

# FROM THE BEGINNING



## The Struggle against Culinary Apartheid

**F**or far too long there has been an attempt to focus, relegate, pigeonhole, and confine African Americans as merely purveyors of “soul food.” Consequently, the myriad creations of rich and delectable soups and stews, exotically spiced meats, side dishes, and vegetables, and irresistible desserts and drinks of every variety by African female and male cooks, and the African origin of the creative process of many of these creations served on American tables from this country’s inception, are still almost never acknowledged. The usual discourse relative to the African contribution to food history in America describes that contribution as “a touch of African spicing,” but after such phrases are added on, “like appliqués to a jacket,” the foundation of the dish or cuisine is described as purely European. In presenting Europe’s supposed culinary methods as the foundation of American cuisine, and in leaving out the true creative role of the African and Native American cook, the writers present a “master narrative”—that is, a formula or script written for, about, and usually by Europeans that is intended to serve as providing the only true account.

## At the Table of Power

The late University of California–Berkeley historian Professor Ronald Takaki, for example, has taken this script (this “master narrative,” as he called it) to task, with reference to the way in which American history has traditionally been taught in US schools. The same Eurocentrism, the same marginalization of Africans and Native Americans, is prevalent in the traditional master narrative of American culinary history, which states that cooking and cuisine were founded by Americans of European ancestry and are rooted in so-called Western civilization. Where Africans and other people of color are included, Europeans are hailed as having *improved* their cuisine. America’s culinary master narrative has trained the average person’s perspective to support, maintain, and reinforce the belief in the master narrative and thereby ensure that its content, though lacking an informed and honest story, is passed down.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the severity of the problem runs deep and can be compared to the era of apartheid in South Africa. When the South African government decided it wanted a particular area of African land for Whites, an area already occupied by Native Africans, the apartheid government simply came in with bulldozers and leveled the African community. With their bulldozers they obliterated Africans and their homes from the land, they then claimed the land, rebuilt it, renamed it, and designated the area as “Whites Only” territory. Africans were physically erased from the land and never allowed on it again, unless they were in some servant capacity to Whites. This happened repeatedly in South Africa in areas such as Cape Town’s District Six.

The same scenario, culinary apartheid, applies to the African cook in American culinary history. Many of us are aware that numerous cookbooks were compiled and published by southern White women after the end of the Civil War. The recipes in these cookbooks were hailed as the creations of the White women who had them published. The recipes were actually collections of the creations of the African women and men who served the Whites, creations that the White women wrote down and then had published in their own names as authors. Some of these books contained a rare reference to a Black cook. They were easy to spot; these cooks were always called by their first names or the first name was preceded by the term “Aunt,” “Uncle,” or “Mammy.”

The identities of the actual enslaved African cooks who created these recipes and all references to them were, in this way, marginalized and effectively erased from history. This was the means to an end because

## From the Beginning

the end of the Civil War (White society blamed the war itself primarily on Africans in America) fostered the attempt to forge White southern nationalism, and in this case southern nationalism centered around food. Africans were to play no part in this nationalism, so that in promoting southern White culture, the concept of “southern cooking” started out as *Whites Only Cuisine*. With an imperialist mindset steeped in colonialist values, Whites have taken recipes and cooking methods of African and African American creation and creativity, claimed the recipes and the creativity, renamed them, and bulldozed into oblivion the names of and all reference to the originators.<sup>2</sup>

I am reminded of one such example of the bulldozing in more modern times when, in 1963, Republican Senator J. Glenn Beall from Maryland rose on the Senate floor “to defend the fair name of the great Free State of Maryland against an insult.” Beall explained, “Just as the distinguished Senators from Georgia would resent a knotty little peach being called ‘a Georgia peach,’ just as the Senators from Idaho would resent a puny little spud being called ‘an Idaho potato,’ just as the distinguished Senators from Maine would resent a crawfish being called ‘a Maine lobster,’ and just as the distinguished Senators from Kentucky would resent cheap bootleg being called ‘Kentucky bourbon[,]’ I resent the crabcakes being served in the Senate dining room being called ‘Maryland crabcakes.’” The Senate restaurant menu, Beall reported, offered “fried fresh ‘Maryland crabcakes’” with tartar sauce, macaroni au gratin, and old-fashioned coleslaw. However, Beall states, “no Marylander would recognize what is served. . . . I simply say they fall far short of the high standard of ‘Maryland crabcakes,’ that tasty dish which has helped to make the name ‘Maryland’ loved throughout the Nation. Patrons of our dining room should be protected from deception.” When Alabama Senator Hill suggested that the Senate would like to be able to compare the superiority of Maryland crab cakes to those of the Senate dining room, by demonstration, Beall promised to arrange it.<sup>3</sup>

A few days later, on January 21, 1963, Senator Beall appeared on the Senate floor armed with a letter and recipes from Helen Avalynne Tawes, wife of the governor of Maryland, J. Millard Tawes, a conservative Democrat who never actively pushed for the enactment of civil rights laws and a native, as was his wife, of the conservative Eastern Shore of Maryland. Among the recipes sent by Mrs. Tawes was one for crab cakes, which she suggested be given to the chef of the Senate restaurant to re-

## At the Table of Power

place the one being used, because, she said, “hers” “is the best crabcake recipe [she] know[s] of.”<sup>4</sup>



The following recipe sent by Helen Avalynne Tawes was printed in the *Congressional Record*.

### Crabcakes, As Submitted to the Senate, by Avalynne Tawes

- One pound crab claw meat
- Two eggs
- Two tablespoons mayonnaise
- One tablespoon Kraft’s horse-radish mustard
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon pepper
- Dash of tabasco sauce
- One tablespoon parsley chopped

Combine all above ingredients including the unbeaten eggs and mix lightly together. Form mixture into desired size of cake or croquette. Do not pack firmly, but allow the mixture to be light and spongy. Roll out a package of crackers into fine crumbs. Then pat the crumbs lightly on the crab cake and fry in deep fat just until golden brown. Remove from hot fat just as soon as golden brown.

Drain on absorbent paper and serve hot.<sup>5</sup>

Tawes fails to mention that it was African American men and women, some who worked for her and her husband’s families, who created and made famous these delicacies in the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. It is also notable to mention that some of these delicacies might well have been lost to Maryland in the nineteenth century because of C. W. Jacobs and the members of Maryland’s Committee on Colored Population. Many White households in Maryland were about to be ruined. Jacobs and his committee were the ones who suggested that all free Africans in the state be reenslaved, a ploy to force free Africans to leave the state. The only reason why Maryland did not go through with this was that neither the economy of the state nor the “nonslaveholding farmers, tradesmen, and householders who depended upon their [African] labor” could do without them. The question became, “Who is to supply the places of the free colored women who are hired by the week, month or year as cooks or house servants, in thousands of families throughout the state?” Whether slave or free, African cooks were the base on which Maryland’s culinary heritage stood.<sup>6</sup>

The crab cake recipe presented on the Senate floor was included in a

## From the Beginning

pamphlet composed of recipes handed out with campaign literature that would help elect Tawes's husband to the governor's seat in 1958. African Americans, however, were bulldozed out of Tawes's collection of recipes in both her culinary pamphlet and her cookbook. With Tawes's version of Maryland recipes bestowing credit to her mother and mother-in-law, a new reinforcement of culinary apartheid and the culinary master narrative was thereby created, one that certain lawmakers were happy to help her disseminate.<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to overlooking and shortchanging African American culinary artists, one of the major areas of this country where the shortchanging has always taken place is in the state of Louisiana, often described as some sort of melting pot, where various ethnicities and races came together to forge a so-called Creole society. According to writers on the subject, the foundation of this Creole society—and therefore the foundation of Louisiana's cuisine, which has also been termed "Creole"—is European, specifically French. The master narrative is alive and well, entrenched in Louisiana, even though it is the one state where you will hear the African contribution to its cuisine and culture mentioned slightly more often. And the only reason it is mentioned slightly more often is because, as in Brazil, its culture and cuisine are so deeply Africanized one would look insane to try to leave it out.

A description of the French population in colonial Louisiana around which the culinary master narrative is written is crucial. It is imperative to mention that, in 1719, Louisiana was colonized by the rejects and worst dregs of French society. French colonization turned Louisiana into a penal colony. Prisoners condemned to the galleys who had their sentences commuted, soldiers guilty of desertion, vagabonds, murderers, those arrested for debauchery, acts of violence, drunkards, and beggars, as well as neighbors and family members considered troublesome, were all prime candidates for deportation to Louisiana. Many French women had even worse reputations than the men. Some had been removed from dungeons. One was a serial killer and had murdered fifteen people. The majority of the women were in their thirties and accused of theft, prostitution, assassination, blasphemy, debauchery (usually with married men), irreligion, and repeated lying.<sup>8</sup>

As reported in numerous volumes, it was Native Americans who saved the Europeans, particularly in the realm of food. Native Americans taught the French everything there was to know about the to-

pography of the land, its flora and fauna, the building of boats and the navigation of the network of treacherous waterways that facilitated communication among French settlements. Native American expertise in agriculture was passed on to White colonists in various regions of early America. Whites were also taught how to hunt, fish, build houses, make clothes and how to dress, the uses of herbal medicines, and preparation and preservation of food. The Chitimacha peoples, who occupied the delta area south and west of New Orleans and whose diet relied heavily on shellfish and seafood, taught the early French colonists techniques of crop cultivation that included corn, squash, potatoes, tobacco, and other indigenous foods.<sup>9</sup>

African culinary and cultural infusions into Louisiana appeared in different stages. Africans were brought to Louisiana as slaves in 1719. The slave ships carried rice seed and Africans knowledgeable in rice cultivation. African expertise in rice production made rice a reliable food crop for local consumption in Louisiana. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall writes that two-thirds of the Africans brought to Louisiana by the French were from the Senegambia region. This region, between the Senegal and Gambia Rivers, is more than a geographical area, it contains homogenous culture and a common historical and social legacy. Also noteworthy is that most of the Africans brought into Louisiana by the French came directly from Port Lorient in Africa. Most slave trade voyages made stops at various Caribbean islands and left Africans there to be “seasoned,” but Louisiana slaveholders and slave traders received ships arriving “nonstop” from Africa. This certainly suggests that African cultural traits that have permeated and persisted throughout Louisiana’s history did so undiluted by other environments.<sup>10</sup>

For this reason it is essential to compare agricultural production in the ancestral home of these West Africans during the early eighteenth century to agriculture in eighteenth-century France. The Senegal Valley, made extremely fertile by the flooding of the river, has been compared to the Nile Valley. Farming in West Africa always took into account, among other things, the ecological setting: indigenous crops (borrowed or replaced), the nature of households in various farming societies, the kinds of tools used, how production is organized and carried out, and how farming communities interact socially and economically within larger agricultural networks. With an understanding of their own ecological settings, farmers in West Africa employed complex land use combina-

## From the Beginning

tions that allowed them to differentiate categories of farming. Within combinations of upland (shifting) cultivation, valley bottom flood retreat cultivation, and hunting and gathering over fallow and uncultivated land, they have been adept at creating or conserving just the right conditions for plant growth on forest and grassland fields or varieties of valley, and homestead or non-homestead farms.<sup>11</sup>

West African farmers were therefore aware of the importance of the condition and characteristics of the soil in different regions. They used a variety of approaches designed to improve yields and fertility that are dependent upon social and environmental factors. For plant growth under intense rainfall, the methods used included heaping, ridging, mulching, terracing, minimum tillage, and vegetation cover to minimize erosion. Nevertheless, most literature dealing with African agriculture fails to acknowledge that agriculture was independently developed in Africa and not a foreign skill brought in from Europe or Asia.

The procedures developed to cultivate fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices—evolving them from African wild species—were innovations that were indigenous to Africa, “uniquely African-invented techniques concerned with the proper management of the physical and ecological properties of African soils.” The Diola of Guinea-Bissau, for example, transformed most of the mangrove swamps lining a number of river estuaries into a network of paddy fields. Their techniques of dyking, desalinating, ridging, and transplanting antedate all European contact, and linguistic evidence has shown that ancient West, Central, and East African agricultural practices, especially those in Tanzania, and terms used to describe those practices, migrated to the Americas long before its so-called discovery. The Yoruba and Bini and other Nigerian societies have lived in settled communities on the same sites for several hundred years and have evolved agricultural systems that allow continuous cultivation of their soils without loss of fertility.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, African rice (*oryza glabberima*) was domesticated in West Africa thousands of years ago (thirty-five hundred years is one estimate, but it was probably much earlier), long before Asian rice (*oryza sativa*) was known on the continent. Paddy rice was grown along the Upper Guinea coast. Both wet and dry rices were well developed and cultivated throughout the Senegal Valley. Corn, called *Mil* in Senegal, was of two kinds, *gros* and *petit*, and was widely cultivated. Several varieties of peas, as well as huge fields of “excellent tobacco” were grown. Abun-

## At the Table of Power

dant crops of indigo and cotton, which “grew almost without cultivation,” could be found. Salt was produced at the mouth of the Senegal River and traded on a number of inland routes. The Senegal River was also the site of deep-sea-fishing-vessel building. There were natural prairies along the Senegal River that fed cows, sheep, goats, all “with a marvelous flavor,” in addition to fowl of just about every kind. The fowl were fed with corn (or pearl millet) and grew “very fat, and consequently very tender.” Africans were famous as expert hunters “and one sees regiments rather than companies of partridges, guinea fowl, wood pigeons, sea birds and migratory birds.” Referred to as *lougans*, the fields in which corn, peas, melons, rice, and other vegetables were grown were also planted in abundance.<sup>13</sup>

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Rice with shrimp and fruit combine to produce marvelous flavors for stuffing game hens. Plentiful in Africa, the hens are served on many West, East, and Southern African tables.

### Cornish Hens with Shrimp, Rice, and Mango Stuffing

- 4 cornish hens
- Season birds to taste with garlic salt with parsley, seasoned salt, black pepper, cilantro, and parsley flakes. Coat birds generously with paprika
- 12 tablespoons butter
- For stuffing:
- About three tablespoons dende,\* or peanut, or olive oil
- 1 tablespoons finely grated ginger
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- A heaping 1/2 cup chopped green or red bell pepper
- 2 “bird”\*\* chili peppers, seeds removed and finely chopped
- 1/4 rounded teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 teaspoon EACH, or more to taste, black pepper and garlic salt with parsley
- 1 medium tomato, chopped
- 10 fresh shrimp (31–40 per pound size), shelled and deveined
- 1/2 cup cooked rice
- 1 cup peeled and cubed mango

After seasoning, place 3 tablespoons of butter in each hen cavity. Bake, tightly covered, in a preheated 350 degree oven 1 hour to 1 hour and 20 minutes, depending on the size of the birds. Baste hens with pan juices when done. Use pan juices as sauce for hens.

Heat oil in skillet. Add remaining ingredients, except shrimp, rice, and mango. Cook, stirring often, until onions and peppers are tender. Stir in shrimp, rice, and mangoes. Continue cooking and



## From the Beginning

stirring often, just long enough to cook shrimp (approximately 7 minutes).

Stuff equal amounts of mixture in each bird cavity and serve.<sup>14</sup>

\*Dende oil, or palm oil, is thick and reddish-orange in color, and is the cooking oil of choice of many Africans in the Motherland, as well as in the Diaspora.

\*\*Bird chili peppers are small, elongated chilies, available fresh in red, green, purple, and orange from specialty (African, Asian, and Indian) food grocers.

West Africans, such as the Wolof of the Senegal/Gambia region, were known to grind one of their abundant crops, “maize of the white variety,” into flour, which was then added to oil and liquid. This basic batter was sometimes baked, and imaginative variations on the basic batter would turn out cakes, breads, and dumplings. Soups and stews using corn as the main ingredient were common. Palm wine was consumed in West Africa, but in some regions both wine and beer brewed specifically from corn were the only types consumed.<sup>15</sup>

One multipurpose indigenous food crop in Africa is sorghum, known as guinea corn in West Africa (presumably because for a long time botanists confused it with maize). The grains of certain varieties were popped like popcorn. Sorghum grain is made into flour for a thick pancake batter that is fried in groundnut or palm oil. Sorghum beer is a favorite beverage consumed at wrestling matches either as burkutu, an alcoholic gruel, or as pito, with the sediment removed. At any rate, West Africans were familiar with maize, corn, sorghum, and rice long before Columbus mistakenly ran into what is now called the Americas.<sup>16</sup>

Any discussion of Africa’s culinary and agricultural civilizations has to include mention of its highly skilled and multitalented metallurgists. Besides blacksmiths, coppersmiths, and horseshoe makers, there were the goldsmiths, silversmiths, and the arms makers who made knives, hatchets, axes, and blades of iron. Africa’s iron mining industries—not just on the West Coast but throughout the continent—produced new mining tools and made possible an industrial advancement that had a great impact on an already superior agricultural production, as well as on household and kitchen utensils. Superior crops provided a larger collection of revenue on land and trade. The technology of the West African iron industry evolved to master agriculture and provided the basis for other specialized societies to develop. These were crucial skills needed in the founding of Louisiana and America in general. These were skills

## At the Table of Power

put to great use in New Orleans and surrounding areas, as the skills of African iron forgers can be seen in the ornate grill work prevalent in the architecture of the city's homes and businesses.<sup>17</sup>

West Africans who were not dependent on agriculture were pastoralists or expert in the art of catching fish. Favorite methods of preparing fish were pickled, raw, fried, boiled, and what we have come to call gumboing. Dried shrimp and crayfish are still must-have ingredients in stews and sauces, some of which combine different types of fish with coconut milk and other ingredients. Crab, lobster, cod, mackerel, sole, alligator, pike, prawn, gilthead, eel, shrimp, sprat, flounder, carp, and many other varieties of catch were obtained from oceans, rivers, streams, and lagoons and always provided "fisher folk" such as the Twi of Ghana and the Muslim Bozo, who depended heavily on fishing and boat trade on the Niger and Bani Rivers, with enormous quantities of fish that were dried and salted or smoked to keep for long periods of time for sale at markets located well into the interior of the continent.

Many West African cities had open air retail markets, which were principally in the hands of women. The market streets were filled with stalls selling calabashes, palm oil, palm wine, ducks, chickens of many colors, fresh beef, mutton and other meats, yams and yam fritters, guinea corn (sorghum) and millet beers, groundnuts, raw and cooked beans, thin brown cakes (which were said to smell like gingerbread), bean cakes (*akara*), meal dumplings, and oblong-shaped bean buns called *jenkaraga*, and soups and stews. Some of the ready-made dishes included *enjibotchi* (rice with sauce), *eko* (durra porridge), *killishi* (roasted meat, marinated and basted with oil), herbs and spices, and *atchia-kara* (a yam and vegetable sauce ladled over a combination of chunks of beef, goat, and lamb).

West Africa's ancient Mali Empire—one of the largest empires in West African history, and in the world—was known for its trained male and female physicians and surgeons. The roots of its wealth, however, were in food surplus and gold. It is especially important to note West Africa's highly developed organization of trade, commerce, and industry since current writers on the culinary history of Philadelphia's nineteenth-century Black restaurateurs and caterers assign the success of these Blacks to America's French immigrants, who are credited with teaching Blacks everything they knew about cooking and business acumen. During West Africa's early iron age, however, Mali's old city of Djenne (or Jenne) developed as an important center of interregional

## From the Beginning

trade, long before the influence of the trans-Saharan trade. Djenne linked forestlands to the south with those of the savannas, and by way of Timbuktu, with the caravans of the trans-Saharan trade. During the Middle Ages, Djenne was the capital of Mali and controlled the largest trading center in the world, with arms stretching to India and China. Travelers and merchants visiting Djenne referred to the town as a great flourishing market of the Muslim world and marveled at the prosperity, in terms of foods and other goods, of all Mali's citizens.<sup>18</sup>

It was Africans from this wealthy culinary, cultural, and economic heritage who were brought as slaves to Louisiana's colonial capital, New Orleans, founded in 1718. It was here that crops and buildings were often destroyed by floods and hurricanes. Even though skilled workers arrived from France to help maintain the colony, few of them survived. Death, disease, and famine disrupted and suspended most operations in the colony. French colonized Louisiana survived only because of African labor and African technology. African knowledge of rice production supported and maintained a reliable food crop that could be grown in the swamplands in and around New Orleans. In fact, all of the major crops of eighteenth-century Louisiana were foods brought over with Africans from the Senegambia region.

Rice, however, was the most successful. Complex technology was involved in converting swamps and tidal wetlands into rice paddies, with which Africans were thoroughly familiar. Sixteenth-century residents along the Gambia River grew rice in the alluvial soil, using a system of dikes that harnessed the tides. Most households had a rice nursery nearby by 1685. Once rice for seeding reached Louisiana, along with Africans who knew what to do with it, by 1720 rice was "growing in great abundance all along the Mississippi River; within a few years, rice was exported to the French colonized West Indies. By 1721, the Kolly concession on the Chapitoulas coast just north of New Orleans produced six hundred quarters of rice from fourteen quarters that had been sown." Rice production expanded to such an extent that soon it relatively guaranteed that no matter what catastrophe Louisiana experienced, it could always count on having rice.<sup>19</sup>

Africans could also be counted on for their skills in herbal medicine. They were commonly used as medical doctors and surgeons in eighteenth-century Louisiana. Often considered better therapists than French doctors, slave doctors cured various ills. One apparently special-

ized in ailments specific to women; he also practiced an effective cure for scurvy before 1734.<sup>20</sup>

Europeans, to be sure, were looking to attain a better life, and the American colonies seemed to offer that promise. There were a few groups still arriving and by 1770 one thousand Acadians immigrated to Louisiana, having been forcibly removed from Nova Scotia by the British. Between twenty-six hundred and three thousand Acadians arrived in Louisiana between 1765 and 1785. The largest group was said to arrive from France aboard Spanish ships in 1785. They had returned to France from Nova Scotia and were subsequently sent on to Louisiana. Acadians, or Cajuns, were among the “poverty stricken immigrants [who] survived only where they could build upon the economy of the swamps that had been developed by runaway slave communities.”<sup>21</sup>

Because the Acadians are rooted in France and are therefore European, much literature abounds extolling the qualities, creativity, and inventiveness of “Cajun” cooking. Just as important is that such literature also extolls the inherent superior culinary heritage of the French. The Acadians’ roots are in Brittany, Normandy, Picardy, Poitou, and other rural peasant regions of France. With regard to cooking and cuisine, it is crucial that we take a serious look at these rural peasants in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France in order to compare their true agricultural and culinary legacy not only with that of West Africa but also with what current food writers have offered as the master narrative.

First, cultivation was in the hands of poor peasants, and rural peasants found it especially difficult to feed themselves during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because “French agriculture was at this time quite backward.” Henri Eugene Sée tells us in his *Economic and Social Conditions in France during the Eighteenth Century* that there was a great deal of uncultivated lands and wastelands, and “methods of cultivation remained very primitive, and progress was very slow.”<sup>22</sup>

Uncultivated lands were important in the rural economy of the era because peasants without pasturage were allowed to graze their cattle on the common wastelands and used the produce of these lands as litter for their animals; that produce was also used as fertilizer for their fields. Sée states: “The farm-buildings were poorly arranged, and the implements were unsatisfactory and quite primitive, being hardly superior to those employed during the Middle Ages. Intensive cultivation was practically unknown almost everywhere. The system of fallow land was

## From the Beginning

used universally, except in Flanders, Alsace, and a part of Normandy. Even in Picardy the land lay idle one year in three. In Brittany it was left idle every other year, sometimes for two years out of three, and certain 'cold' lands were cultivated only every seven or eight years, or even every twenty years. The artificial meadow was hardly ever used." Sée goes on to say:

The peasants, prompted by the spirit of routine and having but little capital, devoted no great care to cultivation. They did not plow deeply, they weeded their grain negligently, sowed too late, and used poor seed. Almost everywhere there was lack of good manure. Since the farm itself furnished very little manure, leaves and ferns, allowed to rot, were used instead. This explains the small crops. . . . [Still another characteristic] was that in almost all France wheat was considered a luxury crop and rye predominated, except in Toulouse, Angoumois, and the coastal region of Brittany. Poor land was used particularly for buckwheat, and this furnished the peasants their principal nourishment in the form of cakes. In the central and southern sections maize played an important part. . . . The government, fearing that wines might take the place of grains, restricted the cultivation of the former in the eighteenth century. . . . Cattle-raising and horse-breeding remained very mediocre, although the second half of the eighteenth century witnessed a certain amount of improvement.<sup>23</sup>

Beaten down by the carelessness of the "great proprietors," overwhelming taxes, inadequate means of communication, and continuous obstacles blocking free cultivation and trade in agricultural commodities, France found itself enveloped in the slow development of agriculture. It did not help that in some regions such as eastern Normandy and Picardy, peasants abandoned soil cultivation to take up spinning and weaving. Such decisions had profoundly negative consequences for agriculture.<sup>24</sup>

The peasants' material existence in most regions of France "was still quite miserable. . . . Their dwelling-places were altogether inadequate. Most of them were built of mud, covered with thatch, and having only a single low room without a ceiling. The windows were small and had no glass. In Brittany, and especially in Lower Brittany, it has been said that the peasants lived 'in the water and in the mud.' This is one of the principal causes for the epidemics that were still so frequent." Peasants' homes in northern France, however, were a little more comfortable. In addition,

## At the Table of Power

peasant clothes “were often wretched.” The poor peasants’ clothing, “and they were almost all poor—was even more pitiful, for they had only one outfit for winter and summer, regardless of the quality of the material. And their single pair of shoes, very thin and cleated with nails, which they procured at the time of their marriage, had to serve them the rest of their lives, or at least as long as the shoes lasted.”<sup>25</sup>

Peasants’ meals, if their job was as servant, consisted of bread, butter, cakes, and sometimes bacon. It was rare to receive any other meat. The usual beverage was water, although in wine-growing areas sour wine made from grapes or apples was provided. Generally speaking:

The food of the peasants . . . was always coarse, and often insufficient. Meat appeared on the table but rarely. In Brittany cider was drunk only in years of abundance. The basic foods were bread, soup, dairy products, and butter. Wheat bread was quite rare; only bread of rye and oats, and that frequently of poor quality, was known. In the poorest regions the peasants ate biscuits and porridge of buckwheat, or even of chestnuts or maize. Wheat and even rye served largely to pay the taxes and farm-rent, or were sold for export when this was permitted. Potatoes, which later became a staple food-product among the farmers, were grown only in a few particularly fertile regions.

In the seventeenth century there was great suffering in the rural sections of every part of France. The governor of Dauphine, Lesdiguières, wrote in 1675, “It is a fact, and I assure you that I know whereof I speak, that the great majority of the inhabitants of this province lived during the winter only from acorns and roots, and that now they can be seen eating the grass of the fields and the bark of the trees.” Misery increased after 1685:

There are practically no peasants in comfortable circumstances. There are only poor cooperative farmers who have nothing. The landlords have to furnish them with cattle, lend them food, pay their *taille* [a direct land tax on the peasantry], and take their crops in payment, and often even this does not cancel the debt. . . . The peasants live from buckwheat bread. Others, who have no buckwheat, live from roots of ferns boiled with the flour of barley or oats, and salt. . . . One finds them sleeping on straw. They have no clothing except what they wear, and that is very poor. They are destitute of furnishings and provisions. Everything in their huts points to dire need.<sup>26</sup>

## From the Beginning

Apparently, eighteenth-century France fared no better than seventeenth-century France. Misery grew more serious. Famine hit France in the winter of 1709, and there were great crises in 1725, 1740, 1759, from 1766 to 1768, from 1772 to 1776, and 1784. The great drought in 1785 forced farmers to sell a portion of their cattle stock. There was an enormous increase in food prices. In 1774 and 1789 farmers had to live on turnips, milk, and even grass. Day laborers, who formed an important part of the agricultural population especially in Flanders, Picardy, eastern Normandy, and Brittany were most affected by the crises. They accounted for the majority of beggars and vagabonds up to the French Revolution. The epidemic outbreaks were more frequent and devastating in rural sections than in cities; rural inhabitants had no medical care. Many sought refuge in cities, but cities were no better in opportunities to secure aid than rural areas.<sup>27</sup>

It can truly be said that “the real wealth of a kingdom lies in the abundance of its supply of food, which is so necessary for human life.” French resources were said to be too limited to allow the French to implement real agricultural improvements, thereby rendering French agriculture retarded in development until at least 1840. They adhered to the old methods. Clearings and uncultivated lands could be used only with partial success.<sup>28</sup>

By 1870 the initiation of the Franco-Prussian War did not help France’s situation, as the prices of foods rose by 25–75 percent. Some items, such as potatoes, cost twenty times as much as in the preceding year. In October 1870, meat rationing began, with a day’s allotted portion gradually becoming smaller and smaller. Supplies ran out, and when there was not one shred of any type of regular meat left, horsemeat was substituted. No breed was spared, and thoroughbreds, cavalry horses, and mules were included in the diet of soldiers and civilians. When horsemeat became scarce, dogs, cats, and especially rats were frequent victims. Pet owners had to keep constant vigil, as regular hunts were undertaken to snatch domestic animals. Loose animals could be seen running for their lives down streets and alleys, as French matrons and their children prowled to catch that night’s supper. Rats were on sale at markets for one franc each, or one franc fifty centimes for a big one. Unfortunately, the price continued to spiral upward so that not everyone could afford them, which is strange because rats occupied Paris in abundance. The multitude of rodents allowed a new industry to develop



## At the Table of Power

in France—the ratcatcher, who supplied both the housewife and the restaurant chef. Diners could order a *salmi* (ragout) of rats at most of the restaurants. Zoo animals were added to the menu, as Paris could no longer afford to feed them. Castor and Pollux, two elephants considered “the pride of Paris,” were killed to provide food. Since there were no choices, one restaurant invested in a number of the “exotic” meats, serving elephant with *sauce chasseur*. Another restaurant became famous for its bear steaks. *Consommé d’éléphant* (elephant broth), *le civet de kangourou* (kangaroo stew), zebra, hippopotamus, giraffe, as well as saddle of cocker spaniel, camel, wolf, donkey, ostrich, antelope with truffles, and “cat delicately embellished with rats,” were the objects of culinary affection in restaurants and homes in 1870 Paris. A high incidence of dysentery was blamed on the “bad rye bread” and the lack of salt, but clearly, numerous conditions prevailed, culinary and otherwise, that set the stage for widespread illness.<sup>29</sup>

The French chef Auguste Escoffier was an army cook during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 and seemed to take pride in the tremendously small portions he was forced to serve. Lacking food supplies, the cavalry’s horses eventually provided the meat ration. Once, Escoffier caught a rabbit, one rabbit, which he cooked and served to the officers. Needless to say, one rabbit provided very small portions for each man. Escoffier, considered the king of chefs, whom the world has placed on a culinary pedestal and thereby emulated down through the decades, prepared many menus and meals (and most other French cafés and restaurants are included in this) during times when food was rationed, when there were severe food restrictions in France and in England. These portions that he and the French served up have set the standards for the portions served in French and other restaurants all over America. Interestingly, America and the world lauds and applauds everything about French culinary “technique” and “presentation.” Part of that “presentation” (the portions, for example) is based on and represents the scarcity of food and the poverty of culinary resources endemic in France during these eras. Clearly, a large part of what is lauded is in fact a defect that has been purposefully redefined as a virtue, a commendable quality or trait.<sup>30</sup>

With all of its problems in agriculture and food production, it is easy to see why France, along with the rest of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, embarked on a poverty reduction program by



## From the Beginning

sending its people to colonize areas outside of their borders, in addition to jumping headlong into colonialism and imperialistic endeavors in wealthier nations. Clearly, the difference between what Africans brought to Louisiana and America in general, compared to the French, speaks volumes. Africa is not only the home of humankind and important technological innovations developed in the ancient world of early human prehistory, it is also home to one of the major agricultural complexes to have evolved in the entire course of human history.

Many regions of Africa were considered bread baskets, which bountifully supplied not only the continent itself but also numerous regions of the ancient world such as Rome. Wealth in West Africa, as in any country or continent, was always defined by its agricultural production and the ability to feed its people. Currently, there are two thousand known crops that are indigenous to Africa, and there are many more that once flourished on the continent in ancient times but which have since died out. The abundance of food dictates the quality of life, and with this abundance was centered diverse culinary creativity.

It is, therefore, not far-fetched to state that people who were highly industrialized iron miners, fisherfolk, and agriculturalists (the mining of iron and other metals alone indicates their high level of civilization) would not have had problems producing rice dishes, sauces, or crab cakes. It has been written that colonial and antebellum plantation nobility brought their recipes from France to Louisiana. Even if they did, noteworthy is the fact that by this time the cuisine of France, particularly that of the elites, had already been Africanized by way of the French colonies—and especially by its most lucrative colony, St. Domingue (Haiti), in the Caribbean.<sup>31</sup>

Once in Louisiana, and by way of direct contact with African cooks in plantation kitchens, “French” cooking was re-Africanized, because “the skill and imaginative hands of plantation cooks—almost invariably of African origin or descent—gave a value to the cooking that exceeded the excellence of the original dish.” Gwendolyn Hall suggests that “it is relevant, therefore, to look to Senegambia for the African roots of Louisiana’s Afro-Creole culture.” She also states that “African nations present in early Louisiana and the conditions in Africa, as well as in Louisiana, molded the formation of Afro-Creole culture.”<sup>32</sup>

Every effort was put forth to develop New Orleans as a colony. Within a twelve-year period Africans brought to Louisiana by the French

would comprise a substantial majority of the population, and that population would thoroughly Africanize Louisiana, including its cooking and cuisine, during the early years of colonization. Noteworthy, too, is that Caribbean and American cuisine continued to be re-Africanized by culinary infusions from Jamaica and Haiti after the Haitian Revolution.<sup>33</sup>

Many Acadians (or Cajuns, as they came to be called in Louisiana) came to Louisiana from Nova Scotia, a rocky terrain where agriculture was difficult because of the short growing seasons and harsh winters, and a land not noted for its cuisine. Much of their diet consisted of salted or dried fish and root vegetables that stored well, such as potatoes and parsnips. It has been written that Acadian fishermen traded a portion of their salt fish in the West Indies for molasses, which indicates a relationship with maintenance and support of slavery and the slave trade. But after all, slavery was the primary business to be in during that era.

Acadian potato dishes were plentiful. There was sometimes chicken or other meat, but most meals were prepared with grated potatoes as the main ingredient. Ragged and starving when they arrived in Louisiana, Acadians were taught by Native Americans and African Americans where, what, and how various plants, crops, and spices could be utilized. Cajuns were also taught medicinal remedies through herbs and spices.

In no way am I stating that Cajuns did not add their own individual touches to the cuisine they found in Louisiana. I am sure that they did, but let us not forget that the French and every other European group who came to Louisiana, as well as to all of the southern and eastern seaboard colonies, survived only as the result of help and influence from Native Americans and the African cooks whose creativity ran the kitchens. You cannot come from a history and heritage with no knowledge of spices and herbs, no varieties of fruits and vegetables, no seafood, and different meats, of not even having enough food, and then magically become purveyors of "the most unique American cuisine ever developed." A unique and distinctive cuisine was already present when the Cajuns arrived.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, Cajuns are merely one of multiple examples of how everybody but Africans are credited with bringing, creating, and developing cuisine here in America (accompanying okra to America on the slave ship does not constitute the sole culinary contribution). Unquestionably, the culinary master narrative we have all been accustomed to reading and listening to is a lie, and those who extol the current master narrative

## From the Beginning

are liars. European peoples may have added their touches to the cuisine they found upon reaching American shores; but, according to local chefs and culinary historians such as Edna Jordan Smith, in areas in and around New Orleans much so-called American food, like Cajun cooking, “is food done by Blacks. It’s just wrapped up with other peoples’ labels on it.” The African and Native American components and methods of preparation, however, are the very foundation, not only of Louisiana’s but of America’s cuisine in general.<sup>35</sup>

Marcel Giraud’s five-volume treatise titled *Histoire de la Louisiane française* (*A History of French Louisiana*), which many writers on the subject refer to and consider a virtual bible on early Louisiana, mentions Blacks only sparingly, in volume 2, as slaves confined to “household tasks and gardening.” But Giraud also concludes that “black slaves, when available in sufficient numbers, would alone ensure the development of the country,” because “upon the blacks would depend not only the cultivation of the land but also all the numberless chores inseparable from the task of building a colony.” Giraud believed that, “without this contribution by workers used to living in a hot country, Louisiana would remain . . . doomed to an existence without prospect of progress.” Indeed, the French did import Africans as slaves in sufficient numbers to build Louisiana.<sup>36</sup>

One of the areas defined by the African presence was, and is, Louisiana cookery. “The black woman,” Giraud states, “was regarded as having a more open and expansive temperament than the Indian woman, and also as being harder-working and readier to spend her time in the burdensome kitchen tasks that the white woman, supposedly enervated by the climate, declined to perform.” In his typical racist fashion, Giraud describes Africans as slave laborers who expressed discontent with harsh treatment by “compensation through stealing,” and who took to alcohol whenever the opportunity arose. He fails to mention, however, the strong and steady African input in and imprint on *any* category of Louisiana’s development, which makes his one of many master narratives unworthy of consideration as an honest and accurate story.<sup>37</sup>

It comes as no surprise, then, that the same racism that saturates the pages of a written history of Louisiana permeates every story regarding Blacks’ input and imprint, not only in the culinary arena but also in every other field where Blacks endeavored to make a living, following the Civil War and on into the 1880s and 1890s. Following the “Wormley

## At the Table of Power

Agreement," or the "Compromise of 1877," the period known as the Great Nadir saw the flourishing of the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist groups "dedicated to the preservation of white supremacy and to keeping blacks subordinated."<sup>38</sup>

Although subordination of Africans by way of segregation and Jim Crow were well entrenched, there were one or two arenas in which they were included on the rosters. One was sports. There were more than sixty African ballplayers on nineteenth-century White professional baseball teams and in White leagues before *Plessy* was decided. Another arena was horse racing, which saw record-breaking Black jockeys, such as Oliver Lewis, James Winkfield, and especially Isaac Burns Murphy. But as professional baseball became a moneymaker and the size of the horse-racing purses increased, the rise of Jim Crow and the jealousy and envy of the White ballplayers and White jockey competitors pushed Blacks out of both businesses and were successful in purging the Black presence "from that point forward until 1947 when Jackie Robinson took the field with the Brooklyn Dodgers."<sup>39</sup>

Sports was not the only field where Africans were replaced when the job became lucrative and attractive to Whites. Throughout the 1800s, steam engines propelled locomotives in the early days of railroad travel, and Africans were usually employed to perform the filthy backbreaking work of shoveling and stoking coal into the engine's boilers. In 1940, when steam engines were replaced with diesel engines, all that needed to be done was to flip a switch. Whites now wanted those jobs, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen moved to ban Africans from having them. A lawsuit was brought against the Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) in 1944 by African fireman William Steele and his famed African attorney Charles Hamilton Houston. He lost the case, but the US Supreme Court, in one of its most significant decisions regarding employment and labor, overturned the lower court. Also significant was that African chefs continued to propel the dining cars on the L&N Railroad. During the same month that the Steele lawsuit was heard in the courts, the L&N Railroad lost its well-known chef, James H. "Jim" Jones. Before his death, Jones had served for almost fifty years as "road chef" of the business car for four "Old Reliable" presidents: Milton H. Smith, Wible L. Mapother, Whitefoord R. Cole, and James B. Hill. He was also the president's office messenger. Jones was described as an excellent chef who prepared many appetizing meals, and no doubt

## From the Beginning

many of these repasts were both served and savored during discussions of firing African employees, lawsuits, and other business matters.<sup>40</sup>

The *modus operandi* is consistent. The elimination of the African American in sports and in economic labor arenas can certainly be linked to the ongoing effort to replace the African caterer during the earlier era and the African American chef during the more modern period. The earlier era coincided with French cooking coming into vogue, around the turn of the twentieth century, leaving African caterers with fewer and fewer clients. Now, cooking was always a labor intensive endeavor, one that Whites were always willing to leave for those “on the lower rungs” of society. But just as sports was becoming big business and a money-maker in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cooking for those who do not cook for themselves was becoming lucrative as well.

The foremost criteria for anyone to be recognized as worthy of becoming a chef—that is, if you really want to be taken seriously—you have to attend a cooking school, and in this country and all of Europe the foundation of your learning experience was, and still is, to adopt “French cuisine and technique.” And that is yet another issue all by itself because what they are telling you is that European cuisine, French cuisine, is the foundation of the culinary arts and is thereby so complex and superior to everyone else’s that it requires a formal education to master it. This is curious because the fact is, and this has not changed, that Whites entering the culinary business here in America never hesitated to approach African cooks in private homes and private clubs and African stewards of lodge and hotel kitchens to ask these chefs and cooks to teach them about ingredients and different foods, so that they might learn “the best methods for preparing things.”<sup>41</sup>

Today cooking is no longer seen as menial labor. The Department of Labor reclassified chefs in 1976. Today the culinary arena has evolved into an arm of the entertainment industry, and with this connection, it is no longer seen as work for the bottom rungs of society. Those who are chosen to be a part of it are paid well, and for this reason, with Cuisinart and Kitchen Aid labor saving appliances in tow, Whites now want it, and you can be certain that White pockets dominate those who are chosen.

Look at today’s celebrity chefs and cookbook authors who gain all the prestige, accolades, television publicity, and the big money. With the exception of a few (until a couple of years ago there were only one or two), all of the rest are White. Are we to believe that in this country

there are only a few excellent Black chefs? Add the fact that the successful White chefs and restaurateurs love to claim “their” cuisine as “New World” and “fusion”—Caribbean/Latin American, Latin American/Asian, Mexican/Italian, sometimes claiming North African influence (many Whites consider North Africa as White, and not really a part of Africa), and so forth—but with the French technique.<sup>42</sup>

Why don’t these chefs stick with French or Spanish or Italian cuisine? Why don’t they simply offer European fare, since it is supposed to be superior? Why has the cuisine of people of color been claimed and renamed as *their* specialty? There is even one chef in Miami and Key West, Florida, who not only claims to be “known internationally as the founding father of ‘New World Cuisine’” but claims also to be “known for introducing [the] concept of ‘fusion’ to the culinary world.”<sup>43</sup>

First, the term “New World” is an insult to Native Americans, the indigenous Americans. Using the terminology “New World” is idiotic and senseless because the only people new to the territories now known as the Americas were Europeans. Second, America’s first “fusion” cuisine was African and Native American—that is, the incorporation of African indigenous traditional methods and agricultural products with those of all of Native America (mainland America, Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America) and this contact took place in stages, long before and also after the European invasion of the Americas.

Why are the same cooks and chefs who actually laid the foundation and built the culinary repertoire of this country not better represented in the moneymaking echelons of culinary notoriety? The answer: Culinary Apartheid. Africans aspiring to become chefs in today’s restaurants are oftentimes met with restaurateurs’ blatant racism, in that they are told by the owners that they “couldn’t have a black . . . or Latin . . . back there, because it would make my customers uncomfortable.” Other times the first comment restaurant owners utter to a Black applicant is “the only thing you know about is fried chicken and collard greens.” Most of this is sheer racism; however, cookbooks and articles share the blame because most written material has relegated African American cooking to fried chicken, chitlins, and barbeque.<sup>44</sup>

Pigeonholing Black folks in the “soul food” corner tells you that Africans in America have never been given credit for, and have been clearly defined out of, their own complex and diverse culinary creations. There is an irony as well. When applicants are denied employment in restaur-

## From the Beginning

rants serving foods in the traditional European, or French technique (after having been fooled into paying money to attend cooking school to learn the French technique), the only jobs they may be able to get—that is, the only experience that will be on their resumé—will include restaurants preparing barbecued spareribs and macaroni and cheese—that is, “soul food.” “Soul food” has always been considered the lowest rung of cuisine, and therefore anyone who prepares it, commercially or otherwise, operates in the menial category of cooking.

Chef Joe Randall, founder of Chef Joe Randall’s Cooking School in Savannah, Georgia, and a fifty-year veteran in the culinary industry, is well respected and noted for his capacity to teach, guide, and advise others on all aspects of food quality and food service operations. “Unfortunately,” states Chef Randall, “in my opinion, when people refer to African American chefs [in the category of] ‘soul food’ they diminish the contributions from African American chefs in America. You think [an African American chef is] limited in his [or her] skills and that’s not necessarily the case. The terminology sometimes pigeonholes African American chefs.” When asked why she felt there is an underrepresentation of African Americans in the food industry, Chef Tanya Holland, cookbook author and founder of award-winning restaurants Brown Sugar Kitchen and B-Side BBQ, both in Oakland, California, responded, “I think there is a lot of representation in lower tier restaurants and I think a lot of it is because of politics. . . . Here [in the United States] they say, ‘We don’t get the [African American] applicants,’ but I know that’s not the truth. It starts in management. It doesn’t happen in my restaurant because I make the decisions. . . . I think it’s just racism.”<sup>45</sup>

America has had an untold number of African American cooks and chefs, both male and female, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who were the creative geniuses at the helm of nationally and world renowned kitchens. The majority were unknown, anonymous, and often purposefully made invisible. One of the most important contributions to the recognition of Black cooking talent is an online website titled the African American Chefs Hall of Fame. Another contribution is assuredly Chef Nathaniel Burton and Rudy Lombard’s work titled *Creole Feast: Fifteen Master Chefs of New Orleans Reveal Their Secrets*, which presents profiles of male and female African American chefs, in addition to recipes for some of their creations served in “the most renowned and widely acclaimed restaurants in New Orleans.” *Creole Feast* was first



## At the Table of Power

published in 1978, but these chefs' creations have long placed White-owned restaurants in New Orleans on the map, and they continue as culinary legends today. As *Creole Feast* points out, the cooking styles of these chefs "encompasses a creative improvisation not unlike that found among traditional New Orleans Black jazz musicians. Their genius relies largely on experience, combined with the full use and development of all five senses. . . . They do measure ingredients; not only with equipment but also with the cupped hands and the pinch of their fingertips." Another important aspect of describing this prestigious circle of chefs is that they "*are all primarily self-taught rather than formally trained. . . . Along the way they received help, guidance and assistance . . . from other professionals who, like them, also lacked formal training.* In this sense, they are proud heirs to the rich legacy of Creole cuisine they have inherited from *Black professional cooks*" (italics added).<sup>46</sup>

African American females have of course been the majority of cooks in private homes, but they have also run restaurant and hotel kitchens. *Creole Feast* profiles Annie Laura Squalls, chef of the Caribbean Room at the Hotel Pontchartrain; Rosa Barganier, of Corinne Dunbar's; Louise Joshua and Letitia Parker, chefs of the Bon Ton Restaurant; and Leah Chase of Dooky Chase's Restaurant. Mention is also made of Leona Victor, private cook at the home of Corinne Dunbar, "who opened her famous restaurant on the strength of Mrs. Victor's ingenious cooking skills. Mrs. Victor created the famous Oysters and Artichokes Dunbar and Dunbar's Banana Beignet, as well as most of the other original recipes for which Dunbar's became noted. She . . . cooked without benefit of written recipes or formal training." Mrs. Clara Mathus was Mrs. Victor's successor, cooking at Dunbar's for twenty-five years.<sup>47</sup>

Burton and Lombard, in *Creole Feast*, assign the term "culinary giant of her era" to one highly acclaimed Black female chef in Louisiana in the 1940s whose cookbook, *New Orleans Cook Book*, and television cooking show catapulted her to local star status. A renowned chef, caterer, restaurateur, and founder of her own cooking school in 1937, Lena Richard and her television show, "Lena Richard's New Orleans Cook Book," graced local TV twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday at 5 p.m. (occasionally at 3 p.m.). The show first appeared in 1947 (although one or two sources have her first appearance in 1949).<sup>48</sup>

The recipes prepared on the show were from her cookbook, *Lena*



## From the Beginning

*Richard's Cook Book*, self-published in 1939. This edition features Mrs. Richard's photograph and a short preface offering culinary credit for her recipes to those who have cooked "for generations in the South." Interestingly, a new edition of her book was published by Houghton, Mifflin in 1940, retitled *New Orleans Cook Book*. Houghton, Mifflin kept the dedication page, no doubt because it praises one of Mrs. Richard's former employers, Mrs. Nugent B. Vairin. What is fascinating is that Mrs. Richard's photograph, preface, and foreword are gone, replaced by an introduction authored by "an American author and journalist." A new preface appears, apparently authored by Lena Richard, this time extolling credit for the recipes "herein revealed" by "the old French chef," as the keeper of "the secrets of Creole cooking." The new preface also states, "Creole Gumbo, Court Bouillon, Crawfish Bisque, Grillade à la Creole, are no longer dishes prepared in secrecy by French chefs, to be eaten by the rich."<sup>49</sup>

Whose idea was this? Did Lena Richard actually write the new preface? Was she made to write it as part of a mandate to whiten and thereby appropriate these recipes (after all, they removed her photograph and tribute to undoubtedly other Black cooks and chefs), and in order to sell the book to a White audience? Did Houghton editors, or Gwen Bristow, the White "American author and journalist," write it and insist Richard go along with it? At any rate, Richard's cookbook has been written up as a landmark of Louisiana cuisine, and she has also been referred to, along with the cookbook author Mary Land, as defining New Orleans and Louisiana cuisine in the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup>

Lena Richard was born in New Roads, Louisiana, in 1892; her parents were Frances Laurence and John Peter Paul. She moved to New Orleans at an early age. After her mother and aunt were hired as domestics for Alice and Nugent Vairin, Lena assisted in the kitchen. She attended cooking school in New Orleans and then graduated from the Fannie Farmer Cooking School in Boston in 1918. Interestingly, she did not feel the cooking school could teach her more than she already knew. She began catering in the 1920s and then opened a sweetshop. Her 1940 cookbook was sold wherever she cooked, in addition to New Orleans department stores D. H. Holmes and Maison Blanche. Meeting Father Divine, founder of Harlem's Peace Mission Movement, helped her sales tremendously. Father Divine agreed to promote her book with his fol-

## At the Table of Power

lowers by selling them for two dollars each, which was a 66 percent cut in price. Father Divine sold one thousand copies of a book that “stands as a record of African American cooking in New Orleans.”<sup>51</sup>

Around the time the 1940 edition was published, Lena Richard left New Orleans and took the position of head chef at the Bird and Bottle Inn in Garrison, New York, about fifty-five miles north of Manhattan. Her most famous dish was Shrimp Soup Louisiane. Bird and Bottle Inn later canned the bisque and sold it by mail order. Richard returned to New Orleans and opened Lena’s Eatery in November 1941. Her reputation came to the attention of Charles Rockefeller of the John D. Rockefeller Foundation, and she was hired as chef of the foundation’s Travis House restaurant in Colonial Williamsburg during World War II, from 1943 to 1945. In May 1943 she prepared “one of the most elaborate of dinners that had ever been served” at Travis House—for the British High command during a break from meetings with American military staff in Washington. Later that year Richard cooked for Winston Churchill’s wife and daughter, Clementine and Mary Churchill. Her scalloped oysters, shrimp Creole, stuffed eggplant, and other dishes were in such demand that Travis House opened a takeout service.<sup>52</sup>

In 1945 she returned to New Orleans and reopened her catering business with her daughter. While her cooking show ran on TV, she also opened a new restaurant on February 19, 1949, called Lena Richard’s Gumbo House. Located at 1936 Louisiana Avenue, it was a family-run establishment. Her son-in-law, Leroy Rhodes, was the manager; upkeep of the property was overseen by her husband, Percival; her daughter, Marie, was in charge of the restaurant’s finances. Lena Richard also produced frozen dishes in the late 1940s at a plant that was said to employ mostly women. Her turtle soup, okra gumbo, grillades, chicken fricassée, and beef stew were distributed by Bordelon Fine Foods and shipped across the country in five- and ten-gallon containers. She died unexpectedly in 1950, but her family kept her Gumbo House going until 1958.<sup>53</sup>

No disrespect to Lena Richard, but there have been a number of other skilled African American chefs whose creations have defined Louisiana’s cuisine. Leah Chase (also profiled in *Creole Feast*), the executive chef of Dooky Chase’s Restaurant in New Orleans, may not have had her own cooking show on TV, but numerous accolades have embraced her, and her restaurant has been a New Orleans landmark for well over half a century. The oldest of fourteen children, Leah Lange Chase, from Mad-

## From the Beginning

isonville, Louisiana, was married to musician Edgar “Dooky” Chase. When African Americans were barred from New Orleans restaurants in the 1950s and 1960s, Leah Chase cooked for civil rights workers. She even delivered meals to struggling artists and catered their openings before they became known. She still ships her famous gumbo all over the world, and her customers have included Quincy Jones and Sidney Poitier.<sup>54</sup>

The Black male chefs profiled in *Creole Feast* are no less distinguished. Nathaniel Burton and Charles Kirkland of Broussard’s, Raymond Thomas Sr. of the French Market Seafood House, Louis Evans (author of *Louis Evans’ Creole Cookbook*) and Rochester Anderson of the Caribbean Room in the Hotel Pontchartrain, Malcom Ross and Larry Williamson of Galatoire’s, Austin Leslie of Chez Helene (which he opened himself), Sherman Crayton of Vieux Carre Restaurant, Charles Bailey of Braniff Place at the Grand Hotel, and Henry Carr of Manale’s are merely a few of those who brought versatility and legendary tastes to the profession.<sup>55</sup>

Many African American females were private cooks for White families or went directly into catering. Mrs. Christine Warren was a successful caterer, whose business thrived for over thirty-five years. Ms. Lucy Ater also catered. Born in 1893, she cooked in various homes and taught herself how to cook, learning her art on the job. Friends, as well as reading cookbooks, helped her to learn cookery, and eventually she created numerous recipes herself. She began to excel in decorating cakes and other items. Salaries, however, were low; starting out she received eight dollars a week. The market and the wagons that came through the neighborhoods carrying fresh fish and other foods were venues for Ms. Ater’s food supplies.<sup>56</sup>

Working for the Hardies for ten years, Mrs. Christine Warren accompanied them every summer by train or barge to Parish Christien. When Mr. Hardie died, she went to work for the Rittenbergs, where she stayed for eighteen or nineteen years. During that time, according to Ater’s granddaughter Shirley Bateman, all of the Rittenberg’s friends would call on her to cater their parties. Mrs. Rittenberg was of the opinion that Ms. Ater was too fine a cook to be confined in her kitchen. She suggested to Ater that she set up a business so that everyone would know how good she was. When one of the Rittenbergs died, Ater received a little money, which enabled her to start her catering business. During her catering years she made gumbo for the famed entertainer Jack Benny

## At the Table of Power

and his entourage at one of her clients' home. The next night she catered another party where Benny was in attendance. It was Ms. Ater's cooking Benny savored "all the time he was there in New Orleans."<sup>57</sup>

Delivering food by taxi and on foot was difficult, although the inconvenience did not deter her or hamper her business. Ms. Ater's granddaughter Shirley Bateman took over her catering business, having learned everything about catering from her grandmother, who never advertised. When this interview was conducted, Ms. Bateman was in her twenty-third year as a caterer, whose partially inherited clientele was built by word of mouth.<sup>58</sup>

Originally intending to become a dietitian, Ms. Bateman was thrown into the business when she had to cover for her Grandmother Ater one day when she was very ill. Grandmother Ater, however, would never tell her how to prepare dishes. Bateman learned by watching her. When she finished watching, she would go and write down what she saw and then memorize the recipe. The day Grandmother Ater became ill was the day Ms. Bateman learned how to make pie crust. She read the pie crust recipe ingredients in a few books and then made pie crust her own way. Everything was cooked from scratch, even during the busiest season, from March to January. Bateman catered parties attended by Zsa Zsa Gabor, Charleston Heston, Bob Hope, as well as George Bush when he ran for governor of Texas. At one time there were only three Black caterers in the city—Carrie Shaw (whose specialties were deboned and stuffed chicken legs and thighs and homemade ice cream) and Grandmother Ater were two of the three. There were not many caterers who did dinner parties. Bateman states that White caterers preferred cocktail parties; they liked "moving with the debutantes." Bateman also mentioned that one of the White caterers "couldn't stand to do 'tomato windows' and watercress sandwiches, so she had [Grandmother] Lucy do them for her."<sup>59</sup>

Shirley Bateman began doing a lot of bar mitzvahs. A rabbi explained to her all of the do's and don'ts of cooking for bar mitzvahs. Ms. Bateman says she created a recipe for quiche hors d'oeuvres. She says that after she started serving cocktail quiche, it came out on the market within three years.

Now, how often has this occurred? How many times have Black cooks and caterers served their personal creations to the rich and famous at cocktail and dinner parties, only to see these creations wind up either on the market or in food columns of newspapers, or cookbooks, with

## From the Beginning

other people's names on them? In addition, Bateman mentions that one of the Rittenbergs worked with restaurateur Paul Prudhomme at one time. Was this after constant exposure to Bateman's or Grandmother Ater's culinary talent?

When asked whether any part of her culinary repertoire included special dishes, Bateman responded, "No," because everything you cook has to be a specialty. All of Ms. Bateman's specialties, too, were transported in pots by taxi, until she learned how to drive and bought a station wagon. Bateman has cooked for eighteen hundred at a single gathering for the New Orleans Saints. In fact, through Ben Wiener, she cooked for events for the Saints for eighteen years. She credits her success not to formal education as a dietitian but to what she learned on her own and from watching Grandmother Ater, who died on Christmas Day, 1980.<sup>60</sup>

There are numerous chefs who deserve a place on the roster, and they are not all in New Orleans. Robert W. Lee was "one of those worthy heirs to a great tradition of southern cooking." From the Biltmore Hotel in Atlanta to the King and Prince Beach Club on Saint Simons Island, Georgia, to the Harrisburger Hotel in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1939, Chef Lee helped to establish great cuisine. Lee joined the army in 1942, and during his World War II service, where he became a mess sergeant and cooking instructor, he received a medal from President Franklin D. Roosevelt for the extraordinary number of cooks he trained. He returned to the Harrisburger Hotel as a cook in 1946 after his army discharge.<sup>61</sup>

The hotel went through a rapid turnover of executive chefs during the next year, but finally Lee was recommended for the position of executive chef, which he accepted and held for the next twenty-seven years. Chef Lee managed the Harrisburger's kitchens with an all African American crew. This allowed him to train numerous young men and women for careers in the culinary field. For over two decades Chef Lee made the menus, hired and fired and trained hundreds of African American chefs. He also lectured and gave culinary demonstrations at Pennsylvania State University School of Hotel Management. When the owner of the Harrisburger Hotel died in 1966, Chef Lee moved on to become executive chef at the Blue Ridge Country Club until 1969. He then became executive chef at the Sheraton Hotel in Harrisburg for the Archris Hotel Corporation of Boston. During Chef Lee's tenure cooking at the Harrisburger Hotel, "lines stretched for blocks from its doors. No other menu in town offered crab cakes, chicken pot pies and chopped chicken livers

## At the Table of Power

prepared in classic Southern style by the city's first African-American executive chef." And over the years he did garner an award-winning reputation for his crab cakes, stuffings, hors d'oeuvres, and salads. "We didn't use cans like the chefs do today," Lee commented. "I'm about the last person who would know about preparation from the bottom." Fresh and from scratch was his credo, and he made all of the food for the hotel that way, including mayonnaise and dressings.<sup>62</sup>

Chef Lee won his first cooking competition at twenty-three years of age. However, he was not allowed to receive the prize in front of an audience. "At that time, the blacks could not go to the front to get their recognition," Lee said. Later in his career, Lee was asked to do a cooking demonstration at a York, Pennsylvania, hotel but was greeted by a sign directing Blacks to the rear entrance. Chef Lee threatened to leave until management agreed to let him walk through the front door. More recognition was to come, as Chef Lee was recognized for outstanding achievements in the culinary arts when he was named Chef of the Year from 1970 through 1979. He retired in 1979 and lived with his wife, Geneva, in Harrisburg until his death on November 24, 1999.<sup>63</sup>

The African American Chefs Hall of Fame also includes Leon West, born into a family of eight children in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1946. In 1978 Chef West joined the staff of ARAMARK. After being promoted, he was transferred to the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans, where he assumed the responsibility of executive chef in 1983. West is known locally and internationally as one of the most talented chefs in New Orleans. There is also Chef Stanley Jackson Sr., one of ten siblings, and a New Orleans native. His first job in New Orleans was as cook at D. H. Holmes Potpourri Restaurant on Canal Street. He was shortly promoted to chef and put in charge of the menus. Several years later, Chef Jackson met Paul Prudhomme, who at the time was head chef at Commander's Palace. Prudhomme was a fan of Jackson's work at D. H. Holmes, so much so that Jackson was one of the chefs Prudhomme asked to join him to open K-Paul's. Jackson went with him as his executive chef.<sup>64</sup>

The late Chef Patrick Clark was also well known in culinary circles for his creations and presentations at master cooking classes. He was a friend of Chef Joe Randall who was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, and raised in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Chef Randall served as a cook at Turner Air Force Base (a SAC installation in Albany, Georgia, that has

## From the Beginning

since been shut down) while enlisted in the US Air Force in the early 1960s. He has since gone on to become the executive chef at a dozen restaurants including the award-winning Cloister Restaurant in Buffalo, New York, and the Fishmarket in Baltimore, Maryland. A catering firm was at one time under his ownership and management, and he has provided consultant services to restaurant operators and served on the faculty of four schools.

Chef Randall's uncle Richard L. Ross was a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, restaurateur and caterer, who early on gave his nephew a taste of what a career in the culinary field was all about. Chef Randall later completed apprenticeships with Chefs Robert W. Lee at the Harrisburger Hotel and Frank E. Castelli at the Penn Harris Hotel in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. A founding board member of the Southern Food Alliance and Culinary Wonders, Inc., Randall is also the author of *A Taste of Heritage*. From 2000 to 2016 he owned and operated the Chef Joe Randall's Cooking School in Savannah, Georgia, which he used as a "vehicle . . . that preaches the gospel of authentic southern cuisine to all comers. The success of the school is a credit to his undying devotion to his heritage and the cuisine of the South, and his love of sharing it with others."<sup>65</sup>

All of these cooks and chefs should be household names, whom we should look to as culinary role models. Historically speaking, we certainly have quite a selection from which to choose. Unfortunately, most of the names of African American culinary greats have been lost or purposefully deleted from the records. Since George Washington was the first president of the United States and handed down a small record of his African culinary staff (if only because the possibility of losing one of them threw him into a panic and caused him to write letters), it is fitting to take a look not only at his kitchen and the contributions of the African chefs and cooks responsible for establishing the high culinary reputation of his homes but also at their development of an eternally influential culinary legacy for fine dining in America.