

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

>> This is Guy Lamolinara at the Library of Congress. For the past 10 years book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The 2011 festival, our 11th, which is free and open to the public, runs for two days this year. Saturday, September 24, and Sunday, September 25. The festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets on the National Mall rain or shine. Hours are 10AM to 5:30PM Saturday the 24th and 1PM to 5:30PM on Sunday the 25th. For more details visit loc.gov/bookfest. Now it is my pleasure to introduce Jessica B. Harris whose latest book, "High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America," has been published by Bloomsbury. Ms. Harris is a professor of Queens College at the City University of New York and was the first scholar to hold the chair at the Ray Charles Program in African American material, culture at Dillard University where she established the Institute for the Study of Culinary Cultures. In 2010, she was inducted into the James Beard Foundations, Who's Who in Food and Beverage in America. Jessica Harris, thank you for joining us.

>> Oh, thank you so much for having me.

>> You're welcome. You've been writing and making appearances for decades about food. What was it you wanted to say in "High on the Hog" that you felt you hadn't discussed before?

>> Oh, my goodness decades. You're making me feel old.

>> [Laughter]

>> But it's true, it's true. [Laughter] It's true I have to fess up. Actually one of the things that's happened and I've said this before so it probably sounds as though it's canned but it's not, I have always been fascinated by the back story if you will of each recipe. So I noticed that in some books the head notes over the recipe although it may not manifest in the book as the book actually was printed but as I was writing the notes kept getting longer and longer and longer and it seemed as though it was probably time to do a book of the notes as opposed to a recipe.

>> Okay.

>> And so, you know, this is really a narrative history of African Americans and food with only 23 recipes and most of them archival.

>> Oh, okay. What can you tell us about a few of the dishes that Africans brought with them to America and how they changed when they came here?

>> Well, I mean that's the thing that's so fascinating. It's very hard to say this dish or that dish. There are probably a few that we can talk about though and two of them that I will talk about come from South Carolina, come from the low country, come from that rice kitchen down there. One is just a culinary epiphany that friends of mine and I had on

my first visit to Charleston more than a decade ago now since we're into the decades.

>> [Laughter]

>> And it was about that rice that's called Charleston red rice. My first trip to Charleston I had gone with friends all of whom had had some experience in Senegal and Western Africa, and we looked down at that rice, we looked at each other none of us had been to Charleston before and we said, hmm, jumble jen [phonetic] and, in fact, in looking at the history of it, many of the enslaved who were brought to work the rice plantations and, in fact, actually to develop the rice plantations because as it has been, you know, sort of told in a book called "Black Rice" by Judith Carney, who is a scholar out at UC Berkeley I think or UCLA, that rice knowing knowledge, that rice growing culture of South Carolina came directly from the West African coast from Senegambia, from Liberia and Sierra Leone, and so the national dish of Senegal is a red rice with fish and vegetables all cooked together that is extraordinarily similar in taste, texture and look to the red rice of Charleston.

>> Okay.

>> Now what's interesting is that rice moves down the coast in Western Africa and becomes jollof rice, a reference to the Jollof Empire, which existed before modern-day countries, in the area that would become Senegambia and jollof rice also is an ancestor of it. It's kind of the English-speaking ancestor if you will and all four of those dishes are related to jambalaya in Southern Louisiana where there were also people from that region.

>> Okay. You talk about some of the slaves who cooked for famous people like Hercules for George Washington and James Hemmings, for Thomas Jefferson, what kind of food did these chefs make? Were they told to emulate what was considered the height of cuisine at the time, French food from Europe, or were they allowed to make the foods that they were familiar with from Africa?

>> Well, you know, two things. First of all they did cook what they were instructed to cook. In Hercules' case, it was probably more British fare or fare like British fare. Things were served in a kind of manner. They had [speaking French] and tables were cleared between courses and all sorts of meats were, meats and vegetables were lined up in a particular arrangement on the table. Because Hercules was cooking for, you know, the first man if you will of the country, he of necessity would have had to have cooked that type of food. Now the trick is if you have ever given one of your recipes however simple or complex it may be to a friend to cook and been invited to taste it, it never tastes the way you think it should.

>> That's right.

>> That's something the Chinese call the walk hand, sort of the hand in the pot, and my contention is that Hercules's walk hand would have changed somewhat however subtly the taste of those food each individual

chef leaves his mark on whatever recipe it is. Now, in the case of James Hemmings, Jefferson actually when he was ambassador [speaking French] in Paris to the Court of Versailles and Louis XVI, sent for Hemmings to join him in Paris to be apprenticed to various chefs around the city and so he learned the, you know, fine high arts of French cooking in French kitchens and, in fact, in kitchens that went as high as the kitchens of the [inaudible], who was a prince of the blood basically a relative of the king's.

>> Okay. What do you think of the term soul food?

>> [Laughter] Everybody asks me that.

>> Do they? I thought it was going to be a new question.

>> They know I'll go off and rant I'm sure. You know it's a term that I disagree with because basically I contend that it was probably somebody who said I'm going out to feed my soul or, you know, I'm going to have some food for my soul or something like that, but equally back in the day when the term certainly came into common currency, everything was soul, you know, soul brother, soul sister, soul comb, soul handshake. So it's a term, it's certainly a valid term. It's a term we all understand, but when think of soul food they usually think of, you know, fried chicken, smothered pork chops, collard greens, maybe chitlins, and things of that sort. Delicious. Absolutely delicious, wonderful food, but not the total kaleidoscope if you will, not the total repertoire of African American food or cooking.

>> How would you say that Cajun or Creole cuisine relates to African American cuisine?

>> Oh, first of all when we get into Cajun and Creole that gets dicey because they are Southern Louisiana cuisines as we know them in the United States. Now, the trick is that Southern Louisiana is not the American South. There's still very much cuisines that are related to African American cuisine if you're considering African American cuisine to stop at that Southern Louisiana border. If we move that all the way down, they're certainly a part of it because that cuisine, again, experienced an amazing amount of African influence, an amazing amount of African, you know, hands in the pot, an amazing number. So, all of those things are, you know, a part of what makes that whole, you know, that whole cuisine thing, but the Cajun and Creole is sometimes sort of edited out if you will because Southern Louisiana is so particular. In its taste, it often has more to do with the Caribbean, with Cuba or with Haiti than it does even with Northern Louisiana. Certainly than with Georgia or Virginia.

>> Okay. In your book, you write about some restaurants that were very important to the leaders of the Civil Rights movement. Can you tell us about one or two of those?

>> Well, certainly there was Paschal's in New Orleans, not New Orleans I'm sorry I misspoke, Paschal's in Atlanta and Deacons in Atlanta and they were both, you know, local restaurants, local Black-owned restaurants, but that were places where leaders like Martin Luther King,

Jr. could sit around a table with friends, with fellow activists and decide what course of action to take. Those restaurants and others whose names we know were multiplied in cities throughout the south because in some cases those restaurants certainly at a place like Dooky Chase in New Orleans were the only locust if you will where Blacks and whites could get together, could sit together. So, that they became lynch pins and pivot points for the movement.

>> I see. Would you say there are any African American chefs or restaurants today that you think do a good job of representing the cuisine?

>> Oh, good Lord now that's a loaded question. [Laughter]

>> Just name a few you like.

>> Oh, goodness. I mean you know my whole thing is where is dinner next?

>> [Laughter]

>> I just confess I tend not to eat out that often in African American restaurants because it's a food I cook myself and it's also a food that is so inflected in my mind by memory. Nobody is ever going to make it like my momma did.

>> Right.

>> So I tend to be hyper critical which makes me want to maybe not answer that question.

>> That's okay. What do you think about the role of food network in terms of African American cuisine?

>> Oh, well, I think one of the things that happens is Food Network is a wonderful network. I used to be the, you know, resident food historian on Sarah Molton's [phonetic] show when she had a live show back in I guess the 90s, but I have taken to railing against the what I call testosteronization of food. It's gotten very aggressive. We've got Chopped and, you know, Blazing or whatever. I mean I actually I'm too cheap to pay for television so I don't have cable, but one of the things that I've noticed is that the African Americans who are on the Food Network for the most part are representative of only one type of African American cooking and don't really, and I don't like to say don't because it makes it a negative, their shows are not designed to look at the scope and diversity and vitality of what the African American culinary experience has been in this country.

>> What do you think might be the subject of your next book? Have you thought about that?

>> I am not sure. I'm thinking about street food because I'm fascinated by street food. I'm thinking about something that would look at the food of the hemisphere and to try to do some linkages because that's one of the things that I like doing is looking at a plate here and saying, hmm,

that plate looks exactly like the plate there. Let's talk about how that looks the same, but equally I'm thinking about maybe doing something more involving memory or memoir of some sort of family story of some sort.

>> Okay.

>> Albeit using food.

>> Okay, thank you.

>> Thank you so much.

>> We've been hearing from Jessica B. Harris, author of "High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America." Jessica will appear on Saturday, September 24, in the Contemporary Life Pavilion of the National Book Festival. She will also be signing copies of her book that day. Jessica Harris, thank you very much for your time and we look forward to seeing you at the National Book Festival.

>> Thank you. I can't wait.

>> Thank you. I look forward to meeting you. Thanks so much.

>> Absolutely. Thank you so much.

>> Take care.

>> Bye-bye.

>> Bye.

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