

RI FOOD

How Black history and culture influenced Rhode Island's cuisine

Lobsters, oysters, and one-pot meals have long been associated with New England. But there's a direct link between these foods and the enslaved people who lived in Rhode Island

By [Alexa Gagosz](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 17, 2021, 4:36 p.m.



Adena Marcelino is the owner of Black Beans PVD in Providence. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

PROVIDENCE — Growing up in Rhode Island, Adena Marcelino didn't think that sweet potatoes were anything special. She and her family, who can trace their roots back more than 200 years in Rhode Island, called them “candied yams.” Marcelino remembers sweet potato biscuits and sweet potato pie cooking in the kitchen, but never realized the vegetable's true connection to Africans that came to the states hundreds of years ago until she researched it herself.

“It was always just ‘Black food.’ The origins, though, were never talked about,” said Marcelino, who owns [Black Beans PVD](#) restaurant.

The sweet potato originated in Peru, but when Africans arrived in Rhode Island, victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade ([which Rhode Island played a central role in](#)), the root vegetable was the closest substitute they could find for the yams they were more accustomed to eating. Food historians say the first sweet potato dessert that was cooked by an enslaved African was roasted in the embers of a dim fire, which gave it a “glassy,” caramelized look that was described as “candied.”

Like other Black foods, sweet potatoes are now part of the mainstream.



Marcelino sprinkles parsley on grits and gravy. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

“Now I go to a restaurant and see it served as a side, like ‘sautéed collard greens.’ But they’re charging \$15 a pop,” said Marcelino, who is also Cape Verdean. “I always want to ask, ‘Do you know the history of that? Do you know why you serve these dishes a certain way?’ It’s directly linked to African slaves.”

Marcelino says she thinks a lot about food. A psychology major and former advocate in social services, she examines how food connects people from one generation to the next and how it has influenced cuisine across continents.

Many quintessentially American dishes were shaped by Black culture, and not just in the South.

Food historian Tonya Hopkins is the co-founder of the [James Hemings Society](#), a nonprofit dedicated to “serving, unearthing and illuminating” the contributions of food and drink professionals of African descent, including James Hemings, Thomas Jefferson’s classically French-trained chef. She said African and other Indigenous cultures are often overshadowed in the culinary world, which is dominated by the stereotypical “white male chef in a pressed white coat and hat.”

Hopkins focuses her research beyond “Soul” food and slavery, looking into the development of fine dining dishes in the Upper South and Chesapeake Bay’s “plantation kitchens” to those in the North, mid-Atlantic region, and New England. Much of fine dining is “Black culinary creation that gets folded into American food ways,” she said.

“In New England, people don’t even know how much the region benefitted financially because of slavery. They think they are so far removed from that history,” said Hopkins. “But it’s complicated. You have this group of people that have a huge influence on fine dining, but are excluded from partaking in it. They couldn’t even eat in these restaurants.”

Marcelino said there are many reasons why the roots of certain popular foods have been forgotten.

“I honestly believe in all my heart that in Rhode Island, it’s not all because of racism. I think a lot of it is because no one’s ever had that conversation locally,” said Marcelino. “When I say polenta, people in Rhode Island know its Italian. But I say grits, which is similar, they’ve never had it. When I say sweet

potato pie, baked macaroni, collard greens, and corn bread, they say it's Southern food. Not Black food, when that's what it really is."

Hopkins said the word "Southern" has been used to mean "Black" since the 19th century. Some early cook books, written by literate Black Americans in Boston and Pittsburgh, would add the word "Southern," which would make it more familiar to white consumers but would diminish the history of African and African-American cuisine.



Ingredients for Marcelino's grits and gravy include grits, shallot, parsley, beef bacon, and paprika.

LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

According to Chef Neath Pal, a Johnson & Wales University instructor who teaches classic cuisines of the world (including many African dishes), the influence of African Diaspora can be found in New England cuisine in multiple ways, from ingredients like sweet potatoes, peanuts and peanut butter to methods of preparation like those one-pot dishes and stews and fried foods. And those plant-based meal plans that seem to be [everywhere](#) nowadays, didn't derive from a fad diet— it was a method of survival for enslaved people because for them, meats were a luxury.

Pal explained that lobsters were once plentiful along New England's coast, often called "poor man's protein" or "cockroaches of the sea," and were typically fed to prisoners or slaves. The crustaceans weren't considered a delicacy until the turn of the 20th century.

Oysters, which now sell for more than \$1 each at fancy raw bars and beach-side shacks, have a similar history, said Pal.

While some restaurant menus will offer information about where their produce is grown, how their wines taste, whether their beef is grass fed and whether ingredients are organic, these same menus largely leave out the cultures, customs, and history associated with a dish.



Marcelino's grits and gravy. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

"As people progress, really get in touch with their culinary past and heritage, and well-trained chefs tie the fundamental parts of cooking with the history of food, I'm hoping we see more acknowledgement" of a dish or ingredient's influence, said Pal, who is originally from Cambodia and had owned Neath's New American Bistro in Providence. Former New York Times food critic Bryan Miller [had praised Neath's as a "giant leap eastward"](#) for the city's food scene because of the way its chefs combine cultures on a plate while also paying homage to them.

While the Rhode Island Black food scene has expanded with the opening of [Kin Southern Table + Bar](#) by owner Julia Broome and [The AI Vegan](#) (AI stands for Afro-Indigenous) founded by Bree Smith, Marcelino said it's only recently that Black people started opening restaurants in Rhode Island to "serve Black food for other Black people."

"For a long time, we weren't allowed to eat at restaurants, or we had to go to certain places. We couldn't go to a Black-owned restaurant because we didn't have them. So for funerals and weddings, we cooked for ourselves. And that food was passed down as an oral history through families," she said.

She opened Black Beans PVD in December 2019 as a fine-dining supper club that quickly transitioned to a grab-and-go model. But she said she tries to keep African Diaspora influences as a staple on her menu, including cornbread, greens, and black-eyed peas. She said grits have also been a main player on her menu, sometimes paired with sausage gravy and biscuits or braised beef and lima beans.

"We can't have more food whitewashed. When it becomes the 'the state's' food, it doesn't give props to how it was created outside of this country," said Marcelino. "It takes more people of color to say 'Listen, that's our food. We have rights to that, we created that, and we have history behind that.'"

She added, "So give us credit where it's due."

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