



Misty's View of

SOUL FOOD

Soul food sings of a kitchen scented with magnolia blossoms and filé powder, spiced with mystery, loaded with collard greens and seafood fresh off Bubba Gump's shrimp boat. This cuisine has a storied Cajun, Creole, and Confederate past but endures today partly because of it. Having celebrated chefs like Emeril Lagasse and Bobby Flay elevate and unlock its secret flavours on television doesn't hurt either. And everyone imagines that Mardi Gras street food must taste good since it has lasted the test of time.

But that's cooking! And that's where the soul part really comes in. Food that evolves and survives successive generations of families bears its past with pride and honour. It welcomes new members to take on its treasured recipes and provide continuity and integrity for future generations.

Keeping the soul in one's culinary heritage is a challenge these days since our newly embraced global diversity blends our recipes into a delightful fusion of flavours. New creations emerge every season suggesting to us, perhaps, that we must dutifully follow new trends to be good cooks. We often have little time or inclination to cook at all, let alone trying to be current. Sadly, as a result, **the foods of our ethnic past are in danger of becoming extinct!**

A third generation Italian woman recently bemoaned the fact that she has been too busy with her career to learn how to cook more than one or two quasi-Italian dishes. I told her to get on the phone and book a cooking class with her mother before it's too late!

The first resource available for learning one's ethnic culinary staples is likely living within driving distance. Get over there and spend some precious time reading and interpreting family recipes, methods, and spice blends. Make sure to come away with more than words on a card; ask how things work in a dish and what things to avoid doing. Sometimes hearing about culinary disasters is just as helpful as hearing about triumphs.

Holidays are a perfect opportunity to forgo the potluck mishmash and theme your meals according to your heritage. **Honour the foods from both sides of your family** one year or alternate your ethnic focus from year to year.

What do you do if you don't happen to have a living, breathing archive on your continent? Start with a visit to the cookbook section of your favourite store. Browse the shelves and record some of the vital touchstone words that define the cuisine in question. The Internet often has well-written recipes you can try as an experiment before investing in a cookbook.

You could also interview others who share your culinary ethnicity – a co-worker perhaps? Have they learned some secrets from their family members? You might organize an evening in the kitchen to wade into the uncharted waters together. Cooking with friends is the first way to re-establish the ways of the Old World where meals were created by not one indentured cook but rather shared by multi-generational family members. I know of many a male chef who learned to love cooking from his mama's kitchen – my husband included!

And if you are an expert and have family culinary secrets sealed in your experience, then hold court in your kitchen soon! Get your younger ones over and be their much-needed guru. We can access so much information digitally these days, but **nothing really replaces the older apprentice model** where personal contact shapes the learning process.

What you learn from these mentors does not have to be about haute cuisine. I see Soul Food as being more about learning how to transform simple, (and in the case of the original Soul Food) basic ingredients into memorable dishes that create a bond with family members. Traditions can be newly created, but traditions that are established from discovery of one's past could perhaps be infinitely more valuable. Forging renewed links to the past through culinary research is a fun and easy way to add dimension to the life of your family and new ingredients in your larder.

As a chef and teacher, I know so many, many busy professionals who lack a foundation and a direction for their cooking. They are intimidated by trends and hype, thinking that they must magically possess the knowledge and skills touted in the media. What might save them in the end is going back to their roots and using this connection as the first vital step towards developing their own soul in their own kitchen.

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