

# The Roots of Southern Food

## By ReadWorks



A plate of food at Martha Lou's restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina, is a beautiful sight to behold. Vibrant, brightly colored vegetables sit side by side on a white plate. Stewed okra, turnip greens, fried chicken, and cornbread are on the plate. Sweet iced tea is in a glass, and for dessert there is banana pudding.

The food Martha Lou cooks is called "Southern food" or "soul food." Southern food people eat today originated in the American South, but it can now be found all over the United States. Southern food is the result of hundreds of years of trade across oceans. It is mostly the result of cultural exchange between Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans.

Before the first Europeans arrived in North America, the Native Americans living in various parts of the continent had different diets, depending on the plants and animals in their region. Some of the crops Native Americans ate included corn, squash, and beans. Generations of Native Americans improved the crops by selecting seeds for the next harvest from the tastiest crops. They also hunted animals such as squirrels and bison. Each tribe had its own cuisine and cooking habits, but they shared many of these common ingredients.

When the Europeans first arrived in North America, they had never tasted American plants before. The first European settlers brought their own seeds with them. Spinach, turnips, and radishes are all vegetables that came from Europe. In time the Europeans began to eat the American plants as well. Because corn and squash were originally from America, they were sometimes easier to grow in America than the European vegetables. Over time a new "American" diet evolved with dishes that used produce from both Europe and America.

But Southern food doesn't only come from European and Native American cultures. Many of the vegetables, fruits, and grains eaten in the South today came from Africa. In the 1600s, the first Africans arrived on the shores of North America. They came against their will and were sold into slavery. These Africans brought their own food with them across the Atlantic Ocean. Lots of delicious vegetables, legumes, fruits, and grains grew in Africa. Yams, black-eyed peas, watermelon, and some kinds of rice all came from Africa. As more and more Africans were brought to North America as slaves, African produce took root in American soil. Most of the slaves in the United States were in the South. So rice fields covered the wet marshlands along the coast of South Carolina. Black-eyed peas sprung up across the Deep South, from Georgia to Alabama.

Slavery in the United States lasted until 1865, when the 13th Amendment abolished slavery. After the end of slavery, many African Americans continued to live in the Southern states. Over time, the food culture of African Americans and European Americans in the South grew closer, and became what we now call "Southern food."

In time, the produce from Europe, Africa, and America were grown side by side in gardens and fields. The different produce also found their way onto the dinner plate together. Think about what was on that plate of food at Martha Lou's Southern food restaurant: stewed okra, turnip greens, fried chicken, and cornbread. Each produce item came from a different place. Okra came from Africa. Turnip greens came from Northern Europe. And cornbread? Native Americans were making something like cornbread long before European settlers arrived in North America, and the European settlers made their own version of European breads using corn instead of the wheat they had used on their home continent.

Southern food spread throughout the United States when African Americans from the South moved to major cities across the country. From 1900 to 1970, more than 6 million African Americans moved to big American cities in the North, Midwest, and West. They left the South to seek fair treatment and more opportunities. They brought with them the foods and traditions of their past home.

Southern food traditions are still changing today. As new immigrants from other parts of the world move to the United States, they bring their own food traditions. There are now Asian-Southern restaurants in Atlanta and Caribbean soul restaurants in New York City. New patterns of migration and trade will change the foods that we eat and create new cuisines.