

Why the African American museum's food focus will go beyond soul

By Maura

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Of course, there will be soul food. But that's not the soul of the foodways exhibition at the upcoming National Museum of African American History and Culture.

"We wanted to break up the idea that there's one type of food, and that African Americans all eat that type of food," said curator Joanne Hyppolite. "African Americans have been involved in perfecting a number of American cuisines. Because literally, they were always in everyone's kitchen. It's way more diverse than soul food."

One area of focus? Oysters.

Catching, shucking and selling oysters was a way for African Americans to make a living. "It's an industry they've been involved in from sea to table," Hyppolite said. Curators collected artifacts that were used by African American oystermen and vendors, including an oyster basket, culling hammer and shucking bucket, as well as menus from Thomas Downing's Oyster House, a famous New York restaurant that attracted prominent white patrons. Many of the artifacts were purchased at a local antique store.

Street vendors, from the early 20th century to Baltimore's present-day Arabbers, are another area of concentration. The museum has amassed a series of old postcards depicting African American fruit sellers, and an audiovisual component in the exhibition will include field recordings of their unique cries, which have been preserved by the Library of Congress.

That doesn't mean soul food will be absent from the exhibition. One item on display of particular significance to locals is a pot from the longtime soul food restaurant Florida Avenue Grill.

"They would be extremely proud," said Lacey C. Wilson Jr., whose parents founded the Florida Avenue Grill in 1944. The younger Wilson, now 80, took over the restaurant from 1970 to 2005, when he sold it to Imar Hutchins. He said the fact that the museum acquired a collard greens pot was especially meaningful: "It was a staple there for 60 years."

Collards also speak to the evolution of soul food, Hyppolite said. After all, “now they have a vegan version.”

The foodways exhibition is part of the Cultural Expressions Gallery, which will also include artifacts relating to fashion, crafts, dance and language. Within the foodways portion of the exhibition, there will be three areas of focus, divided regionally: The North will encompass the oyster industry; the agricultural South will focus on collard greens; and the Creole South will examine the cuisine of New Orleans and diaspora Caribbean communities, with an emphasis on red beans and rice.

Those three topic areas align with the stations in the museum’s restaurant, North Star Cafe, named for the beacon in the sky that escaped slaves followed to freedom. But in the cafe, there will be one more area of focus: The West. That means there will be barbecue in the restaurant, but not in the museum — a decision that may raise the hackles of some barbecue traditionalists.

“We had it slated, and then we just ran out of space,” Hyppolite said.

Throughout all of the topic areas, the museum will tell the stories of famous African Americans such as Hercules, George Washington’s enslaved cook, and New Orleans chef Leah Chase, whose jacket and cookbook will be on exhibit. Curators are also beginning to amass a collection of early cookbooks and other culinary literature, such as “The Negro Motorist Green-Book,” which functioned as an early Michelin guide for African American travelers, telling them which restaurants and hotels were safe to visit during segregation.

There are food-related objects elsewhere in the museum, too. An exhibition on segregation includes stools from the Greensboro, N.C., sit-in, which will be displayed in a re-creation of the lunch counter where the demonstration took place. Also in that exhibition are displays of the stereotypical images of African Americans — like the “mammy” caricature — that were often depicted on food packaging and advertisements, as well as throughout pop culture.

“In some instances they were [depicted] to endorse the quality of the food,” said guest curator Spencer Crew. In others, “they used stereotypical imagery to get people to chuckle.”

The museum’s collection of food artifacts is small: Only 74 items out of the 37,000 total. But it is growing: Now that the opening exhibitions are finalized, Hyppolite says curators can move on to what they call “Day 2” collecting, or sourcing a broader selection of objects for future exhibitions. Hyppolite’s goal is to acquire an object or cooking implement from every famous African American chef, whether it’s a handwritten recipe, a pot, a hat or a menu.

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Still, there are difficulties in collecting culinary artifacts for a museum.

“Food smells, and food things attract pests. So we have to think very strategically when we’re collecting cooking implements,” Hyppolite said. “We don’t want pests in our collection because then they go to other parts of the collection and damage those areas.”

That was something they had to consider when acquiring the Florida Avenue Grill pot. It had to be cleaned, but not *too* much.

“That used pot has a lot of life,” said Michèle Gates Moresi, curator of collections. “The grime and the grease is part of the story.”

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