Deconstructing My Namesake

In 1985 I was apprenticing with Nach Waxman at his Kitchen Arts & Letters in New York, preparing to open my own culinary bookstore in Charleston, South Carolina. I hadn’t decided on a name yet, but I was leaning toward the Educated Palate, which was soundly rebuffed by nearly everyone I knew. On New Year’s Day I attended a party at another southern friend’s apartment. I agreed to bring the hoppin’ john, the celebratory southern dish made with rice and cowpeas (dried field peas). When I arrived with the dish, my friends began calling me “Hoppin’ John,” and the name stuck. There was no doubt what my business would be called.

I was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but moved to the very similar terrain of the South Carolina lowcountry (the coastal plain) when I was three years old. I have eaten creole cooking all my life. The first written recipe that I know of for hoppin’ john, the “national” dish of the lowcountry, appeared in The Carolina Housewife in 1847. Writing anonymously, as was the custom for Charleston women prior to the Nineteenth Amendment, Sarah Rutledge was the “Lady of Charleston” who penned this early American cookbook that established lowcountry cooking as a creole cookery separate from the other cuisines emerging throughout the South. She was the daughter of Edward Rutledge, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and niece of Arthur Middleton, another signer. Her version, calling for bacon, “red peas,” and rice, is a Charleston “PER lō” as we say—a pilau or pilaf, a sort of bean and rice jambalaya. Miss Rutledge suggested adding, “if liked, a sprig of green mint” [italics mine]. The lowcountry classic, served on New Year’s Day for good luck, is a very dry version of the dish, but it is served with greens (for financial success throughout the year) with their juices, as well as a side dish of more cowpeas and pot likker. Most folks today use black-eyed peas, which are one of many types of cowpeas.

There have been many conjectures about the name hoppin’ john. My dear friend and colleague, the late, great culinary historian Karen Hess, was convinced, and attempted to prove through assiduous research, that the name comes from the old Persian bahatta kachang, meaning cooked rice and beans, from Hindi and Malay origins. Her sources are historical, etymological, and sociological. It makes sense, but I’m not convinced, though it’s certainly more compelling than the folk etymologies surrounding the dish—e.g., that it was hawked on the streets of Charleston by a crippled man known as Hoppin’ John; that the name is a corruption of “pois à pigeon” (pigeon peas), another legume brought to the New World from Africa; or that children were required to hop around the table before the dish was served. Historians call these apocryphal tales “fakelore” because they are based on neither fact nor historical record;
Karen added that “most of the proposed origins are demeaning to African-Americans.”

The dish certainly came from West Africa, whence came both cowpeas and the enslaved who were great growers and cooks of rice. Wherever rice is grown in the world, you find dishes of rice and legumes, whose synergy is legend. The white men who owned the vast rice plantations in early Carolina, on which the fortunes of Charleston were built, probably knew little about rice prior to their arrival in the New World, where they found themselves the owners of not only land, but humans as well. It is to the ancestors of today’s African Americans that I raise my glass on New Year’s, with our meal of hoppin’ john, collards, sweet potatoes, and roast pork. For it is they, from the West African Rice Coast, who knew the systems of wetland rice cultivation; they who cleared the land; built the embankments; cultivated the floodplains; sowed the seeds; maintained the weeding; harvested the crop; hoed the stubble; burned the remains; threshed the sheaves; winnowed with baskets of their own making; milled with mortars and pestles of their own making; and, finally, it was they who cooked the rice.⁶ As I have written many times before, neither the French nor the English who owned the rice plantations in Carolina knew much of anything about rice cookery; I dare say they still don’t.

Hess speculated in her seminal work, The Carolina Rice Kitchen: The African Connection, that there is a Provençal connection to the pilau of Carolina. In Charleston you might hear “pil LÔ” or “PER lô” or “per LOO” or several other pronunciations of the word, but I always say “PER lô” no matter how it’s spelled. Hess wrote, “Pilau is the most characteristic dish of the Carolina rice kitchen…. Word and dish come from Persia…. The classic pilau is not so much a receipt as a culinary concept.” Twenty pages later, as she traces the pilau following Islam, through Turkey and Spain, to Paris as early as 1300, and to Provençal cookbooks of the nineteenth century, she hypothesized that “the pilau was brought to Carolina by Huguenots fleeing persecution.” Hess asked me to read the manuscript twice before publication and twice I protested. But she countered in the book, “It has been observed that most Huguenots in Carolina did not come from Provence, or even the Midi. Considering that some of the most important strongholds were in the Midi, particularly in the Cévennes, adjacent to Provence, it seems reasonable to suppose that there must at least have been a few. Nor does the objection take into account the compelling presence of rice in South Carolina.” Her supposition that since the rest of the French and English settlers would have known nothing about rice cookery, but “even a single family from Provence could very nearly have intro-

duced such a concept into the new rice lands” diminishes the strength of the major thesis of her work, which she calls the “skill of the African-American cooks who had long known rice cookery, almost surely including certain versions of pilau.”⁷

Culinary history is fascinating, but these days I’m far more interested in both the “big picture” and the cultural aspects of food. Hoppin’ john is, simply, a bean and rice pilau which has traveled from the lowcountry plantations to wherever both black and white Southerners have settled. The dish may have originated in West Africa, but this delicious, nutritious favorite of the hapless Africans must have quickly moved from slave cabin to the “Big House” and on to the tables of the Charleston merchants and freedmen, former Europeans, Jews, Christians, cooks and eaters both rich and poor alike who left the lowcountry and settled across America, taking a love of hoppin’ john with them.

Before Ms. Rutledge provided us with a recipe, Caroline Howard Gilman wrote in her Recollections of a Southern Matron in 1838:

Lo! there stood before papa a pig on his four feet, with a lemon between his teeth, and a string of sausages round his neck. His grin was horrible.

Before me, though at the head of many delicacies provided by papa, was an immense field of hopping John; a good dish, to be sure, but no more presentable to strangers at the South than baked beans and pork in New-England. I had not self-possession to joke about the unsightly dish, nor courage to offer it. I glanced at papa.

“What is that mountain before you, my daughter?” said papa, looking comically over his pig.⁸

Caroline Howard was a proper Bostonian who married Samuel Gilman, a Harvard graduate who became the minister of the Archdale Unitarian Church in Charleston in 1819, a position he kept for nearly forty years. She was neither southern nor the mistress of the plantation she purported to be in her recollections. She published under her own name, which was unheard of for a woman in Carolina society (a Charleston lady’s name appeared in print only upon birth, marriage, and death until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment). She did own house servants and most historians agree that her observations of daily life are poignant and relevant, however fictional. Her scene of hoppin’ john’s appearance at the table (which she felt necessary to footnote and explain as “bacon and rice”) is perhaps the first of many to follow in southern writing.⁹

In 1946, Carson McCullers wrote in The Member of the Wedding:
They stopped off for a few minutes to get on with the dinner. F. Jasmine sat with her elbows on the table and her bare heels hooked on the rungs of the chair. She and Bernice sat opposite each other, and John Henry faced the window. Now hopping-John was F. Jasmine’s very favorite food. She had always wanted them to wave a plate of rice and peas before her nose when she was in her coffin, to make sure there was no mistake, for if a breath of life was left in her, she would sit up and eat, but if she smelled the hopping-John and did not stir, then they could just nail down the coffin and be certain she was truly dead. Now Bernice had chosen for her death-test a piece of fried fresh-water trout, and for John Henry it was divinity fudge. But though Jasmine loved the hopping-John the very best, the others also liked it well enough, and all three of them enjoyed the dinner that day: the ham knuckle, the hopping-John, cornbread, hot baked sweet potatoes, and the buttermilk.

The Member of the Wedding is fiction, but it is said to be the most autobiographical of her works. The character Frankie, who is the F. Jasmine of the cited passage, is the one of all of her many “who seemed to her family and friends most like the author herself,” according to the author’s sister Margarita Smith. Set in a small southern town in the 1940s, the book is a brilliant window into adolescence, but it truly illuminates the culture as well. Just before hoppin’ John makes its appearance, we read:

“Don’t call me Frankie!” she said. “I don’t wish to have to remind you any more.”

It was the time of the early afternoon when in the old days a sweet band would be playing. Now with the radio turned off, the kitchen was solemn and silent and there were sounds from far away. A colored voice called from the sidewalk, calling the names of vegetables in a dark, slurred tone, a long, unwinding hollering in which there were no words. Somewhere, near in the neighborhood, there was the sound of a hammer, and each stroke left a round echo.

McCullers could simultaneously draw broad strokes and pinpoints of light. Hoppin’ John was part of her world.

It was also part of Tennessee Williams’s. Southern food and drink are often major characters in his plays, and in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Big Mama knows how to satisfy Big Daddy:

BIG MAMA: Did you all notice the food he ate at the table? Did you all notice the supper he put away? Why, he ate like a hawss!…Why, that man—ate a huge piece of cawn-bread with molasses on it! Helped himself twice to hoppin’ John.

MARGARET: Big Daddy loves hoppin’ John. — We had a real country dinner.

BIG MAMA: Yair, he simply adores it! Are candied yams? That man put away enough food at that table to stuff a … field-hand!

BIG MAMA: Why should Big Daddy suffer for satisfying a normal appetite?!

Much has been written about the rice plantation of South Carolina and the knowledge system that came with the enslaved from West Africa. Until my gentleman planter friend Dick Schulze reintroduced Carolina Gold to the lowcountry in the 1980s, there had been virtually no rice grown in the area in sixty years. The Civil War had taken away the slave labor; the grain had been introduced into Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas, where the new machinery, which was too heavy for the soft lowcountry soil, made competition impossible for the lowcountry rice planters, whose aging plantations were battered by a series of storms, freshets, and silting caused by upriver cotton farming.

Interestingly, though, people still ate rice at nearly every meal. And many sandlappers, as residents of the lowcountry are apt to call themselves, continue to do so. When Fritz Hollings was elected Governor of South Carolina in 1958, he learned that its largely rural population was suffering from malnutrition, even though they were eating the same foods they had eaten since the end of the Civil War. He funded a study of the diets of the malnourished and found that all of the rice being eaten in the state was also imported. Stripped of its nutrients in the milling process, it was filling bellies, but not sustaining life. He rushed a bill through the state legislature requiring that all rice sold in the state be fortified with the vitamins and minerals stripped off in the milling process; further, directions must instruct the cook not to wash the rice before cooking, which would rinse away those restored nutrients. The law is still on the books.

I grew up eating hoppin’ John in the land of cowpeas—those “red peas” that Sarah Rutledge called for in that earliest of written recipes for the dish. Many food writers seem to think that boiled peanuts and grits are the defining foods of the South, but I sell stone-ground, whole-grain, heirloom corn grits to folks in every state, and many of my customers are chefs in restaurants. Very few of them are, in fact, Southerners. And the Lee Bros. have popularized boiled peanuts in New York City, though I do think that the popularity of edamame (the boiled green soybeans of sushi bars, similar in texture and flavor) has also helped boiled peanuts’ visibility. Everyone has heard of black-eyed peas, perhaps the best known of the cowpeas, but no one would call them “red.” And there’s even an heirloom California black-eye. But few Americans outside the Deep South grow or eat the myriad other varieties of Vigna unguiculata. The nomenclature, both scientific and common, can be maddening. Even the botanists can’t agree
on the pronunciations, and subspecies continued to be isolated. All peas and beans, including Vigna, cowpeas; Pisum, green peas; Glycine, soybeans; Cajanus, pigeon peas; and Phaseolus, or the common beans such as lima beans, black beans, Navy beans, and green beans, belong to the legume family, Fabaceae, which means Fava-like. That is, they resemble Old World beans. There are both subtle and dramatic culinary differences among the peas and beans. New Orleans red beans and rice, for example, does not taste like hoppin’ john, but unripe cowpeas in the pod can be eaten like unripe common green beans. At the turn of the last century, Sturtevant classified cowpeas with pigeon peas, but today cowpeas are recognized as a separate genus. They are neither peas (as in green peas) nor beans (as in green beans or favas), but you may hear them called both. If you hear a Southerner talking about shelling peas, he means cowpeas, which are also known as crowders, field peas, and, tellingly, southern peas. Crowders are so called, some say, because the beans are crammed together in the pod, squaring off the shoulders of the peas, but William Woy Weaver, the food historian and master gardener, has written that as poor whites began to eat them in the eighteenth century, they began to call them “crowder peas, from the Scotch-Irish word crowdy.”

Cowpeas are as varied as grapes or apples, and Southerners tend to crave the type that was grown in their neck of the woods. I’m partial to cream peas and some of the lesser known black-eye types, such as whippoorwills, but, in truth, I love them all.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1798 that the cowpea “is very productive, excellent food for man and beast.” He praised the plant’s ability to improve the “tilth and fertility” of the soil, and he sowed them in the South Orchard at Monticello between 1806 and 1810. Perhaps the cowpea’s reputation as both fodder and a soil enhancer has kept it from the practice of planting them in cotton fields “where they would crowd (and fertilize) the rows.”

Yet another shelling bean of the South is the butterbean, or Sieva bean, but those Lima types are, well, an entirely different bag of beans, as are yard-long beans, which resemble green beans, but which are a subspecies of Vigna unguiculata, which may have originated in Africa, but have been in Asia for thousands of years and are not directly related to the New World beans. Because of the confusion, I urge food writers to use scientific nomenclature, and not worry about how it’s pronounced.

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it off tables, because the season is not too long for many American climates. Indeed, Weaver grows several varieties in his awe-inspiring garden in Devon, Pennsylvania. Mine matured as quickly as my tomatoes and squash, and before my corn and melons, in my Washington DC, community garden—and that’s how it should be. Native Americans knew all about the companion planting that we are all learning about now that gardening has become one of the country’s most popular pastimes. “The Three Sisters” are the trinity of corn, beans, and squash planted together. The corn provides a pole for the beans to climb; the beans restore the nitrogen that corn demands back into the soil; the squash rambles on the ground, providing shade to lock in moisture and to block out the sun’s rays on which weeds thrive. Further, the prickly stems of the squash plants deter insects.

Jesus quoted the Torah when he said that man does not live by bread alone, imploring his flock to cultivate spiritual health as well. I choose to believe that the ancient texts were based on far more practical homilies. That is, grains do not provide us with all we need to live. Neither wheat nor corn nor rice can sustain life. They lack certain amino acids to form complete proteins. When grains are combined with pulses, however, complete proteins become accessible to humans. The enslaved West Africans who arrived in Carolina had for centuries grown cowpeas and pigeon peas to complement their rice, as well as root vegetables, greens, and other grains such as millet and sorghum, most of which quickly became established in the New World or were replaced with similar plants. Many of the enslaved were also excellent herdsmen and understood free-ranging cattle long before and much better than their European masters. As Judith Carney explained in Black Rice, in the vast wetlands of the Inland Niger Delta, following rice harvests, cattle entered the fields to graze on the stubble, “their manure fertilizing the soil. This seasonal rotation between rice cultivation and pastoralism embraces a clever land-use strategy that satisfies both cereal and protein … needs while improving crop yields through the addition of animal manure. Rice farmers [farther] south…in the absence of cattle … rely upon other techniques to maintain soil fertility, such as rotating fields with nitrogen-fixing legumes and intercropping plants that add crucial nutrients to the soil.”

In her latest book, Carney and her coauthor Richard Rosomoff point out that “The practice of leaving cattle to graze on the plants’ [leavings]…is likely responsible for the plant’s alternative names in English (cowpea), Portuguese (ervilha de vaca) and Spanish (chicharo de vaca).”

It’s too bad that future Southerners didn’t pay more attention to the successful and sophisticated Native American and African farming techniques. Monoculture, as we know, has continued to destroy even the smallest farmers of the South, who have gone from one ill-fated crop, such as cotton, to another, such as the Christmas trees that replaced heirloom corn and bean patches throughout Appalachia and now are dying from root rot and acid rain.

In Carolina, the taste has never died for the cowpeas and rice and sorghum and greens and sesame seeds that came to Carolina with the slave trade from West Africa early on. By 1708, there was a black majority in South Carolina. When I was growing up, there were 300 varieties of cowpeas being grown on traditional, small truck farms throughout the Lowcountry. In the forty years that followed, however, most had all but disappeared until the interest in heirloom plants took off a few years ago. Now, through the efforts of dedicated farmers, seed-savers, universities, and nonprofit organizations such as Monticello, the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation, and Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, and scholars such as Will Weaver and Steven Facciola, I can type the name of just about any heirloom cowpea variety into my browser and probably find someone with seeds to sell.

In Washington, DC I’ve grown Mississippi Silvers, razorbacks, purple hulls, and clay cowpeas—a rare old favorite of Confederate soldiers who both added them to their rations and planted them alongside battlefield stations. One of the great beauties of growing them is that you can eat them fresh (I simply boil a piece of smoked ham hock or neck bones in water until it’s seasoned, then add the peas and cook on a low boil for about half an hour) or save the dried beans for winter use—though let me advise you to freeze them first to kill any critters. There’s nothing more disheartening than opening your precious stash of hoppin’ johns on New Year’s Day to find them riddled with bugs. Sometimes I can harvest both green and dried cowpeas on the same day from the same plants. Cowpeas will grow right up to frost, and then you simply leave the plants in the ground to provide nutrients for next year’s corn.

Cowpeas are favored all over the world now. And wherever you find them, you are likely to also find rice. And wherever you find rice, you are likely to find some form of rice and beans. In a recent Facebook exchange, I followed several well-known southern cookbook authors’ discussion of what they thought was southern and what wasn’t. “I draw the line at Saigon Hoppin’ john,” wrote one. “I don’t care how many Vietnamese live down south now.” I couldn’t resist butting in and telling her that we’ve known for several years that cowpeas got to Asia several thousand years before they got to America. In Vietnam, rice and black-eyed peas...
are cooked just like hoppin’ john, though the street vendors who sell it often have a stalk of lemongrass garnishing it in lieu of Miss Rutledge’s mint.\textsuperscript{31}

It’s no wonder that the black-eye type became the defining cowpea of the dish as it spread across the country in what I call the Southern Diaspora. Mature at sixty-five to seventy days, it doesn’t require the eighty-five to ninety or more days that many of the other more delicate lady peas, cream peas, and white acres do. The common names are as confusing as the scientific nomenclature, and, like barbecue and jambalaya, the way you like your hoppin’ john probably has more to do with where you were grew up than with actual taste. Hoppin’ john has managed to keep its name, but even the same varieties of cowpeas seem to change names as you cross county lines. You can grow them anywhere you have full sun and warm, well-drained soil. Their ability to grow in poor soil is legendary, but they still remain a mostly southern vegetable. Like many African plants, they are extremely versatile, though few people today use these old foodways: the green seeds can be roasted like peanuts, the leaves may be used as a potherb, and, in hard times, you can dark-roast the seeds as a coffee substitute.\textsuperscript{32}

Weaver claims that their “close association with African Americans and the New England perception of the peas as a fodder crop for slaves” kept them out of not only non-southern gardens, but also out of the books. But not out of the literature, so to speak, for Thomas Jefferson described raising a black-eyed pea he referred to as French, though many varieties are now thought to have come to America via the Caribbean or Brazil rather than directly from Africa. That would certainly make sense in Carolina, which was granted to some Barbadian planters who restored Charles II to the throne. Nevertheless, Weaver writes, “cowpeas are not generally considered among the vegetables fit for the kitchen garden… Because cowpeas require considerable space, they have always been treated as field crops. On the other hand, they are no more troublesome in this respect than sweet potatoes, and the bush varieties can be raised like bush beans. If there is a drawback, it is only that cowpeas cannot be grown in much of the country due to their need for a long, warm growing season. For this reason their culture is most closely associated with the South.”\textsuperscript{33}

In 1879, Marion Cabell Tyree edited the remarkable Housekeeping in Old Virginia: Containing Contributions from Two Hundred and Fifty of Virginia’s Noted Housewives, Distinguished for Their Skill in the Culinary Art and Other Branches of Domestic Economy. In it there appears, attributed to Mozis Addums, a “Resipee for Cukin Kon-Feel Pees,”\textsuperscript{34} complete with condescending eye dialect, which is the spelling device used by writers to disparage a speaking character’s nonstandard pronunciation and grammar. Such spellings can be effective in fiction, but they mostly serve to make the writer appear superior by making the speaker seem uncouth and illiterate.\textsuperscript{35} There was no Moses Adams. It was one of several pseudonyms for the blowhard racist, George William Bagby, author of The Old Virginia Gentleman, in which I read the most disturbingly bigoted diatribes I’ve ever encountered. Field peas were so dear to Bagby’s heart, however, that he argued that Virginians were the greatest people on earth simply because they lived where “cornfield peas” grew. In spite of his hysterical, racist ranting, Bagby does demonstrate one truism: in the South, the white man came to love the black man’s food.\textsuperscript{36}

Two more recipes appear in Tyree’s book: One, for Cornfield or Black Eye Peas, submitted by a Mrs. S.T. (who happens to be Tyree herself), reads, “Shell early in the morning, throw into water till an hour before dinner, then put into boiling water, covering close while cooking. Add a little salt, just before taking from the fire. Drain and serve with a large spoonful fresh butter, or put in a pan with a slice of fat meat, and simmer a few minutes. Dried peas must be soaked overnight, and cooked twice as long as fresh.”\textsuperscript{37}

Mrs. Tyree’s advice to salt only just before serving shows what black South Carolinians would call “an old hand,” referring to the wisdom of experience that makes good cooks.\textsuperscript{38} Salt toughens peas and beans, so it’s prudent to avoid salting them while they cook.

Mary Randolph’s The Virginia House-Wife of 1824 had long before waxed poetic about field peas: “There are many varieties of these peas,” she wrote, “the smaller kind are the most delicate. — Have them young and newly gathered, shell and boil them tender, pour them in a colander to drain; put some lard in a frying-pan, when it boils, mash the peas and fry them in a cake of a light brown; put in the dish with the crust uppermost, garnish with thin bits of fried bacon.”\textsuperscript{39} So much for California chef Jeremiah Tower’s laughable claim to have invented the bean cake in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{40}

Many cookbook authors would add their own tips through the years. Lettice Bryan advised in The Kentucky Housewife in 1839 to harvest the peas “when full grown, and the pods just beginning to turn yellow; then they have their full flavor, and are perfectly tender, and may be shelled without difficulty.”\textsuperscript{41}

But in just as many southern cookbooks, recipes for vegetables and fish are conspicuous in their absence. I am convinced that the cooks assumed that you would know the most important thing about both: don’t overcook them. Prior to the twentieth century, when rice is mentioned, it’s
mostly in Carolina and Georgia cookbooks, or the recipes clearly have a Carolina provenance.

I like to think that Miss Rutledge published her version of hoppin’ john, like many Charlestonians after her, as an attempt to get the old slave recipes down on paper before those days were over. Surely hoppin’ john had long been a favorite on the master’s table by the time her recipe appeared. We culinary historians generally agree that written recipes lag many years behind common usage. Rutledge and the Virginian Randolph were both from aristocratic families. When Randolph wrote about rice, she was writing about Carolina rice cookery. But she didn’t mention hoppin’ john, and it’s rarely mentioned outside the rice-growing lowcountry until much later.

Immediately after the Civil War, Mrs. Hill’s Southern Practical Cookery and Receipt Book appeared in Atlanta. Fish and vegetables are finally given their due. For asparagus, she warns: “Take them up as soon as done; too much cooking injures the color and flavor.” “Vegetables intended for dinner,” she wrote, “should be gathered early in the morning. A few only can be kept twelve hours without detriment... They lose their good appearance and flavor if cooked too long.” Her devilled crabs are made with “fresh olive oil”; frogs’ legs are broiled or fried, “their meat is beautifully white; the taste delicious.”

She also included her version of “Hopping John: Pick out the defective ones from a quart of dried peas; soak them several hours in tepid water; boil them with a chicken or piece of pickled pork until the peas are thoroughly done. In a separate stew-pan boil half as much rice dry; take the peas from the meat, mix them with the rice, fry a few minutes until dry. Season with salt and pepper.”

After the Civil War, however, much of the South was emasculated and poor. Many formerly wealthy landowners struggled on small plots of land, just like the African Americans. Coincidentally, industrialization and the modern railway system brought cheap canned and dried foods to areas where everyone had once eaten fresh, local produce. It was mostly after the war that simpler foods began to be embraced by the former gentry, when overcooked canned vegetables became the norm, when the South came to be defined as hog meat and hoe cake.

In summary, this is what we know: Field peas and rice came to Carolina from West Africa, along with Africans who knew how to cook both, and together. The dish spread throughout the South. Favored varieties of the peas were saved. New varieties appeared through selective breeding. Dishes of rice and beans are served throughout rice-growing lands as a sort good-luck dish, associated with the harvest of both grain and pulse. In the antebellum lowcountry rice fields, the New Year marked the ancient celebration of days becoming longer, and the one time when field hands could take a break from the backbreaking work of rice cultivation. As descendants of those enslaved moved inland, and Southerners, both black and white, spread throughout the land, the dish, and custom, traveled with them. I honestly don’t care what you call hoppin’ john, but you better serve it to me on New Year’s. I don’t think I’ve ever not had it, and I seem to have had pretty damn good luck.

### Hoppin’ John

1 cup small dried beans such as cowpeas or black-eyed
5 to 6 cups water
1 dried hot pepper (optional)
1 smoked ham hock
1 medium onion, chopped (about ¾ cup)
1 cup long-grain white rice

Wash and sort the peas. Place them in the saucepan, add the water, and discard any peas that float. Gently boil the peas with the pepper, ham hock, and onion, uncovered, until tender but not mushy—about 1½ hours—or until 2 cups of liquid remain. Add the rice to the pot, cover, and simmer over low heat for about 20 minutes, never lifting the lid.

Remove from the heat and allow to steam, still covered, for another 10 minutes. Remove the cover, fluff with a fork, and serve immediately.


### Notes

5. Ibid., 98.
14. See, especially, Carney, Black Rice.
22. Schneider, 718.
24. Native American companion planting methods are well documented. For practical instructions, see Sally Jean Cunningham, Great Garden Companions (Eminence, IN: Rodale Press, Inc., 1993).
25. Carney, Black Rice, 47.
28. Dr. Merle Shepard at the Clemson Coastal Research and Education Center near Charleston is a font of information about the heirloom plants of the lowcountry. He is a board member of the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation, whose mission is to “advance the sustainable restoration and preservation of Carolina Gold Rice and other heirloom grains and raise public awareness of the importance of historic ricelands and heirloom agriculture.” See http://www.carolinagoldricefoundation.org/, http://www.monticello.org/chp/index.html, http://www.southernexposure.com/index.html, Weaver, and Facciola.
30. Carney and Rosomoff, In the Shadow of Slavery, 73.
32. See Carney and Rosomoff, In the Shadow of Slavery, 149, and Facciola, 115.
33. Weaver, 150–151.
37. Tyree, 254.
38. Many old expressions such as this one are common in Charleston and the surrounding lowcountry. They are often based on Gullah, the creole language of descendants of enslaved Africans in the area, or on the original West African idioms.
42. See Hess in Randolph, xv.
43. Annabella P. Hill, Mrs. Hill’s Southern Practical Cookery and Receipt Book: A facsimile with a biographical sketch and history notes by Damon L. Fowler (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 179.
44. Hill, 196.