Neo Soul

These soulful summer sides reconnect us with our culinary roots: true soul food that's fresh, green and, yes, healthy.

May 27, 2008 By Nicole Joseph

Whether sipping sweet tea on a shady porch while a great-aunt recalls a bygone era, driving Down South to a family reunion or taking a family vacation in a place that played an important role in black history, the sultry days of summer are when many of us explore our roots.

An often neglected source of our culinary history is the produce stand. While many of us associate soul food with fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and Aunt Audrey's double-butter pound cake, its origins are actually on our forebears' farms, where they grew their own string beans, black-eyed peas and, yes, even poultry—organically. Now that so many of us have been replanted in concrete, it can be difficult to relate to our ancestors' love of the soil—and their early-morning trips into the backyard garden, where they picked only the freshest, vine-ripened food for the family to eat that day.

We asked Oakland, California, chef Bryant Terry, coauthor of *Grub: Ideas for an Urban Organic Kitchen*, to chew the fat with us about black America's fresh and tasty cooking traditions. Terry, 34, schools us on soul food's healthy legacy, how we can reclaim our culinary heritage, and his new soul food book, as yet untitled, due out next year.

When did you begin your love affair with food?
Both sets of my grandparents had beautiful backyard gardens—my maternal grandmother had peach trees, pear trees and plum trees; every inch of my paternal grandfather's backyard was covered with food. My sister and I would spend a lot of time with my grandparents during the summers, and my grandfather used to say, "If you don't get in the garden, you're not eating!" So we were all a part of growing and learning about food, and connecting with the earth.

You've said that your upcoming book will help people understand that today's idea of soul food isn't traditional soul food. What do you mean?
I think that contemporary notions of soul food are very skewed. In the late 1960s, the popular media "discovered"—as they would probably say—soul food. They took the parts that were exotic and hip, illuminating things like pig feet and chitlins, which many people have come to associate with soul food. Talking about a fresh green bean salad would probably be less sexy than talking about some…pig snout!

The types of foods we often see portrayed in the media, films and some soul food restaurants lean more toward what I see as “comfort foods” that would be eaten for celebration. But when I think about what my grandparents ate on a consistent basis, it was fresh food, it was always in season, and it was as local as their backyard garden.

Most of us have fallen in love with soul food’s media remix, often buying it packaged, canned, frozen or as takeout, and spicing it up with salt, hot sauce or vinegar. What makes you think we’d enjoy the foods from our grandparents gardens?
The reason that resonates most with people is flavor. Foods that have been sitting in a warehouse for weeks are going to be much less flavorful than something that was harvested that morning, which is going to have the maximum flavor.

It’s also more nutritious. The foods we ate every day were fresh salad leaves from the garden, lightly sautéed greens or green beans, or okra and tomatoes. Everything wasn’t deep-fried; everything wasn’t cooked until the nutrients were depleted from it.

Many people say that what you describe as the comfort version of soul food hurts black folks’ health. How do we incorporate the more traditional, healthier version into our lives?
We must broaden our understanding of what soul food can be. I think so many people are detached from actually growing their own foods and being connected to the cuisine that comfort foods become what soul food is for most people. You don’t have to give up those foods completely. We just can’t eat them all the time. We all have different constitutions; there’s no one diet that’s right for everyone. And there’s no one diet that’s perfect for an individual for his or her whole life. We must keep checking in with our bodies to see how we’re responding spiritually and physically to food, and modify accordingly.

Cooking soundtrack: “Crawlin’ Kingsnake,” by John Lee Hooker, from I*s He Really the World’s Greatest Blues Singer?*

Roasted Red Potato Salad With Parsley–Pine Nut Pesto
Yield: 6–8 servings

My family serves drowned-in-mayonnaise potato salad at cookouts that I may or may not eat. I brought this egg-less version to a family reunion for the folks who avoid dairy (my sister and me). It was gone before I could get any. I didn’t even trip.

For the pesto
1⁄3 cup pine nuts
2 cups loosely packed fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves
2 medium garlic cloves, peeled
1 tablespoon mellow white or yellow miso
¼ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
½ cup extra-virgin olive oil

½ teaspoon coarse sea salt

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Arrange the pine nuts on a baking sheet and toast them for about 8 minutes, stirring after 4 minutes.

In the bowl of a food processor fitted with a metal blade, combine the pine nuts, parsley, garlic, miso and lemon juice; purée. Slowly add the oil and process until smooth. Blend
½ teaspoon salt and set aside.

For the salad
2 pounds small red potatoes, cut into 1-inch chunks
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
3 large red bell peppers, seeded and cut into 1-inch dice
Coarse sea salt
Freshly ground white pepper

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

In a large bowl, combine the potatoes and the olive oil. Stir to coat. Transfer the potatoes to a parchment-lined rimmed baking sheet and roast for 20 minutes, stirring after 10 minutes. Add the bell peppers to the baking sheet and stir to combine. Roast for 1 hour, stirring every 15 minutes, until the potatoes are tender and the bell peppers well roasted.

Transfer the potatoes and bell peppers to a large bowl, add ½ cup plus 2 tablespoons of pesto, stir well, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve at room temperature. Cover the remaining pesto with a film of olive oil in a tightly sealed jar and refrigerate for up to 2 weeks.

Fresh Green Beans With Garlic Citrus Vinaigrette
Yield: 4–6 servings

½ teaspoon coarse sea salt
2 pounds fresh green beans, snapped at each end and cut into 1-inch diagonal slices
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
2 teaspoons agave syrup
1 small garlic clove, minced
1 tablespoon fresh rosemary, minced
½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Freshly ground white pepper to taste

Add half of the salt to a large pot of water; bring to a boil. Add beans and cook 4 to 5 minutes, until tender but still al dente. Drain beans into a colander, and shock in a bowl filled with ice water to stop the cooking. Drain again and place in a serving bowl.
In a blender, combine lemon juice, vinegar, mustard, agave syrup, garlic, rosemary and remaining salt. Slowly pour in the olive oil with the blender going. Add white pepper to taste.

Toss the green beans with the vinaigrette and refrigerate for up to 4 hours, tossing every 30 minutes. Drain and serve room temperature.

Agave Sweetened Double Orange-Pekoe Tea
Yield: about 1 gallon

When it comes to nonalcoholic beverage staples from the South, “sweet tea” will consistently be in the top two, with lemonade. And it ain’t called “sweet” for nothing. Although sweet tea usually comes pre-sweetened with white sugar, most people add just a lil’ bit more of some kind of sweetener when it hits the table.

I created this equally sweet version that will satisfy the snootiest of sweet tea connoisseurs and won’t give drinkers an insulin spike. Agave syrup is now a popular food and beverage sweetener; it’s good for non-insulin dependent diabetics, as it is a low-glycemic-index sugar substitute.

It’s pleasantly sweet, can be used in a range of dishes, and lacks that chemical taste of a lot of artificial sweeteners like Acesulfame-K (Sunette, Sweet & Safe, Sweet One), Aspartame (Equal, Canderel and NutraSweet) and Sucralose (Splenda).
In the past, agave was available only in health-food stores, but now many conventional grocery stores carry it as well. If your store doesn’t, get five of your friends to call or write requesting it. That should encourage the grocer to carry it. (You can also order it online.)
I intentionally over-sweetened this tea in order for it to even out once ice is added. Enjoy.

12 cups cold water
2 2-inch sticks of cinnamon
12 orange-pekoe black tea bags
2 cups freshly squeezed orange juice
½ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
1½ cup agave nectar
Ice cubes
Thin orange wedges, garnish

In a stockpot, combine the water and cinnamon sticks and bring to a boil. Remove from heat, add the tea bags, orange juice, lemon juice and agave nectar. Cover and let stand for 30 minutes.

Allow the tea to cool. Remove the tea bags with a slotted spoon.

Ladle into glasses filled with ice and garnish with orange wedges.

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