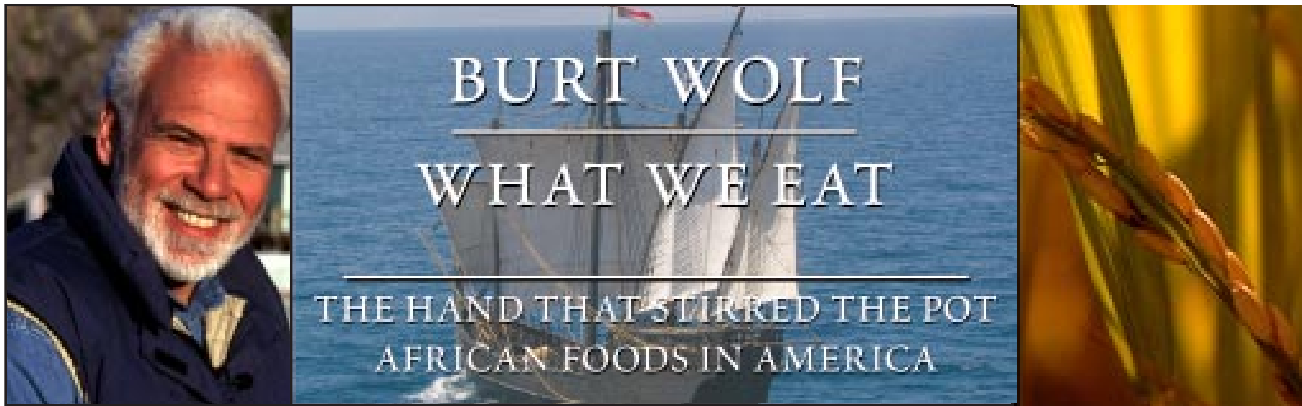

The domestication of plants and animals in Africa goes back at least 6,000 years. One of the basics foods for a number of groups was the yam, and when iron tools were introduced about 2,500 years ago yam production was made easier and crop yields increased rapidly. People who ate yams developed a higher culture because they had a more reliable source of food than their neighbors. They also developed larger populations.

"Peculiar as it may sound, slave traders really understood African cultures—especially West African. If you read slave ship logs, you realize the captains knew that people from one region of Africa ate yams and would not eat rice and so, in their own self-interest, they brought on board foods the slaves would eat. The healthier a slave looked at auction, the higher the price he or she could garner." —Jessica Harris

African cuisine came to the New World with the slaves imported to work in agriculture. On the plantations where they were allowed to grow their own food, okra, bananas, watermelon, yams, rice and peanuts were all brought in. But frequently, they didn't have a choice about what they ate, when they ate, and, in many cases, where they ate it. The only choice they might have had was how they cooked it.

The adaptation of African foods to the Americas had two distinct stages. The first came from the fact that the slaves came from many different tribes with many different gastronomic traditions. When they were brought together on the boats and on the plantations, food traditions between the different groups were exchanged.

"You'd find rice eaters working with yam eaters, and fish eaters next to meat eaters. They didn't come from the same place; they didn't speak the same language. They were juxtaposed within this New World. In the end, a new cuisine was created."

—Jessica Harris

The second stage involved substituting readily available American ingredients for foods no longer at hand. In the process, Africans played a major role in the creation of American cuisine, particularly in the Caribbean and the southern United States.

"Our mythical Southern cuisine was created by black slave cooks. In any house of any importance whatsoever, slaves did the cooking—Black hands stirred the pots. It produced a phenomenon which the Chinese call 'wok hand' or 'wok signature.' The person who does the cooking makes the dish their own."

—Karen Hess

THE PEANUT GALLERY

A peanut is not a nut. It is a legume, like peas and beans. But unlike peas and beans, peanuts are oily, not starchy. They also have an unusual way of growing. As soon as the plant starts to germinate, it grows back down into the ground where the peanuts mature in their pods.

Peanuts are native to South America and have been a staple crop in Bolivia, Peru and Brazil for almost 4,000 years. Archaeologists report that ancient Peruvians ate peanuts as a snack food, and that their city streets were as littered with peanut shells as the stands at a modern baseball stadium.

A thousand years ago, the Aztecs made a peanut paste very similar to peanut butter. Curiously, they used their peanut paste not as a food, but as a toothpaste.

By the early 1500s, the Portuguese, seeking out new trade routes to the East, became aware of the value of peanuts during their voyages along the coast of Brazil. Peanuts keep for months and can be eaten raw, which makes them ideal for sea voyages. They began taking peanuts on their ships, and these voyages brought peanuts to West Africa. By 1510, the peanut was a staple at Portuguese trading posts.

Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, the people of West Africa ate Bambara nuts, which are similar to peanuts. Africans quickly discovered that peanuts produced a higher yield, provided more oil and were easier to grow than the Bambara, and they soon became a staple crop across West Africa.

Peanuts arrived in North America via the slave trade. By the early 1700s, Portuguese slave traders put them on board the slave ships that went from Africa to the Caribbean. And when the peanut came back to the Americas, it came back with its African name. In the Bantu language the Bambara nut was called a "goober." Africans used this word to describe the peanut, and

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when they traveled across the Atlantic, they took the old name and the new food with them. They also took the ways they had developed for using the peanut. They ate them raw, roasted, boiled, and prepared in soups and stews. They also used peanut oil for frying.

The peanut became so closely associated with Africa that even leading botanists didn't realize they originated in South America until the mid-1800s.

A few white planters, including Thomas Jefferson, attempted to grow peanuts as a cash crop, but most whites used them for hog feed. But Africans were doing the cooking in many white households and they slowly introduced peanuts into the cuisine of the south.

In 1791, a slave rebellion in Haiti sent hundreds of French planters and their household slaves to Philadelphia. The household servants brought with them a taste for peanuts, and peanut recipes soon appeared in early American cookbooks.

By the early 1800s, African women in Philadelphia were working as peanut vendors, selling peanuts and peanut cakes. In the years before packaged snack foods, peanuts were a favorite snack of the working classes. Theatergoers munched on peanuts, and littered the floors with the shells. Critics began to complain about the "peanut-eating geniuses" in the cheap seats, and the notion of the "peanut gallery" was born.

THE ULTIMATE PEANUT MAN

Born in Missouri in 1864, George Washington Carver was the greatest champion of the peanut in the history of the U.S.

An excellent student, Carver got a master's degree in agriculture, and became the first black faculty member at the agricultural college that eventually became Iowa State University. In 1896 Booker T. Washington invited Carver to head Tuskegee Institute's new Department of Agriculture. He took the job and worked there for almost five decades.

For years, Carver had been searching for a replacement crop for cotton farmers who'd lost their livelihoods to boll weevil infestations. Ideally, the crop would be one they could eat themselves if market prices dropped. His search led him to the peanut. In 1916 he published a pamphlet, *How to Grow the Peanut and 105 Ways of Preparing it for Human Consumption*, which set the tone for his future. Carver became a tireless advocate of peanut cultivation and consumption, lecturing widely on the virtues of the peanut, for the rest of his career.

Carver served dinners consisting entirely of peanut products: peanut soup, peanut-based meat substitutes, peanut beverages, and peanut desserts. By the end of his life, he had developed over 300 peanut products, including such unlikely items as wallboard, creams, paints, soaps and dyes.

One of the very few peanut products Carver didn't invent was peanut butter. For that matter, neither did John Harvey Kellogg, who coined the term "peanut butter" when he introduced it as a health food in 1894. Africans had been grinding nuts into pastes with a mortar and pestle even before encountering the peanut itself.

BANANA'S BOUNTY

The banana was first cultivated around 3,000 years ago in Malaysia, and eventually became a staple food throughout Southeast Asia. Malaysian sailors spread the fruit throughout the islands of the Pacific, where bananas, along with their starchier cousin, the plantain (the plants differ only in that the plantain's fruit contains less moisture) became primary crops in Polynesia and the Philippines.

The banana plant, which can reach heights of 30 feet, is not really a tree, but a gigantic herb, related to the lily and the orchid. The "trunk" of the banana plant is no more than a bunch of tightly rolled leaves. It is a tropical plant and refuses to bear significant quantities of fruit north of 30º latitude, which is about even with the city of New Orleans.

By the sixth century B.C. bananas grew widely in India, where Alexander the Great encountered them during his Indian campaign of 327 B.C.

Arab traders who made their way to Malaysia in the 1600s were the first to introduce the banana to Africa. Early on, the banana became part of Islamic legend. Koranic scholars identified the banana—not the apple—as the forbidden fruit in Paradise. According to their interpretation, Europeans, in their translations of Genesis, may have confused the banana with the Middle Eastern fig. If Adam and Eve were looking for something to cover their nakedness, a huge banana leaf makes more sense as a loincloth than a fig leaf.

Bananas spread quickly across the African continent, and became an important food crop. The fruit picked up the name by which we know it today in West Africa, on the Guinea coast. The name stuck, since this was where modern Europeans had their first significant contact with the fruit.

In 1482, the Portuguese brought the banana to their sugar plantations on the Atlantic island of Madeira. Spanish traders soon imported it to the Canary Islands. As the European powers moved their plantations to the Americas, bananas followed. Portuguese slave ships were provisioned with bananas when they left Africa, and by 1516 the Spanish were growing bananas in the Caribbean as food for the expanding population of African slaves. The banana quickly adapted to the American tropics, and became a basic food in Central and South America.

In the 1870s and 1880s, a group of U. S. fruit merchants that

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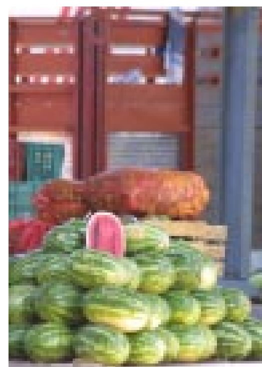
eventually became the United Fruit Company began importing bananas from Panama, Costa Rica, and Jamaica. Bananas were introduced to the North American public at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, and soon became popular in the United States. At first they were a luxury item, but as shipping methods and refrigeration improved and prices dropped, bananas became equally popular with the working classes.

IT'S THE PITS

The watermelon was first domesticated in southern and central Africa, probably in the region around the Kalahari Desert. It was cultivated in Egypt more than 5,000 years ago—wall paintings featuring watermelons, along with actual watermelon seeds, have been found in Egyptian tombs. Watermelon consumption spread through North Africa, where the moisture-rich melons—"botanical canteens," as some scientists have called them—became very valuable in the desert environment. They provided both food and water. Arab traders took watermelons wherever they traveled: the watermelon reached India by the 800s and China by the 1100s.



The Moors cultivated watermelons during the centuries when they ruled Spain. The Spanish grew watermelons in Florida as early as 1576, and by the early 1600s they were being grown in European gardens as far north as England.

The watermelon was widely accepted by Native Americans in North America, and cultivation quickly spread westward. By the time the British had begun planting watermelons in the Northeast, the Zuni and Pueblo peoples were already growing them in the arid Southwest. By 1629, watermelons were being grown in Massachusetts. Watermelon festivals, along with competitive giant-watermelon growing, became a part of popular rural culture all over the young United States.

Africans spread the fruit throughout the American South, the Caribbean, and South America. In the Southern United States, watermelons became associated with enslaved African-Americans, and even after the end of slavery they have remained an all-too-familiar symbol of racism in the United States.

"People…think watermelon, and they have a hideous mental image of late 19th century, early 20th century African Americans being lampooned. And yet watermelons certainly started out as something positive. It was a simple, easy, functional way of getting the liquid that you needed for survival. It did originate in Africa and so it really is ours."

—Jessica Harris

The watermelon, indisputably African, has become essentially American; an enduring summer treat for Americans of every racial and ethnic background.

TASTY AND SO NICE

"Americans associate rice with China, but its cultivation in America was learned from Africans. African methods, African know-how, African cooking techniques, and at the beginning, even African rice."

—Karen Hess

According to some estimates, half the world's population depends on rice. It is thought to have originated in India, and has been grown in Asia for some 3,000 years. In Europe, rice has been known since Alexander the Great returned from India.

In West Africa, a native rice species, *Oryza glaberrima*, was domesticated independently of the Asian varieties, and has been cultivated there since 1500 B.C. In the tidal lowlands of the Senegal and Gambia rivers, an area that became known as the "Grain Coast" or "Rice Coast," African farmers developed a system of wetlands for rice cultivation that resembles the paddy system used in Asia.

Europeans in the Americas began growing rice on dry land irrigated only by rainfall. At first it was food for the growing slave population, but it became an export commodity by the beginning of the 1700s. South Carolina emerged as the center of rice production in North America. As rice gained economic importance, a plantation system for its production developed.

Plantation owners in South Carolina's low country were well aware of the traditions of African rice growing, and the rice economy that developed in the American South depended on African slave labor.

"There is an indigenous African rice, a wet rice grown in water according to a certain system. The Carolina planters knew that, and paid a top price for slaves from that part of Africa who understood rice cultivation. The entire rice system of Carolina is based on an African task system."

—Jessica Harris

Slaves from Senegal and Gambia introduced the flood irrigation techniques they'd used in West Africa, and built an elaborate irrigation system that made the Carolina rice industry possible. In the process, they made "Carolina Rice " a prized export to Europe—and at the same time made South Carolina planters some of the richest people in North America. Europeans were so enamored of Carolina rice that when the British took Charleston during the Revolutionary War, they removed the entire rice crop and shipped it home to England.

African rice cooking has left its mark on all the cuisines of the Americas. The familiar American dishes of rice and beans—Hoppin' John in the southern U.S., Jamaican and Haitian rice and peas, Cuba's Moros y Cristianos, and the rice and beans dishes found all over Latin America—are all of African origin.

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YAMS AND OKRA

Yams are native to both Southeast Asia and West Africa, and have been growing in both areas for about 8,000 years. Starchy porridges, made from grains or tubers, and eaten with a sauce or meat, are common all over Africa.

In the early 1500s, the Portuguese brought the sweet potato to Africa, where, like the peanut, it was quickly accepted. While the peanut largely replaced the Bambara groundnut, the sweet potato was added to African menus, grown and used alongside, rather than in place of, the yam.

True African yams made their way to the Americas with the slaves. And ever since, North Americans have been confusing yams and sweet potatoes. Perhaps it's because African Americans described the sweet potato using the same word they'd used at home for the yam. Today, the sweeter, smoother-fleshed varieties of sweet potato are commonly referred to as yams, though true yams are sweeter than sweet potatoes. The confusion is perpetuated by the fact that several varieties of sweet potatoes are even marketed as yams. Yams, which have a skin resembling bark and white flesh, rather than the orange flesh and smoother skin of the sweet potato, are still rarely encountered in the United States.

Okra dishes, the "signature dish of the African Diaspora," are the most typically African of all of the dishes served in the United States. While today okra is closely associated with Southern cuisine, and with the foods of Louisiana Creoles in particular, okra was brought here as food for slaves.

A relative of cotton and hibiscus, okra is native to Africa. It probably originated either in the rainforests of western Sudan, or in the Nile Valley, around what is now Ethiopia. As it spread north and west, okra became a fixture in many African cuisines.

The okra dishes of the Americas make some of the clearest culinary connections to Africa. The slaves took the okra recipes they knew and revised them, establishing a "gumbo trail" that reaches back to West Africa.

All over the South (and in the Caribbean and South America) traditional okra stews were extended with local meats, fish, vegetables, and grains. Okra is the primary ingredient of gumbo, one of the dishes most closely associated with New Orleans' creole culture. In fact, the name "gumbo" comes from the Angolan word for okra in the Twi language of Ghana.

When you talk about the influence of black cooks on the foods of this hemisphere, it's almost impossible to know where to start. Rice and beans, gumbo, fried chicken, peanut butter, watermelon, sweet potato pie, and a banana split—what could be more American? Nothing, as long as you remember that an essential ingredient in each of those dishes was brought here by African slaves.

TO LEARN MORE

Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons:
Africa's Gift to New World Cooking
by Jessica B. Harris
published by Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Peanuts: The Illustrious History
of the Goober Pea
by Andrew F. Smith
published by University of Illinois Press

The Carolina Rice Kitchen:
The African Connection
by Karen Hess and Robert M. Weir
published by University of South Carolina Press

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