

## Broadening the Story: African American Foodways, A New Approach

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*High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America.* TV Series (4 episodes). Series Producer, *Shoshana Guy*; Producer, *Jonathan Classberry*; and Associate Producer, *Lauren Fulton*. TM & Company, Netflix Worldwide Entertainment, LLC., 2020.

*Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue* by Adrian Miller. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 301 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$30.00; eBook, \$24.99, audio book, audio CD; free e-exam copies via [uncpress.org](http://uncpress.org).

Access to and understanding of the significance of African American culinary history took a leap forward with the television series *High on the Hog* (2021). This four-part documentary, led by chef and avid culinary history student Stephen Satterfield, takes its viewers on a captivating journey. The series' opener steps into both positive and challenging aspects of the Black experience in America through a montage of images that create a not quite comfortable place for viewers. "Our Roots" (episode 1) establishes the historic timeline centering the series in Africa and the transatlantic slave trade. From there it sails to the southern colonies of "The Rice Kingdom" (episode 2), moves higher up the social ladder with "Our Founding Chefs" (episode 3), and in "Freedom" (episode 4) journeys across the country. Every episode introduces a multigenerational cast while presenting layers of historic and contemporary information, woven around a central theme, and they all leave open doors towards future study and research in their wake.

The series mixes three groups of people who transmit information to host Stephen Satterfield, who represents the hungry student to be found in many of us, on this amazing intellectual and emotional journey. Guiding the way first are the scholars, noted culinary and cultural historians, and cultural preservationists; the second group are bloggers, artists, chefs, and cooks in restaurants and kitchens both indoors and out; and the third group is made up of the elders, mentors, and community members who keep the history alive by living it every day.

Based on the book *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (2011) by Jessica B. Harris, PhD, the series begins in the Bight of Benin, on the West Coast of Africa, an active hub of the transatlantic slave trade. Satterfield is guided through the sights and sounds of the Dantokpa Market by Dr. Harris, whose fluent French, a language she taught, opens up the colonized world of West Africa. Together they share a lunch at *Saveurs du Benin*, owned by writer/chef Valérie Vinakpon, which showcases the foods of the diaspora and the foodways of Black

Americans. These opening scenes set the stage for how the series' creators will share their visions. The scene gives panoramic views to feast upon and also close-ups of things important for people seeking to elevate historic interpretation of African American foodways. The swift, precise knifework of a market woman cutting okra in the air demonstrates the skills of enslaved cooks, and an important technique that can be used in museum spaces where the European style of cutting boards and working flat is seen more often. Dr. Harris uses the marketplace and the restaurant as visual lecture halls clarifying information on staple ingredients like okra and yam, along with culturally blended dishes that contain ingredients native to the Americas (corn flour and chili peppers) created by African hands during the slave trade that are still a common part of diaspora tables.

Throughout the series, influential food bloggers and cultural preservationists bridge the way between elders, chefs, artists, and viewers. Their conversations with Satterfield highlight the reality that information and ingredients from Africa are now easily available online. Their on-going work and research shared via social media open avenues for public historians to glean new material and resources. The visual delights of delicious food created by chefs and cooks, who are preserving foods and techniques while creating new dishes, tempt us with smells and tastes we can only imagine, but one is not allowed to fantasize too much in any of the episodes because the realities of Black life are ever present. In episode 2, for example, the visual splendor of the Sea Islands and the Gullah vocal tones of Chef BJ Dennis sooth us until he speaks of the encroachment of golf clubs and resorts on ancestral lands. Worse is the jolt that comes later, perhaps jerking us from wanting the heads of cabbage growing out of ground that "wouldn't grow grass," but is now producing lush produce that cultural preservationist Gabrielle E. W. Carter is harvesting. The pain in her voice and the tears in her eyes are clear as she pauses and speaks of seventy and eighty-year-old relatives who live around her losing their land, as she also lost a good portion of her garden to eminent domain for highway expansion. Even as the episode was being filmed, they were packing and, by now, they are gone.

"The Rice Kingdom" may surprise many. Of the food crops often spoken of when discussing colonial history, rice is usually not included outside of the South. But for culinary historians in the middle and northern colonies, the information shared can lead to research and a new interpretation around rice, and a reason to use some of the rice recipes found in manuscript receipt books. This episode also finds Africa at home in a pot of okra stew using rice and okra to solidly connect West Africa to Soul Food.

Episodes 3 and 4 are no less rich. Raising the culinary bar from the slave cabins to the highest of the big houses, "Our Founding Chefs" shares the culinary genius of Hercules, the enslaved cook of George Washington, and James Hemings, owned by Thomas Jefferson. The height of the eighteenth-century table comes to life as Satterfield and culinary historian Adrian Miller sit, waiting to dine at a table laid with white linen and fine service, in a Georgian mansion setting. Innovation meets

historic house in this episode with an adapted stew stove at Hatcher Hall, a restaurant in Los Angeles, and a historic one at Jefferson's home, Monticello. A wonderful addition is the focus on economic independence and catering. The passing of elders in a Philadelphia family and a cache of old photos reveal luxury lifestyles and a place in the city's culinary pantheon that the descendants were unaware of. Chef Omar Tate uses their historic menus to return forgotten popular dishes to the table and sums up this transition of time beautifully, "A lot of times our history is dark or we view it as dark. But there was so much beauty between the lines." The world of Black caterers and confectioners in prominent nineteenth and twentieth century cities is under-researched across the board. This episode speaks to refinement and elegance many know little of, an area public historians could use to bring more diversity and local history to their communities.

"Freedom," episode 4, takes us to Texas, examining Juneteenth (June 19), barbecue, cowboys, westward expansion, and the final meal that pulls everything together. The sounds and movements of Texas Southern University's Ocean of Soul marching band take us back to the African aesthetic. The beat of the drums and the gyrating bodies of the drum majors link to those seen in Benin because, for many in Texas, football is church. Barbecue goes hand in hand with many aspects of African American culture, and churches play a big part, as do dusty trails and roads ridden by Black cowboys pushing meat still on the hoof. The episode also visits Black rodeos, where the skills needed for handling steers and broncos are for show, fun, and prestige. Satterfield and Adrian Miller, a barbecue judge, delve with delight into the history and presence of beef brisket, sausages, and other tasty bits of the pit and grill at Gatlin's Barbecue. The conversation and plates, especially those of beef, shift to the rugged often ignored history of Black cowboys.

Throughout the series Satterfield's openness, interest, and empathy work their way through the layers, nuisances, and emotional tight spots with ease. His curiosity and attentive listening bring clarity and focus together like a good sermon and his style is to be commended. Each episode contains numerous voices. Others include some challenging information, such as the question of whether Martha Washington's receipt book was actually made up of Hercules's recipes—it was not. Easing into the final leg of the journey is a beautiful sunset dancing off Houston's skyline, ultimately leading into the elegant dining room of Lucille's. It is here that chef/owner Chris Williams, the great-grandson of Lucille B. Smith, shares the history of this culinary shero, and crafts an intriguing meal mixing the flavors of Africa and the African diaspora, and finding inspiration and recipes from Toni Tipton-Martin's book, *Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking* (2019). Like her fellow culinary scholars and historians, Ms. Tipton-Martin's presence in the show invites those unfamiliar with her work to explore years of research and sources in *Jubilee*, and her other extraordinary work *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (2015).

Every episode of *High on the Hog* offers numerous gateways into the study of African American foodways and their impact on America. This series is a gift to

public and academic historians, docents, culinary professionals, and regular folk; everyone can enjoy and learn so much from the series, and each repeated viewing will bring something new to light. The books and articles written by the participating scholars alone would fill a good size shelf. The international array of participants found on blogs, social media, and other platforms, as well as chefs, beg us to remember that culinary history is a living thing. The chefs featured are only a few of those currently working to broaden the understanding of what African American cuisine was, is, and can be. As Chef Chris Williams, owner of Lucille's, says, regarding his own path (and I believe he speaks not only for himself, but for all who were involved in this endeavor), "I think often when we talk about our ancestors and our history, we tend to talk about them in a way that makes it feel like we have all been erased. . . . what's more true is . . . their legacy lives in us." *High on the Hog* is useable history, from techniques on how to use ingredients that lead us forward into practicing its living legacy. I look forward to Season 2.

In *High on the Hog* many are introduced to the culinary historian, writer, and barbecue judge Adrian Miller for the first time. His work already includes two well received books including his first, a James Beard Award winner, *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine One Plate at a Time* (2013). Miller's newest work, *Black Smoke*, is destined to elevate his place among culinary professionals even more. *Black Smoke*, like *High on the Hog*, is a timeline journey, but it is focused on African Americans and barbecue. While researching *Soul Food*, Miller became increasingly aware of barbecue on menus in a variety of African American restaurants. After seeing a popular television program featuring barbecue in which all the pit masters involved were white, and knowing the place of barbecue in African American foodways, Miller set out to discover what was driving the absence of Black pit masters he was seeing in competitions and television programs. The result of his journey is an easy-to-read but full work that provides a history of the Black presence in barbecue and reveals the systematic path that has led to the visual absence of African American pit masters on popular platforms of foodie culture.

*Black Smoke* is first a homage to generations of Black men and women who perfected this uniquely American area of meat work. Miller begins by tackling a sticky subject within the Black community, the ever-burning question of who really created barbecue. His research and direct writing style echoes what many are doing in the world of public history, giving equal inclusion to the three major colonial cultures. With clarity he reviews the cooking styles from Africa and Britain, as well as those of Indigenous Americans, that revolve around meat work. He details these techniques and shows how they merged to create a uniquely American culinary form. His focus on Native/Indigenous cooking is a wonderful tool for public historians to consider as we bring the original cultures of the Americas more into the historic narratives we share. From this early colonial setting, seated in Virginia, Miller moves to the work of enslaved and free cooks, and their place as the primary hands and brains in the world of traditional Virginia barbecue as it moved across the South, then the United States.

Using chapter headings like *Burnt Offerings* (chapter 3), and *Glowing Embers* (chapter 10), each of the ten chapters covers a major theme in the life of barbecue. Miller's research and documentation, newspaper clippings, illustrated flyers, photos, oral histories, and personal narratives add flavor to what otherwise would be a straightforward history book. He shows the when, where, how, and why of barbecue as an event, and discusses service, entertainment, sauces, and side dishes, all of which were the purview of African Americans until refrigeration changed the game. His approach allows public historians to step into the story at any point, even for those not located in the South. By using historic newspapers or political events, *Black Smoke* helps us to see barbecue in new ways and might inspire interpretative staff to pursue research that may allow them to bring barbecue into their historic foodways programming.

Visual modern references to several points Miller describes can be seen in *High on the Hog*, such as whole animal barbecuing in episode 2, when Gullah Chef BJ Dennis prepares a whole hog. Episode 4 gives voice to both the church barbecue and the entrepreneurial expansion into barbecue restaurant culture. Miller takes barbecue scholarship seriously and the notes and bibliography will help anyone interested to dive deeper into the subject without setting up a grill, although the recipes may tempt you into the kitchen. Whether it is re-creating a pit roast for a July 4th event or even a Sunday social with outdoor dining tables under the trees, programming ideas can be gleaned from both the book and the series. Together or separately *High on the Hog* and *Black Smoke* open paths to inclusive programming with very little effort and a whole lot of class.

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