

## “Our Story is Told Through Our Plates’: Southern Foodways”

### Overview:

This lesson provides students an overview of southern foodways, introducing students to the cultural combinations that have served as the backbone for the region’s diverse cuisines. It focuses on the role that colonialism and slavery played in shaping the region’s food systems, as well as on the role that food has played in protests and transformations throughout Southern history. This lesson also gives a primer to food studies, showing students the ways in which food is tied to history, culture, and memory.

### Grades

4-8

### Essential Questions

- What are some of the key cultural combinations that have shaped Southern Foodways?
- Why is it important for us to understand foodways?
- Who were the “Greensboro Four,” and how would you characterize them?
- Who is Leah Chase, and what is her philosophy around food?

### Materials

- Southern Foodways accompanying Powerpoint, available at <https://k12database.unc.edu/files/2020/06/SouthernFoodwaysPPTsm.pdf>
  - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
  - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to [CarolinaK12@unc.edu](mailto:CarolinaK12@unc.edu)

### Duration

60 minutes

### Preparation

There is no specific preparation needed, but if students have already studied Southern history – in particular, if they have studied colonialism, slavery, and Jim Crow – then they will be able to make connections more easily.

### Procedure

#### Introductory Brainstorming [10-15 minutes]

1. Ask students to brainstorm foods that they associate with the south. Write these down on the board as students call them out. They may name things like: collards, okra, sweet potatoes, fried chicken, grits, biscuits, pimento cheese, pecan pie, cornbread, black-eyed peas, sweet tea, pork, barbeque, soul food, Cajun food, creole food, or they may name things that are specific to their family, community, or town. Remind them that there aren’t any wrong answers. Point out there is always an ongoing argument about what counts as southern food, because there is an ongoing argument over whose stories get to be told, and whose identity counts as “authentically” southern. Throughout the class session, leave this list up and keep adding to it as new foods are mentioned – this will help to break down stereotypes about what counts as “Southern.”
2. Tell students you’re going to be making a second list. Ask them to brainstorm events or occasions that they might associate with food. They might name things like: specific holidays, barbeques, pig pickin’s, funerals, picnics, state fairs, etc. Some students might again name holidays specific to their family or extended

community. Ask them if any of their families have particular food traditions (i.e., a particular recipe someone in the family makes, a weekly food tradition such as “Friday pizza night,” etc.? Affirm the importance of these traditions, even when seemingly simple, and explain to them that “foodways” are not just about what we eat, but about the rituals that surround food.

### Slavery, Colonialism, and Food [20 minutes]

3. Pull up the PowerPoint presentation and go to slide 2. Tell students that they are going to watch a short clip of Michael Twitty, a food historian, talking about slavery, food, and the roots of southern foodways. Instruct them to both listen and watch carefully, since they will be seeing some scenes where he is using the same cooking tools and methods that would have been used during the colonial era. (Play the video at <https://www.pbs.org/video/the-cooking-gene-michael-twitty-baqmq2/> until 4:43.) Afterwards, discuss:
  - What struck you, or what did you find interesting, from that clip?
  - What is the biggest misconception about Southern food?
  - According to Twitty, how is food an example of agency and resistance when it comes to enslaved people?
  - What examples did Twitty offer to illustrate how food is so connected to history and culture?
  - What did you notice about the kitchen Mr. Twitty was using?
  - How does Twitty describe “Black cooking?” What does he mean when he says feeding people is spiritual?
  - What specific ingredients was he cooking, and where did he get them?
    - Draw students’ attention to the image of the recreated “slave garden,” and tell them that enslaved people in America often grew their own food in order to supplement the insufficient rations they were given. Invite students to share their reactions to this.
  - In what ways does labor for preparing meals extend far beyond the kitchen?
    - Discuss with students how having and preparing food includes farming, foraging, hunting, fishing, raising and butchering animals, and processing foods.
  - This clip started with Mr. Twitty commenting that “Food is a way we can begin to understand ourselves and our neighbors on a much deeper level.” What do you think he meant?
4. Tell students that you’re going to show them a few slides, and have them guess what connects all of the foods on each slide to one other.
  - Begin with slide 3. After students have guessed, tell them that slide 3 is all foods that are native to the Americas (turkey, corn, beans, squash).
  - Repeat this with slide 4 (which shows foods that were brought over to Americas from West Africa during the slave trade: watermelon, yams, okra, black eyed peas, rice).
  - Repeat this with slide 5 (which shows foods that colonialists brought with them from Europe: wheat, cabbage, turnips, radishes, beef, pork). Ask the students to compare the foods on this slide to the list they made earlier of southern foods, to see how Southern food draws from different continents.
5. Move on to slide 6. Tell students that just as each of these groups had specific foods they brought to the American table, each one also had specific cooking techniques that they brought with them. Ask students what’s going on in this picture (a pit barbeque getting set up). Explain to them that barbequing was a technique that enslaved West Africans brought with them to the American South, although the pigs they were barbequing originated in Europe. Tell them there are many other examples of how the south became a place for creative cultural combinations, like French cooking techniques being used with West African ingredients in Creole cooking.
6. Switch to slide 7, and explain that each group also brought specific agricultural practices with them. The picture on the left is of enslaved women in a rice field; tell students that it was only because of the

agricultural knowledge of enslaved people that plantations in South Carolina and Georgia were able to successfully produce rice. Then tell students that the picture on the right is of a “three sisters” garden, with squash, corn, and beans planted together. It was a traditional form of Native American/indigenous farming that was displaced by colonists who instead planted monoculture fields of wheat, rice, and tobacco. Remind them that these cultures weren’t interacting with each other in a power vacuum. But while enslaved people and indigenous culinary traditions were suppressed and co-opted by colonists and antebellum slaveholders, they still found ways to sustain their traditions and to innovate under oppressive conditions. This was a form of resistance that it is important to acknowledge and celebrate, just as Michael Twitty pointed out in the clip previously viewed.

5. Switch to [slide 8](#), and remind students that these three main cultural groups you’ve been discussing – West African, European, and Native American – are not the only ones whose traditions are represented in Southern Food. Explain that what you’ve been discussing is one of the main factors that goes into shaping a regional cuisine: *What cultures are represented, and what do they each bring - what ingredients, what cooking techniques, and what agricultural practices?*
6. Switch to [slide 9](#), and ask students to brainstorm, as a class, what other variables shape a region’s foodways. Step away from the PowerPoint for about 10 minutes to brainstorm on the board students’ ideas. Variables to consider include:
  - What is the land and climate like? (What plants will grow well here? Is there pastureland, rivers, or good soil? Explain to students that the diverse climate of the south adds to the diversity of southern cuisine.)
  - What is the socioeconomic structure? (Is this society wealthy or poor, rural or urban?)
  - Who is primarily doing the cooking? (Men or women? The wealthy or the poor? Enslaved or free?)
  - What kind of food do people need? (Something easy and quick? That you can bring with you and eat in the fields, or while hunting? That will last all winter?)
  - Does everyone have the same access to food? (In the American South, whites restricted food access for enslaved people and Native Americans.)

Wrap up this exercise by pointing out to students that there is a combination of practical and cultural factors that have shaped southern foodways.

### **Protest, Transformation, and Community [20 minutes]**

7. Focus students on the fact that even though foodways in the American South tell a story of colonialism and enslavement, as previously mentioned, it foodways were also a form of agency and resistance – and also of transformation and community. Ask students if they can think of any examples of food or restaurants being sites of change and/or resistance.
8. Go to [slide 11](#). Explain to them that on Feb. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1960, these four courageous college students - Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, William Smith, and Clarence Henderson - sat at the whites-only counter at Woolworth’s, where they were refused service because of the color of their skin, until the shop closed for the day. They kept coming back every day to do the same thing with more and more fellow students and protesters, eventually hundreds, and in July 1960 the lunch counter was integrated. Ask them to observe the photograph and point out anything that stands out to them about it. They may note that there is a black man behind the counter – he was allowed to make and serve food, but not to sit and eat at the counter. Remind them that this racial segregation targeted not only black communities in the South, but also Native American. (Teachers may also want to share additional examples, such as the 1957 protest in Durham at the segregated [Royal Ice Cream Company](#) or the [Colonial Drug lunch counter sit-in in Chapel Hill](#).)

9. Go to [slide 12](#), and tell students that you are going to explore another example of a restaurant as a site of change – this time by looking at a black-owned restaurant in New Orleans called Dooky Chase’s. Play the 7-minute video at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mqk9\\_TEgsw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mqk9_TEgsw). (If pressed for time, it can also be started at 2:10.)

Relatedly, teachers can show “First Lady of Barbeque” and lead a similar discussion: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx7YmXMK5bU&list=PLtj6C65v\\_tfT9XZGd\\_aj6-4zWwo1LZu2W&index=7](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx7YmXMK5bU&list=PLtj6C65v_tfT9XZGd_aj6-4zWwo1LZu2W&index=7)

10. After showing either or both clips, ask students what struck them. Ask them to also list the foods they saw in the video, and whether they see overlaps with the list of southern foods they made at the start of class. Then, ask them to discuss what role they see food playing based on this clip. Drawing on the clip, they may mention things like:
- Food is about cultural identity – what we eat is who we are, even if that is a *combination* of identities.
  - Food is about memory - it tells the story of a people’s past.
  - Food connects to spirit – it fills the soul, comforts, inspires, “food is love,” etc.
  - Food can nurture political and societal change – Chase’s was used for meetings during the Civil Rights Movement.
  - Food can build community – post-Katrina, Chase’s restaurant was an important symbol of hope; Grady’s is also an obvious place where people gather and have been touched/felt cared for
11. Ask students why they think that restaurants are such powerful sites for protest. Direct them back to the idea that food is about *identity*, and that we bond together and claim people as part of our community by eating with them. Tell the students that there are many examples like Dooky Chase’s throughout the south where restaurants have been gathering places for people who are seeking to connect and to make a change or who want to carve out spaces from which to create a different kind of South for their children.

### **Creative Combinations [10 minutes]**

12. Put up [slide 13](#). Tell your class that you are now going to be thinking about the creative combinations that make the southern food scene today so vibrant and diverse. Describe to them what they are seeing in the photographs on the slide:
- Tacos al Pastor: These tacos are made using a technique of cooking meat on a rotisserie that originated in the Middle East, was adopted in Mexico, and now is being used throughout the South.
  - Collard sandwiches: These were invented by Lumbee restaurant owners Glenn and Dorsey Hunt who wanted to create a meal that textile workers could easily eat on their breaks, and now they’re popular throughout NC.
  - Vegan Soul Food: This takes a traditional African American southern cuisine and translates it to work without meat, dairy, or eggs.
  - Transplanting Traditions: This is one of a number of farms in North Carolina run by communities of refugees from Southeast Asia. They grow a combination of Asian and American (“American”!) vegetables and herbs that work well in this climate.
  - \*\*Ideally, teachers will include examples from your own local area as well.\*\*
13. Ask students what these various examples show us about food in the south today. Pose the question “What *is* Southern food? Who cooks southern food? Who owns it?” and work them towards the answer “all of us!” Teasing out this question together, affirm that there are endless ways to be authentically southern. Foodways are an opportunity for people to negotiate, express, and embrace their identities – their southern identities, but also complex histories of their families and communities.