



Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time

Adrian Miller

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2014 James Beard Foundation Book Award, Reference and Scholarship

Honor Book for Nonfiction, Black Caucus of the American Library Association

In this insightful and eclectic history, Adrian Miller delves into the influences, ingredients, and innovations that make up the soul food tradition. Focusing each chapter on the culinary and social history of one dish--such as fried chicken, chitlins, yams, greens, and "red drinks"--Miller uncovers how it got on the soul food plate and what it means for African American culture and identity.

Miller argues that the story is more complex and surprising than commonly thought. Four centuries in the making, and fusing European, Native American, and West African cuisines, soul food--in all its fried, pork-infused, and sugary glory--is but one aspect of African American culinary heritage. Miller discusses how soul food has become incorporated into American culture and explores its connections to identity politics, bad health raps, and healthier alternatives. This refreshing look at one of America's most celebrated, mythologized, and maligned cuisines is enriched by spirited sidebars, photographs, and twenty-two recipes.

Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time Details

Date : Published August 15th 2013 by University of North Carolina Press (first published January 1st 2013)

ISBN : 9781469607627

Author : Adrian Miller

Format : Hardcover 333 pages

Genre : Food and Drink, Food, History, Nonfiction, Food History, Cooking, Cookbooks, Food Writing

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From Reader Review Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time for online ebook

Redsteve says

Soul Food is a fascinating book on many levels, and covers a blank spot in my food history knowledge (I have to admit that, with some limited exceptions, my knowledge of North American food history pretty much stops at 1776). The author covers social, economic and scientific changes in foods eaten by “African Americans who left the Black Belt region of the south, settled across a nation and reestablished and reinterpreted the Black Belt South’s celebration foods in their new homes.” He actually goes back to food origins in medieval Africa (based on Arabic texts from the period), introduction of new plants and animals to Africa and then to North American and the Caribbean, the Middle Passage, the slave period, sharecropping, the eventual diaspora to the North (and eventually the rest of the US – with the attendant move to an urban environment), the linking of Soul Food to Black Power and the current (Soul Food was published in 2013) ambivalent relationship that “black America” has with Soul Food. I heartily recommend this book, both as a general text and also to learn about specific cultural factors – why the chicken is called the Gospel Bird, the white vs. yellow cornmeal conflict, the importance of red drinks, the sinful background (and eventual rehabilitation) of the fish fry and more. Note: in an attempt to cover a more specific culture, Miller deliberately did not include food traditions specific to the Lowcountry (South Carolina, Georgia), Creole (Gulf Coast) or Chesapeake regions – so, once again, there goes the one area (Creole) that I had some knowledge of prior to reading Soul Food.

David Ward says

Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time by Adrian Miller (UNC Press 2013)(641.59296). Nicely done, Adrian Miller! You made this native white southerner's mouth water. I grew up eating the same foods that the author described so eloquently and so lovingly. When I was in my thirties, it suddenly dawned on me one day that I had been eating "soul food" all of my life, and that my family just called our daily cuisine (and cuisine of choice) "food!" Author Miller's most salient point is that the daily cuisine of black and white southerners converged in the 1860's during and after the War of Northern Aggression. I'm thankful that this is so. My rating: 7.5/10, finished 7/2/14.

Alexandra Sundarsingh says

I learned an incredible amount from this book - about the food of West Africa, and African Americans all over the United States. What I think Miller does best is highlight the incredible and unexpected diversity of soul food. It is not the deep fried stereotype we lean on, but rather a framework in which foods can be organized. The most profound revelation was also the most timely: if cuisines in America are the celebration foods of immigrants, changed for their new home, then we have a lot of work to do on integrating people and learning about each other. That can start by sitting down across the table.

Jeremy Hornik says

A good book. Basically a history of black people in America told through the plate. Maybe overlong? The author's voice is sort of knowingly highfalutin... a little pompous, a little jokey, broadly winking at every drop into vernacular. But he's done a ton of research, and he breaks it up with comments from restaurateurs and other foodies, and the device of breaking the book up dish by dish (with recipes!) sustained better than I feared it might. Between slavery, the diaspora, and the complicated cultural history of the US, there's a lot of ground to cover, and if it's not perfect, it's ambitious and thoughtful and personal all at once.

Also: a tough book to read while I'm trying to lose weight. Welp.

Pam says

Defining "soul food" is a task that others have attempted; yet a precise definition remains elusive. Author and "soul foodie" Adrian Miller meticulously and lovingly researches the complex history and traditions of this uniquely American cuisine. Miller compares and contrasts soul food with southern and down home cooking. He does this through planning a hypothetical, traditional soul food meal and then dedicating an entire chapter to each of its components. With this method, Miller weaves African American culinary history from West Africa, the Atlantic slave trade, the antebellum era, post Civil War poverty across the South, Jim Crow, the Great Migration, the Civil Rights era, to modern attempts to revive soul food. Other ethnic foods have found a niche in the American fast food and medium food markets (think Olive Garden, Applebees as "medium"). Yet soul food remains largely regulated to homes, church dinners, and small, local restaurants. Miller's last chapter is appropriately titled, "Whither Soul Food?" as he explores the future of soul food. Yes, there are recipes at the conclusion of each chapter! This is an excellent history book with flavor. I recommend this for book clubs for adults and teens, as the meetings could include sharing of recipes from the book.

Summer says

I loved this book. It took a long time to read because it was chock FULL of facts. I learned something new on nearly every page. Did you know Macaroni and Cheese used to be confined to the fanciest of aristocratic tables? Did you know potatoes aren't native to Ireland? Did you know hot sauce was touted as medicine to ward off cholera?

It never would have OCCURRED to me to think of any possible West African spiritual connection to the redness of a red drink. I just assumed people drank red drinks due to their deliciousness. But what we consider delicious is complicated and informed by a million sneaky cultural factors.

Mr. Miller is a fantastic writer and exhaustive researcher. I must applaud the way he structures his book. Acknowledging that "soul food" can have blurry borders, he picks ten items of his personal preference and talks the reader through his meal one item at a time. He focuses on hard science and cites every source. (The bibliography is 25 pages long) He also entertains the reader with personal stories of his travels through kitchens and restaurants in modern day America.

I can't say enough good things about this book. If you have even the slightest interest in American history or

foodways, you will love this. If you've ever read Michael Pollan, it's a no-brainer. The only criticism I can offer is they should have printed the pictures in color. I'm sure these black and white pics of pear cobbler aren't doing it justice.

Phil Ross says

Excellent job by an intelligent, witty "recovering lawyer." Entertaining and informative, yet easy to read. This guy took time from his professional life to do his homework, visiting every size and kind of soul-food eateries nationwide. He is a true gourmand who has ably conveyed his love and knowledge of various dishes into an educational experience for readers without condescension. In this day and age of a Baby Boomer population exploding into old age, larger type would've been preferred, though.

Melanie says

Lots to learn about the fusion of West African, Western European, and Native American culinary elements behind the home cooking and comfort food of my childhood. I discovered that some of what I thought were my own Southern family's peculiar tastes (for example, accompanying dishes with bites of a fresh raw hot pepper) are actually regional foodways with a long and interesting history. There's lots of important history in the early chapters, too, about how restricting food access and assistance to poor blacks post-Civil War and during the Civil Rights Movement was a deliberate attempt by Southern authorities to undermine political organizing in black communities--which brings to mind the overwhelming present-day rejection by Southern states of federal safety net programs for low-income communities including SNAP and Medicaid expansion. These things aren't unrelated.

Mary says

This was a scholarly, yet accessible, look at the evolution of specific foods that make up what the author defines as "the soul food plate." He makes it clear though that other dishes could have been chosen as well (a second helpings sequel perhaps?)

A lot of research clearly went into this book (there is a huge bibliography) and numerous viewpoints are presented on various questions. What makes the book really enjoyable though is the strong voice of the author. He is opinionated and clearly LOVES the food he is talking about. This is a fascinating look at a plate-full of American food culture.

Margaret Sankey says

I love good food history. Miller examines (with scholarly footnotes) iconic soul food dishes, with marvelous sidelights like the politicizing of the term "soul food" in the 1960s, the Orisha connections to chicken (which I knew from Sundiata) and black-eyed peas, the off-post restaurants in Vietnam serving chitlins and red Kool-Aid to African-American soldiers, the sweet-savory cornbread divide, the Harlem Macaroni Factory

(and macaroni and cheese), Nilla Wafer's advertising in black newspapers (which leads to banana pudding), Tabasco in Space! and the total inseparability of church and plate. Which all makes me miss Whispering Oaks in Opelika, AL, where the waitress would lean down and pronounce, "Honey, you're too thin. We have pie."

Cindy Dyson Eitelman says

Loved it. Did you know that in the 1700s, English aristocrats adored chitlins? In slavery days, chitlins were eaten as much in the Big House as in the slave cabins and they weren't embarrassed about it. I'm sure my ancestors (poor whites; couldn't afford slaves) ate them. I think I might have eaten them once, but I don't remember exactly.

Since the book is about the origin and evolution of soul food in America, there are other dishes you'd expect like fried chicken, greens, and candied sweet potatoes. He describes each dish in a separate chapter, not skimping on how they became "black food" during and after the diaspora. But he also includes dishes I'd never have considered iconically soulful, like macaroni and cheese--oh, sorry--mac 'n cheese--hot sauce, and "red drinks." Who'd have thunk it?

Cool book. I don't expect to be trying any of his recipes. For one thing, I am constitutionally unable to put sugar in corn bread. My Mom would kill me. Some of the other dishes are things I love, like greens, but I've learned to like them just as much without meat as a seasoning. But I bet I'd love every single one.

Note: it's not a recipe book--it just includes one or two recipes at the end of each chapter, lagniappe.

Kristi says

Great scholarship & lively writing in this food history!

Carla says

Denver author.

Cynthia says

A wonderfully engaging look at the history and present of foods that came to define a culture. Miller's writing is warmly charming but thoroughly scholarly. He clearly both knows and loves his subject. Of course, like most good food histories, it teaches about more than food. The culture associated with the dishes described comes alive. Definitely highly recommend this book.

Bookworm says

Good read about soul food. I was intrigued by the concept of the book. Never having been to the South and not really knowing people well enough to have them cook "soul food" for me (or be in a place with good, legitimate soul food), this seemed like an interesting pick up. Author Miller takes the reader through the history of what is called soul food, from the influence of trade routes, slavery and the passage of time.

Miller talks about why he included certain foods but not others in his writing. From other reviews I see some disagree, but what he does write about is an interesting history. First he discusses the history of food, from what Africans ate to what slaves ate on the ships bringing them to North America to what they ate in the fields of plantations. Then, after the Civil War we see how migration of blacks from the South to the North brings change, due to what is available, what they can afford, the influence of other groups (Italian immigrants for example).

Then Miller takes a look at particular foods, one by one. Cornbread, Kool-Aid, greens, fried chicken and macaroni and cheese are just some of the items included. Each chapter is then pretty formulaic: Miller looks at the history of each food item, from how and why the very basic plants (corn, chickens, the vegetables that are considered "greens"), become part of the diet to how they are made and references to historical recipes.

This part was probably the most fascinating to me. It was interesting to see what foods were used in Africa and what were brought by traders there to see the transformation and adaptation of foods that are used on the slavery plantations. Then we start seeing the modern preparations, including to how and if they change due to pricing, desire (health reasons are often mentioned as to why there's been some movement to vegetarian/vegan options as well as increasing choices to baked/grilled/steamed options vs. just fried).

Miller may discuss a bit as to restaurants and cooks who serve such items and why they prepare them so. There are many issues that are touched upon in this book: while it's about soul food, it's also a little bit about the health concerns that often face the black/African-American communities. There is some discussion about how greens used to be grown for slave consumption in little gardens and over time that has been lost due to moving to cities or areas that are clearly food deserts. And how food was used as just another tool for slave owners to use in control.

The book also looks at the stereotypes (fried chicken, watermelon, etc.) and how they arose over time. Much of it, unsurprisingly, has origins back in the times of slavery, but the author also traces how over time they change and become embedded as stereotypes. We also see how black churches become important for feeding those in need (this will be notable later when Miller discusses fried chicken).

Overall I thought it was a good read. I don't know a lot about the topic so I couldn't say where Miller might be missing anything, especially as it seems he REALLY did his work and everything is so detailed in the research.

I would recommend keeping in mind that it is NOT a cookbook (there are recipes, but that's not the point of the book. It's more of a history book than cookbook). I'd also say that as the book becomes more formulaic in its approach by looking at one food item=one chapter, it loses some of its narrative voice that was present in the beginning. Which is fine for the purposes of the book (better for organization) but there is a shift in the writing style (although not the details and research).

Definitely recommend it as a read. I probably wouldn't buy it unless you're interested in soul food

specifically or a historian on food and/or blacks and African-Americans. It's not a cookbook but it may be a good complement for a cook's shelf.
