Filmmaker Documents African Americans' Complex Relationship With Soul Food

March 26, 2013

When you think of soul food dishes, what comes to mind? Mac 'n' cheese, maybe, or how about fried chicken, ribs and peach cobbler. For acclaimed filmmaker Byron Hurt, soul food goes beyond these delicious comfort foods. His latest documentary, Soul Food Junkies, has sparked a hard look at the soul food tradition, its relevance to African-American cultural identity and its current effects on the health of the black community, reported the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The documentary has been screening on college campuses, in community centers and at panel discussions across the country. Most recently, the film took home the Best Documentary award at the UrbanWorld Film Festival, aired on PBS's Independent Lens and it was named among the "Best in Black Cinema" by Indiewire in 2012.

Hurt is best known for his 2008 film Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes, which was nominated for an award at the Sundance Film Festival. For Soul Food Junkies, the director conducted candid interviews with soul food cooks, historians, doctors, scholars and everyday people to document the origins of soul food and people's love affair with the fatty, sugary and salt-laden cuisine. Hurt turned his lens on both private and public issues concerning soul food, including its contributions to the Civil Rights movement, its devastating effects on African-American health, and the role it played in the loss of his overweight and unhealthy father to pancreatic cancer in 2007.

"I wanted [my dad's] life and his memory to potentially have an impact on millions of people," Hurt said. "I hope people are inspired by his story and consider having conversations with family members who need that extra push to change their diet and to exercise on a regular basis."

But the film also noted that it would be overly simplistic to blame soul food for the high rates of obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and other weight-related diseases in the African-American community. The documentary explores the socioeconomic conditions in predominantly black neighborhoods where healthy food is hard to come by; it also focuses on the pioneers of the emerging food justice movement who advocate for healthier versions of traditional soul food recipes.

Love soul food but want to stay healthy? You can still eat the same tasty, flavor-rich meals your

family may have grown up enjoying. Just click here and learn how to make them over with a few simple tips from Real Health's "Meal Makeovers."

To watch the trailer for Soul Food Junkies, click here.

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