflect the long history of the development of African American cuisine. These texts are practical and instructional, while also offering insights into the transnational development of food as an expression of cultural history through African, Indigenous, and European influences. African Americans, and more specifically Black women, have contributed to the food history of the Southern United States by developing a distinct African American cuisine and creating the texts by which to publicly declare their knowledge and ensure its survival. By analyzing the cookbooks of Malinda Russell, Edna Lewis, Vertamae Smith-Grosvenor, and Carole and Norma Jean Darden, a timeline of cookbooks from the Civil War to the Black Power Movement can be established. Their commonalities, including the use of cookbooks as autobiographies, community memoirs, and genealogical records, are features that resonated with the Civil Rights Movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. Food is more than a means of survival. It is a constantly evolving expression of culture, people, and celebration.

I enjoy baking. That is part of why I chose to write this essay. Food history is fascinating to me. It is tangible. Sometimes history can feel distant, always at arm's length. But food is something that fills our everyday lives, present in the most mundane and special of occasions. I can reflect on its place in our personal lives and in history, and where those two spheres overlap. I can read an old recipe, and recreate it as best I can. By baking it and eating it, I share an experience with someone long gone, whom I have never met and never could meet. I will try to do that in these pages, and hope that just for a moment, I can time travel.

Food has always been a defining factor of African American history. Captive Africans aboard ships traveling to the Americas were fed a slurry known as slabber sauce, a mush comprised of oils, starch, smoked fish, boiled vegetables, and pepper that was so vile that it was refused by the enslaved passengers. At the height of the transatlantic slave trade, the transportation of enslaved Africans coincided with the spring sowing of new crops throughout the Americas.[1] This example of white control of diet is emblematic of the ways in which the dominant American culture would attempt to exert control over the foodways of African Americans, but also of the ways African Americans fought to subvert those systems. In urban and rural areas, the role of cooks in white homes was a relationship fraught with power imbalances, while food in Black homes drew on past knowledge and new freedoms to create dishes that were about both survival and celebration. Meals are part of celebratory gatherings, while the food itself is a celebration of a continuous legacy. The public expression of food as culture came about through cookbooks. Over the course of two centuries, Black women used cookbooks as an instructional medium to proclaim the surviving power of Black culture on a personal and communal level. The personal, political, economic, and cultural are all expressed in these culinary texts. Scholarship and the continued practice of African American cooking ensures that the fundamental place African Americans have in the development of a unique expression of race, gender, and cultural history in the southern United States cannot be denied. Black women who became cooks and cookbook authors are agents of memory and resistance.

The study of African American food and cookbooks engages with cultural, transnational, and food histories within the larger category of Black history. Scholarship on Black history has formally developed over the course of the twentieth century, making its way into white-dominated academic spaces within the last three decades.[2] As the discipline has expanded, scholars have begun to refer to the "long Civil Rights Movement."[3] This approach acknowledges efforts by African Americans to advance the instituting of civil rights and improvements in the quality of life for Black Americans outside of the more typical dates of 1954–1965, which begin with *Brown v. Board of Education* and end with the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act.[4]

Cultural historians seek to understand how human interactions, beliefs, values, emotions, as well as specific expressions of culture, such as language, art, and food, have impacted relationships

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[1] Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African-American Culinary History in the Old South* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017), 208.
[2] Kevin Gaines, "African-American History," in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Temple University Press, 2011), 400-401.
[3] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no.4 (March 2005), 1235.
[4] Gaines, "African-American History," 411.

and events. At its core, cultural history recognizes that people and their environments shape one another.[5] When studying Black cultural history, it is essential to use a transnational context. The concept of examining events and their impact across borders, rather than isolating them within a nation, first appeared in the 1970s, and rose to prominence during the 1980's and 1990s.[6] There has been debate in the development of transnational scholarship on what constitutes a "nation," as the concept "cannot refer to border crossing where the nation-state does not exist."[7] Transnational scholar Ian Tyrrell suggests that for instances dealing with the histories of colonized spaces such as Canada and the United States, a more appropriate term could be "intercultural history." He states that "… colonial histories of these modern nations were often seen as transnational experiences, even though no nation existed. Though work on… colonial America could arguably be included in a transnational history of colonization, technically it could only be so as part of an inter-imperial history of Spanish, English, and French colonists, as part of relations with sovereign Native American peoples."[8]

This definition of transnational history rests on a notion of nationhood defined by European ideas and the assumption that no nations existed within North America in the pre-colonialism period. If it is only a white concept of nationhood that matters, it becomes easy for scholarship to dismiss African nations as well as both local and global African American cultures considered "Pan-African" by the Civil Rights Movement (but dismissed as inferior by Euro-American settlers). For Black Americans and the long Civil Rights Movement, transnationalism in the form of the Pan-African movement has been a staple piece of social justice since the early twentieth century through the advocacy of individuals like W. E. B. Du Bois, who promoted the idea of an international Black experience and a global resistance against colonial powers.[9] The cultural history of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and the long Civil Rights Movement is not only transnational because Africans were physically moved from one continent to another by European nations. It is transnational because of the relationships between African, Indigenous, and European nations, and the ways in which societies were destroyed and reformed based on geographic, social, and cultural factors.

Food history provides an essential example of the ways in which transnational geography and culture can be expressed simultaneously. While access to ingredients and other resources can be largely dictated by geography, a cuisine becomes cultural because it is claimed by the people who produce it, regardless of geographical movements.[10] The knowledge of food and cooking brought by Africans forced into the transatlantic slave trade created many transnational cuisines connected by the African diaspora. These transnational cuisines facilitate a social memory. The concept of social memory posits that communities form collective "sociobiographical memory," which allows those within a community to feel collective emotions such as pride or shame,

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[5] Anna Green, *Cultural History* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2-4.
[6] Ian Tyrrell, "Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice," *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 3 (November 1st, 2009), 454.
[7] Tyrrell, "Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History," 454.
[8] Tyrrell, "Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History," 461.
[9] Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 2.
[10] Laura Di Fiore, "Heritage and food history, a critical assessment," in *Food Heritage and Nationalism in Europe*, ed. Ilaria Porciani (Taylor & Francis, 2020), 35-36.

stemming from their shared past.[11] For diasporic communities, the inclusion of memory in historical narratives can become a social justice strategy, as it reveals incomplete historical narratives, reinstating those suppressed by combinations of factors such as race, gender, and class.[12] Activist bell hooks wrote that memory is not only nostalgic, but a space for collective self-recovery through post-colonial resistance.[13] Through the sharing of recipes and the social space of the dinner table, cultural foods are two-fold: they are practical means of survival, as well as joyous proclamations of a persevering people.

This paper seeks to understand the ways that Black American women have engaged with food and the act of cooking. By examining the relationships between the cooking, eating, and sharing of food, as well as anti-Black racism directed at the cooks, we can gain a sharper sense of the role African American cuisine has played in family life, civil rights, and cultural and financial prosperity for Black women. Examining the food and cookbooks requires attention to geographical, social, and cultural factors, while the lives of the writers and their audience may be illuminated through a class-based analysis. Cooks and cookbook authors reinforced their claim to intergenerational and transnational knowledge rooted in African American foodways and developed through geographic, economic, and social factors in the United States. Black women were able to transition from cooks who withstood a level of forced intimacy with white families (whether enslaved or employed), to cooks who could directly profit from their personal and communal knowledge of foodways through publication royalties.

Analyzing food and cookbooks can reveal the geographic, social, and cultural influences on cuisine. A class-based analysis contributes to an examination of the lives of the writers and their audience. By looking at the development of "soul food" in the latter half of the twentieth century, the experiences of the Black middle class in relation and contrast to the larger African American community can be better understood, as the rise of soul food chronicles the Black middle class's desire to reassert their African identity and involvement in the long Civil Rights Movement. Through the works of Malinda Russell, the National Council of Negro Women, Edna Lewis, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, and Carole and Norma Jean Darden, a clear and valuable timeline of cookbooks from the Civil War to the Black Power Movement can be established. The ongoing study of these works exemplifies the ways in which the study of African American foodways remains a constantly evolving and expanding field of study, worthy of the attention and care given to the cuisines of Europe.

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[11] Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998), 125.
[12] Vijay Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 197-198.
[13] Vijay Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity*, 203-204.

Corn Pone
Makes 4 pones, about 3 inches wide, 1 ½ inches high, and 4 inches long
2 cups water-ground white cornmeal
1 teaspoon Royal Baking Powder
½ teaspoon salt
2/3 cup cold water
½ cup milk
1 tablespoon melted butter or lard[14]

I like to bake because I can share what I produce. I love making people's favorite things. Over the first COVID lockdown, I created my own lemon meringue pie recipe. I was so proud of it; it was the first recipe of my own. But I was also proud because it is my Grandpa's favorite pie. So, when we finally saw him again that summer, I could present my own attempt at the perfect lemon meringue pie, and hope he liked it. (He does).

Since the beginning of African enslavement in the United States, the figure of the Black cook in a white family's kitchen was a constant. These cooks, often women, became central figures in the homes of their enslavers as people with highly cultivated skills developed over years of experience. Yet while enslaved African cooks were highly valued domestically and monetarily, their involvement in the messier practical realities of cooking often lead to white enslavers associating the work of the cook with a low status within the household.[15] The simultaneous value placed on what Black cooks produced and the devaluing of the cooks themselves is reflective of white attitudes to Black cooks and enslaved Africans at large. For cooks especially, the products of their labor are the result of hours of work and a lifetime of skills, but can be eaten with little appreciation in minutes.

As early as 1692, laws were enacted that limited the food access of enslaved individuals in American colonies by criminalizing the ownership of a cow or hog. With the growth of the slave trade and the Black population in the Americas, access to food became increasingly crucial. Knowledge of cooking from across Africa combined with shared Indigenous knowledge and imposed European foodways to create a diet based in resistance to colonialism that, over time, became distinctly African American.[16] Through this variety of sources, there emerges not one African American cuisine but many, determined by geography, heritage, and social relationships. In the Reconstruction Era, this generational knowledge of how to find sustenance was reframed in the context of emancipated African Americans creating a foodway of independence. Many freedmen refused to grow crops associated with slavery, especially cotton, despite their potential for high profits. Growing crops for sustenance became the primary goal for many African American farmers, with hogs (now under no ownership restrictions) raised for meat. Hunting and foraging served to supplement what was not available in stores, whether that shortage was due to

[14] Edna Lewis, *The Taste of Country Cooking: The 30th Anniversary of a Great Southern Classic Cookbook* (Knopf, 2012).
[15] Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 2-4.
[16] Twitty, *The Cooking Gene*, 169-171.

geography, prejudice, or class.[17] Intergenerational knowledge allowed West African food staples to be translated into North American equivalents, such as yam and sweet potato, and combined with foods imported with the slave trade, such as peanuts and okra, to create a unique cuisine emblematic of the African American diaspora.[18] With African American access to food historically limited by law and prejudice, the gathering and growing of food for emancipated families in the Reconstruction Era was not just about survival. In the face of continued racism and poverty, self-sufficiency was an assertion of freedom, independence, and the continuation of knowledge.

In southern urban centers, many African American women were forced by economic necessity to return to the homes of white families as paid cooks. Young Black girls often learned to cook from other women in their segregated neighborhoods while their mothers were out working. Skills were developed over the course of a lifetime and shared between entire communities. The tradition of eating as a community established during slavery, became an assertion of freedom and connection between freed African Americans.[19] Having culinary skills at an early age meant that work in a kitchen was often available to young African American women seeking their first employment. Into the twentieth century, cooking remained an intergenerational skill between families, communities, and older and younger employees sharing a kitchen.[20] By 1880, 98% of Black working women were employed in domestic positions. Their working life could start as young as ten and last at least until the age of sixty-five. The salaries paid domestic staff by white families reflected their perceived value. Cooks were often paid the most out of the household staff, though wages overall were still low compared to white employees. Cooks were also the most likely to benefit from new technological advancements of the late nineteenth century, particularly the cast iron stove, which lessened the danger and unpredictability of cooking on an open fire.[21] As in the pre-emancipation era, African American cooks in white households were highly valued for their skills and held an integral place within the home but at the same time, were socially racialized and devalued. The kitchen became a key site of contact between African Americans and white children in the late nineteenth century southern United States. While the number of domestic workers could vary drastically between white households, a cook was a requisite for the urban middle and upper classes. As they had in plantation homes, white children frequently descended into the kitchens as a social space.[22] This was a relationship of forced intimacy for the Black women employed as cooks, resulting in the cook not only being a chef and cleaner, but a surrogate parent as well. While this relationship is emblematic of white assumptions towards the "mammy" role of a Black woman in the household, it is also illustrative of the social power of the process of cooking, that drew the children down to the kitchens to converse with the African American women who swept around them.

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[17] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1998), 107-108.
[18] Tracy N. Poe, "The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915-1946," *American Studies International* 37, no.1 (February 1999), 10-11.
[19] Poe, "The Origins of Soul Food," 12.
[20] Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 20-23.
[21] Tera W. Hunter, *Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labours After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 52-56.
[22] Hunter, "Working Class Neighbourhoods," 56.

Sift the meal, baking powder, and salt into a mixing bowl. Add the water and milk. Stir well, add melted fat, and let the mixture rest for 10 minutes.[23]

Sometimes I bake recipes my parents have been making for years, or try to recreate the baking of great-grandparents or great-aunts. It becomes an exercise in family history. So, as I make this, I am thinking about the privilege I have, to be able to trace my roots back centuries, to specific villages in Scotland and England. The ways in which I can pinpoint geography, people, class, time, and therefore, food.

I know as I make this recipe that the corn pones will be shared between me, my brother, and our parents. So, I find myself thinking about what it means for me – a 20-year-old white woman from Windsor, Ontario – to be making this recipe by Edna Lewis. It is hardly the first time that a white woman has written about food produced by a Black woman. The Virginia Housewife: Or, Methodical Cook was written by white author Mary Randolph, and published in 1824. It is often considered the first quintessentially American cookbook. The influences of Ingenious and enslaved African cooking practices can be seen in the recipes of The Virginia Housewife.[24] *It is impossible to ignore that the wealth, privilege, and legacy she enjoyed was built on the labor of enslaved African Americans, in the fields, in the dining room, and in the kitchen.*

Kitchens as internal, domestic places where Black women could hold conversation and exercise authority shaped the social and political impacts of cookbooks by Black women. Outside of private homes, cookbooks became a medium for the public assertation of African American culture and identity through food. As sources of revenue, they allowed the authors, frequently women, to use the skills of the gendered kitchen for financial independence without the need to cook in a white family home. For many years, the 1881 book *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking*, written by the emancipated Abby Fisher, was believed to be the oldest cookbook by an African American.[25] Then, in 2000, the only known copy of *A Domestic Cook Book: Containing A Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen* written by Malinda Russell, was unearthed in a collection of books owned by Helen Evans Brown, a prolific food writer of the latter half of the twentieth century. *A Domestic Cook Book* was published in Michigan in 1866 by the "True Northerner" Office in the town of Paw Paw.[26] The book is a straightforward collection of recipes, including little to no instructions for method. Regardless, Russell's personal experiences come through in her preface, "A Short History of the Author." She recounts her early life in Tennessee, her grandmother's emancipation that in turn secured her freedom, her life as a washerwoman, owner of a boarding house, and the owner of a pastry shop. Russell explains that money saved from the pastry shop to support herself and her son, was stolen in January 1864 by a guerrilla party, resulting in her "being compelled to leave the south on account of [her] Union principals."[27] Russell's personal experiences embody the conflict and uncertainty of the era.

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[23] Edna Lewis, *The Taste of Country Cooking,* A Spring Breakfast.
[24] Mary Randolph, *The Virginia Housewife: Or, Methodical Cook*, ed. Karen Hess (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), xxix-xxxi.
[25] Christina Bolzman, "The Legacy of Malinda Russell," *Michigan History Magazine* 96, no. 4 (July-August 2012).
[26] Jan Longone, "Early Black-Authored American Cookbooks," *Gastronomica* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 98.
[27] Miranda Russell and William L. Clements Library, *A Domestic Cook Book: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen by Malinda Russell, an experienced cook, Paw Paw, Michigan, 1866: a facsimile of*

The relatively recent discovery of Russell's cookbook illustrates the fact that the history of African Americans, African American women, and their cultural history can easily be lost. Whether through carelessness, accident, indifference or deliberate destruction, the neglect of African American women's life stories is symptomatic of a continued societal devaluing of their personhood and experiences. The persistence of the Black cook stereotype, which casts her as a secretive and commanding tyrant of the kitchen, only enhances the value of cookbooks as sites of autobiography.[28] Many surviving cookbooks, including Russell's, include personal notes, stories, or author introductions with the recipes. The acts of writing and cooking are both engagements with the cultural discourse surrounding food, which in turn is part of contemporary politics. In the face of dominant prejudices of white society, the act of publishing a cookbook took the day-to-day resistance of preparing heritage foods, and expanded the cuisine's audience to a national level. To cook these meals or to read about them is to engage in an act of remembrance that is both personal and communal.

Later cookbooks published by African American women continued the precedent established by Russell and other writers of the era. Post-World War II, in the advent of the short Civil Rights Movement, the function of Black cookbooks as expressions of identity and culture became more explicit. The National Council of Negro Women began to sponsor the publication of cookbooks, beginning with the *Historical Cookbook of the American Negro* in 1958. The short Civil Rights Movement sparked an increase in Black-owned presses and publications, and gave Black authors of all genres, including cookbooks, a more receptive platform for publication and distribution.[29] The foreword of the *Historical Cookbook* asserts itself as "the result of knowledge accumulated through the years and presented in what we consider a new, unique and 'palatable' approach to history."[30] Recipes include "Emancipation Proclamation Breakfast Cake," "Philadelphia Specialties Honoring Lucretia Mott" (an elected member of the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society who used her home in the underground railroad), and Carver's Sweet Potato Recipes (honoring "more than 200 discoveries for various uses… [which] greatly lessened the miseries of southern farmers both Negro and white").[31] The cultural assertiveness, and the community-centered approach to food in the earliest known examples of African American cookbooks, was now an explicit goal of the Civil Rights Movement. While the national nature of the council meant that the cookbook was not specifically a southern publication, the influence of the foodways of African Americans in the southern United States is prominent, particularly in the prevalent use of southern crops like peanuts and sweet potatoes for many recipes. Their culinary place reflects the way that post-emancipation sustenance crops became cultural staples through the efforts of people like the agricultural chemist George Washington Carver.

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the first known cookbook by an African American (Ann Arbour, Michigan: William L. Clements Library, 2007), 21-23.

[28] Rafia Zafar, "The Signifying Dish: Autobiography and History in Two Black Women's Cookbooks," *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1999).

[29] Rosalyn Collings Eves, "A Recipe for Remembrance: Memory and Identity in African-American Women's Cookbooks," *Rhetoric Review* 24, no. 3 (2005), 284-285.

[30] Sue Bailey Thurman, ed. *The Historical Cookbook of the American Negro*, (National Council of Negro Women, 1958), ii.

[31] Thurman, *The Historical Cookbook*, 1-8.

Edna Lewis's 1976 publication *The Taste of Country Cooking* is simultaneously an autobiography, a memoir of Freetown, Virginia and a geographically-based cultural history. Lewis recounts growing up in Freetown, named by its newly emancipated founders, and her desire to remember the original founding families as they were dying out. Her chosen method for remembrance was food. By structuring the cookbook by season, Lewis creates a sense of the passage of a year for the reader, intertwined with stories of community butchering of hogs in December, or of saving abandoned eggs.[32] With place and time so entwined in Lewis's cookbook, using its recipes becomes a re-enactment of the past. In the face of African diaspora, food kept Freetown and similar southern African American communities alive within the consciousness of the long Civil Rights Movement.

Then take the batter and shape it into pones by cupping both hands together and patting it into form.[33]

Given the history of white women both using and appropriating the recipes of Black women, what does it mean for me to bake this one? How do I differ from Mary Randolph? I suppose I could be cynical and I say I do not. But that seems disingenuous, and a disservice to an important conversation. In the house of Mary Randolph, the Black women in her kitchens had no agency, and certainly did not receive recognition or profits for their labor. But when Edna Lewis published "The Taste of Country Cooking." it is because she chose to share it. She wrote her own cookbook, selected what to include, and saw it published properly credited to her, and to Freetown. A cookbook is complete, not when it hits the shelves, but when it is used.

The presence of African American cookbooks paralleled the establishment of the post-war Black middle class in the United States. Faced with attacks from other African Americans for not embodying "authentic" Black identities, the middle class sought to assert their sense of identity in many ways, including through food. Out of this desire came the idea of "soul food" as the cuisine of former enslaved survivors. It embodied an ideal of a united African American community, regardless of current class or geographic location, predicated on the idea of a shared past in the South. The essential factor in whether a dish qualified as "soul food" was not where it was prepared, but its connection to the diet of enslaved African Americans, to the Black identity of the cook, and an intangible factor of "something inherent in the Black body."[34] Food became explicitly tied to the Black Power Movement in the 1970s. Scholar, chef, and social worker Helen Mendes began to promote the notion of African culinary history in 1971, in defiance to the idea that there was no African American food history to explore.[35] As the decade progressed, the embracing of soul food became a proclamation of one's place within the national African American community.[36] Though published eight years apart, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor's cookbook *Vibration Cooking: Or the Travel-Notes of a Geechee Girl* (1970) and Carole and

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[32] Rafia Zafar, "Elegy and Remembrance in the cookbooks of Alice B. Toklas and Edna Lewis," *MELUS* 38, no. 4 (2013): 40-41.
[33] Edna Lewis, *The Taste of Country Cooking,* A Spring Breakfast.
[34] Laretta Henderson, "Ebony Jr! and "soul food": the construction of middle-class African American identity through the use of traditional southern foodways," *MELUS* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2007), 81-83.
[35] Toni Tipton-Martin, "Breaking the Jemima Code: The Legacy of African-American Cookbooks," *Ecotone* 10, no. 1 (2014), 118.
[36] Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), 159.

Norma Jean Darden's *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine: Recipes and Reminiscences of a Family* (1978) were both linked to the Black Power Movement, asserting that food is a universal necessity and form of cultural expression.[37] A concluding section of *Vibration Cooking* combines food and autobiography by juxtaposing recipes and personal letters. On a two-page spread with a recipe for "Morocco Lamb Stew with Prunes" is Smart-Grosvenor's response to a *Time Magazine* article that spoke harshly on the topic of soul food:

> You have the bad taste to say that soul food is tasteless. Your taste buds are so racist that they can't even deal with Black food. Your comment that the 'soul food fad' is going to be short-lived is dumb. But then your whole culture is made of short-lived fads… I will stick to the short-lived fad that brought my ancestors through four hundred years of oppression… Collard greens are thousands of years old and in the days of the Roman Empire were considered an epicurean delight. French restaurants too widely renowned even to depend on stars given by Guide Michelin serve chitlins sausages, only they call it *andouillette*. Soul food is more than chitlins and collard greens, ham hocks and black-eyed peas. Soul food is about a people who have a lot of heart and soul.[38]

Smart-Grosvenor's letter is a clear example of anger prompted by white devaluing of Black culture. Her writing overtly combines personal, political, and culinary histories to show how soul food can be understood, not just in the context of the African American community, but in contemporary transnational race relations. To erase the participation of Black cooks in the development of the food culture of the United States is to deny Black participation in a fundamental act of life.

Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine: Recipes and Reminiscences of a Family takes Lewis's genealogical approach to cultural memory further, even including a family tree after the introduction.[39] Each of the twenty-four sections is named for a relative or family ritual, including "Grandmother Corine Johnson Sampson, Christmas & Dairy Dishes," "William, Pot Roast & Bread Pudding," and "Funerals, Cakes, Fruit Pies and Rolls," and begins with family photographs and biographies. This cookbook is biographical, autobiographical, and deeply historiographical, reproducing family documents and artifacts.[40] It acknowledges the legacy of the earliest African American cookbooks. Like Lewis's *The Taste of Country Cooking*, documentation and remembrance is at the cookbook's heart. That act of remembering was taken further by its transformation into an official genealogical record, adding another layer of self-assertion against a white system of knowledge, which did not value Black family ties.[41] When historical records do not include Black lives, intergenerational recipes become a signifier of their survival, and the continued survival of their decedents.

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[37] Zafar, "The Signifying Dish."
[38] Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking: Or the Travel-Notes of a Geechee Girl*, (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1992), 185-186.
[39] Norma Jean Darden and Carole Darden, *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine: Recipes and Reminiscences of a Family*, (New York, NY: Fawcett Crest, 1980), i-ix.
[40] Darden and Darden, *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*, 42-45.
[41] Zafar, "The Signifying Dish."

Place each pone upon a baking sheet an inch apart from the others and bake in a preheated 375° oven for 15-20 minutes – no longer or the bread will dry out.[42]

Sharing is an integral part of cooking, and Edna Lewis chose to share some of her knowledge. Cookbooks can exist on their own as tomes, legacies, or records. But their fundamental purpose is to spread the knowledge of foodways gathered by the author. It is when other people make the recipes that the cookbook's purpose is fulfilled, and they come alive. The room fills with the smells of flour, salt, and fat. It gets warm, as the oven preheats. Your hands get dirty, a little grainy from the corn meal. And when they are finally in the oven, the smell of baking corn pone slowly starts to fill the room. It smells of corn meal, and a little bit of salt. It has that acidic tang of corn bread, and the sizzle of edges getting crisp. I imagine Edna Lewis, in Freetown, Virginia, with her hands getting grainy from the corn meal, doing the same washing up. It's time travel, and it smells like history.

Food is not utilitarian. Food is a distillation of geography, time, and place. It is climate, soil, and seasons. It is class. It is generations passing down what they have learned. It is hours upon hours of skilled work, then relaxing together. It is gendered. The stereotypical figure of the plantation kitchen is that of a Black woman, at once commanding and nurturing. For the enslaved African American cooks, and the cooks of the Reconstruction Era the kitchen was a site of a contrived, mandated intimacy. But within their own homes, food meant surviving, and the promise of eventual thriving, through the resistance and ingenuity which founded a cuisine. Food can be public. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Malinda Russell took the foods that had been developed under enslavement and freedom alike, an affirmation of life continuing, and made them visible in print. Women in the gendered space of the kitchen carved their own public niche for their hard-earned skills through centuries of writing, and allowed their own voices to come through. Food is a living document in the face of records that prioritize an African American person's monetary value, or their ability to assimilate, or make the least noise. Food is life, in every sense of the word.

[42] Edna Lewis, *The Taste of Country Cooking,* A Spring Breakfast.

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