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The Cuisine That Seasoned Charleston Is Finally Getting Its Due

By Tara Donaldson 6.4.2018

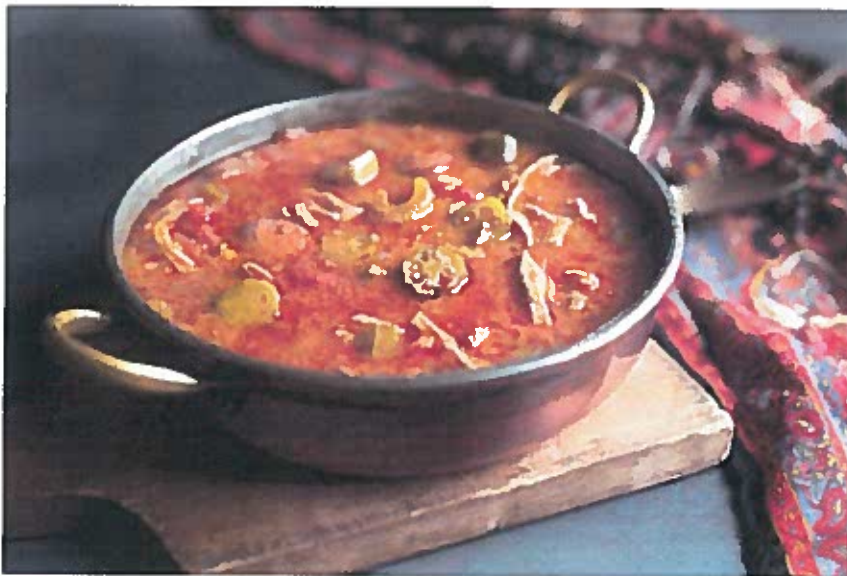


Photo by Aimee M. Lee/Shutterstock
Okra soup, a Gullah staple, is similar to gumbo but starts with a tomato base instead of a roux.

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In South Carolina’s Lowcountry, descendants of the Gullah-Geechee, Africans brought to the state during slavery, are reviving the cuisine that defined the city.

Celebrated Gullah chef Benjamin Dennis is certain about two things: Culture is the defining characteristic of a cuisine, and the roots of Southern fare run deeper than chicken fried to a perfect crisp accompanied with mac-and-cheese.

“Charleston would be nothing without the Gullah-Geechee culture—period,” Dennis says.

As he taste-tests a Gullah-style pasta salad made with freshly caught shrimp and in-season sweet peas in his Charleston catering kitchen, the 39-year-old Charleston native explains that Southern cuisine was shaped largely by the hands of enslaved Africans stirring the pots in colonists’ homes as early as the

1700s

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"We took the rustic soul of the African hands and the Native American [style of cooking] and made this special mash-up," Dennis says, reflecting on how Charleston's cuisine took shape. What sets Gullah-Geechee Southern cuisine apart from the more widely known grits and collard greens variety, says Dennis, who is of Gullah descent, is seasonality and seafood. It has influenced classic Charleston dishes like shrimp 'n'grits and she-crab soup.

Although Dennis, who's made it his mission to promote Gullah-Geechee cooking and has become one of the cuisine's most prominent figures, notes that representations of Gullah culture died down in recent years, he is seeing a renaissance. It's a cuisine that's currently experiencing renewed attention as the Southern city works to preserve its past.

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Now more than ever, Charleston is honing in on its history as an influx of settlers look to capitalize on the city's **growing popularity**, simultaneously threatening to disturb its cultural identity. With tourism booming, and as many as 28 new people moving into the Charleston metro area each day while developers rush to accommodate them, there's concern that some relics won't survive.

"There's a great fear that with more development and more people coming in that the land is going to be bought up and essentially displace a lot of the Gullah people and that that culture is at risk," says Ivy Farr McIntyre, Ph.D., director of communications for the South Carolina Historical Society. (In general, South Carolinians who claim this heritage refer to themselves as Gullah, whereas those from the Georgia region call themselves Geechee.)

Efforts to preserve the creole language spoken by the Gullah-Geechee community have even made it to the Ivy League—Harvard added a course to its African Language program late last year. When Charleston's South Carolina Historical Society Museum opens in September, its Gullah-focused gallery will showcase a dictionary that reveals words visitors long known, like gumbo, come from the Gullah word for okra.

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The popularity of Gullah-Geechee cuisine is picking up, too—it's even found its way into the hands of local brewers: Revelry Brewing's Cream Ale is brewed with grits grown by Geechee Boy Mill. At Husk restaurant, home to James Beard

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Award-winning chef Sean Brock, the limited edition Reezy Peezy, Red Bay Breezy beer is loosely based on a Gullah rice and peas plate.

Southern cuisine had its beginnings in western Africa, where okra went with everything and rice was a way of life. The Gullah-Geechee, descendants of enslaved Africans brought to South Carolina's Lowcountry and the Sea Islands of Georgia from places like Sierra Leone and Liberia for their knowledge of rice cultivation, were practicing farm-to-table cooking long before it was hip.



Photo by Serge Skitin/Shutterstock

A shrimp boat on Shem Creek in Charleston. Fresh, seasonal seafood is a staple of Gullah-Geechee cuisine.

"Seasonality, especially for those who still live in the countryside, is important because it makes the cuisine special," says Dennis, who cooks Carolina blue crab when he can get it from James Island's Louie the crab man. Louie, who Dennis describes as "an old-school Gullah dude" doesn't have a storefront, but if you find him after he's caught something, you're in business. "It comes straight out the creek, straight to your hand."

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These trips around Charleston to source fresh fare for Gullah-Geechee meals are rich and rooted in tradition, which guests at the city's French Quarter Inn can now experience too.

A lack of mainstream availability for Gullah-Geechee cuisine led the boutique hotel in Charleston's Historic District to launch an immersive culinary

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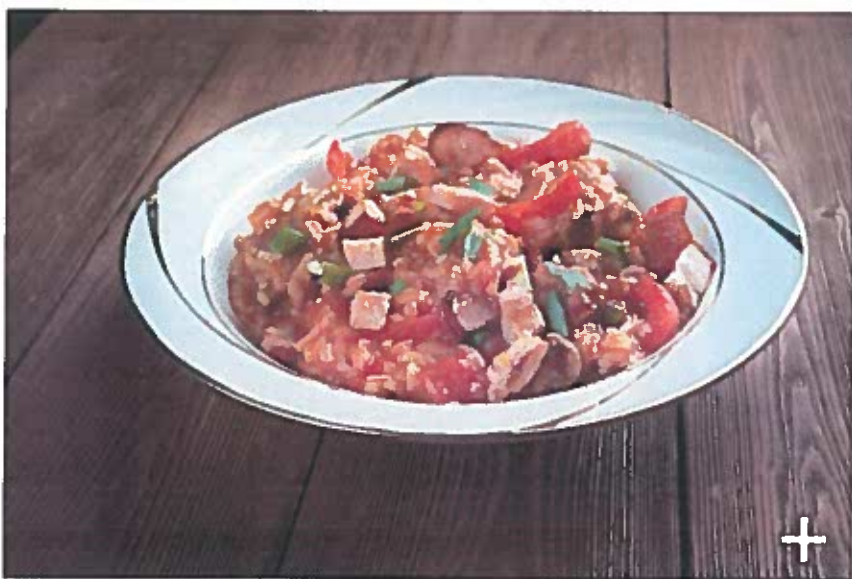
experience this year, where chef Dennis takes interested parties through his process and shares a lesson in both culture and cooking.

"Although some restaurants do incorporate touches of Gullah cuisine and cooking techniques into their meals, we noticed there were no Gullah-specific restaurants," says Carlo Carroccia, dual hotel manager of French Quarter Inn and the Spectator Hotel, explaining that the dishes often make up just a small section of a menu.

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Joining Dennis for the hotel's culinary excursion at the onset of summer means okra's on hand to make his personal favorite Gullah dish, okra soup. It's a melee of ingredients that can shape shift depending on the time of year.



Courtesy of Shutterstock/Fanfa

Charleston red rice—a Gullah-Geechee classic made with tomato paste and bacon

The excursion starts with a 20-minute drive out of downtown Charleston, past the grand oak trees and Spanish moss of local postcard fame, to Joseph Field's Farm on John's Island. From Fields, a Gullah farmer whose family has owned this land since the 1850s, guests gather fresh okra, butter beans, corn, and tomatoes for the soup. Then it's on to a local heritage farm for sustainably made smoked pork neckbone and to the docks for fresh shrimp from a boat called *Miss Lady*.

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Dinner is served following a private cooking lesson with Dennis at a local Charleston home. Traditionally, a perfect Gullah meal—both today and 100 years back—would be sandwiched between two distinct phrases: "*E time ta eat*," when supper is served, followed by "*Boi dat ting bussin*," if it hit the spot.

While more mom-and-pop than mainstream, some Gullah-run restaurants remain, with several handed down African-origin recipes on the menu. Hannibal's Kitchen is known for its crab rice, while Bertha's Kitchen is where Dennis finds his favorite red rice—a Charleston classic made with tomato paste and bacon.

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Gullah-Geechee food is flavor without the frills. All it takes Dennis to work up a taste nearly as rich and layered as the people who nurtured it, is salt, pepper, and thyme. “The most important thing to the cuisine is proper seasoning and the right person stirring the pot,” confirms Gullah-Geechee Nation spokesperson Marquette Goodwine, who goes by Queen Quet.

That the cuisine, while easily among the oldest to have shaped Charleston's culinary identity, is finally getting the recognition it's earned, isn't lost on Goodwine. “The world is now seeing our strength and wants to taste our cuisine, but they don't realize all the healing and empowering energy that is within the pots,” she says. “This has kept us and our culture alive—and it will continue to do so.”

Where to try Gullah dishes in Charleston

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Hannibal's Kitchen: Though its name may not immediately conjure warm and fuzzy feelings, that's precisely what those who seek out the Southern-food staple go for. This finery-free, family owned restaurant says it's been “feeding the soul of the city” for more than 40 years. As anyone will tell you, go there for the crab rice.

Bertha's Kitchen: Having forgone frills to focus on good homestyle Southern cooking, Bertha's Kitchen calls many both inside and out of the Gullah-Geechee community to sample its favored food. It has been named an American Classic by the James Beard Foundation, and the fried fish and red rice are must tastes.

Martha Lou's: A favorite for its fried chicken for those looking for another Southern cuisine staple, this eatery still holds a place with those in the Gullah-Geechee community. Here, guests will find okra soup and gibleet rice, two dishes passed down from the community's African roots.

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