

FROM WE ARE WHAT WE EAT

1998

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## Manje

January 1997

Food and the act of eating are the same word in Kreyol. The average Haitian thinks about this action rather more often than he or she is able to perform it. But Haitian cuisine, a synthesis of French and African ideas of food, is delicious if you have the purchase power. Good and pricey restaurants in Port-au-Prince, or the kitchens of the hotels for foreigners, provided subtly flavored soups; gamey and tasty meat from the well-exercised native pigs, goats, and chickens; a surprisingly succulent conch stew (known in Kreyol as *lambi*), piquantly seasoned with *habañero* peppers. There was a greater supply of fresh fish than had been available before the intervention (when anyone with

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command of a boat immediately set sail for Florida), and on the north coast you even found a delicately flavored Haitian lobster.

If you were Haitian you would very seldom eat the foods that were served to *blancs*. You got by on *riz ak pois*, cassava bread, bananas, fruit, sticks of fresh-peeled sugar cane, and the root vegetables that, since slavery time, had been known as *viures*. You ate meat seldom and in very small quantities; somewhat more frequently you might swallow rich soup stocks boiled from bones.

If you were *blanc* you could eat whatever you liked so long as you didn't mind getting dysentery, which would be inconvenient during long days of travel on Haitian roads, and in severe cases could lead to rectal hemorrhaging followed by death. Therefore you had to follow certain rules: principally that everything you ate must be well cooked and (what was more difficult to know) recently cooked, for if flies lit on the food after it had been prepared the same sorts of problems were likely to ensue. Sadly, the delicious-looking fruits were not worth the risk (unless you were assured of clean water to wash them before cutting), and we had to resist the delicious-smelling cassava bread that Xavier always bought at the roadside markets—it was still warm, but had been a little too frequently passed from hand to hand.

In Port-au-Prince you didn't need to worry—in the hotels for *blancs* it was probably even safe to eat a salad. If

you went north by the coast road, there were safe restaurants in the beach hotels and then at Gonaives. But the interior was unknown territory concerning *manje sauf pou blanc*, so you ate infrequently, perhaps once a day, cautiously even then, and not too much. This taught you something about hunger, and something about organizing food—for perhaps the majority of Haitians the whole day's energy went into organizing the materials for a single meager meal. On the return flight the American doctor remarked to me that she found it strange how Haitian adults always ate before their children, especially when in all other respects Haitians were so loving with their children. But of course, I explained to her, when there was absolutely no slack in anyone's situation, the adults must eat first so they would have energy to go out and stalk the ingredients for their family's next meal. We had to look away from each other then, the doctor and I, for it was not yet a suitable moment to begin weeping.

Later on, when you did get somewhat sick in spite of all precautions, you could eat almost nothing but rice (which absorbed toxins and cleansed the stomach), perhaps rice and beans if you felt sufficiently daring, but careful with beans—it was necessary to balance your need for protein with the risk of worsening your illness. Once you returned from the interior to the establishments frequented by *blancs*, you could look at all sorts of interesting food without actually being able to eat it. At Moulin Sur

Mer, a "vacation prison" similar to Club Med but less expensive and more attractively designed, there were hamburgers, club sandwiches, and sirloin steaks, rather expensive but certainly healthy (even the flies that wafted around the sea breeze seemed to have passed a health inspection), and yet your purchase power had ceased to be meaningful due to the condition of your intestines, so you must only eat a little *riz ak pois*, perhaps half a normal serving.

No matter what it was they were eating, Haitians always ate very slowly, deliberately, without conversation, chewing each mouthful with great care so that all nutrients would be extracted. They did not hurry, but in the end, when all the bones had been cracked and sucked, they left absolutely nothing at all. For somewhat different reasons you adopted the same manner of eating. A slow pace and very thorough chewing were certainly wiser for your stomach, and as for conversation, the culture shock of arriving at Moulin Sur Mer after days on the central plateau and *au Cap* had struck you speechless anyway. Here the international businessmen locked up their families in pleasant security, so the beach was scattered with young white mothers sunning in bikinis, and toddlers playing in the sand. The sun was tilting westward toward the island of Gonave and the flat, still surface of the bay was turned a coppery color by the light. A dugout Haitian sailboat plied toward Gonave, sail half-slackening from the mast.

Below the mirrored surface of the water was the Island Below Sea, the metaphysical Guinée, African home of Les Morts and Les Mystères, who could not rise up through that surface until Legba opened the way for their passage. Who were these people who sat stuporously on the sunny beach, without knowing anything of history or the gods? They were *blancs*, but what were you?

When so many people had so much trouble finding food, fat became the most ostentatious evidence of wealth. Body fat meant warm, comfortable, voluptuous prosperity. For this reason Alex was vastly admired by everyone. Cries of "Gros nèg!" (or in the capital, "Beeg Boy!") rang up and down the street whenever we took a stroll. The prostitutes who chased us down the Rue Capois from the Champ de Mars stroked his belly lovingly, not quite believing it was real. In the countryside, women wanted to make love with him for free.

But just at the moment, life for Haitians successful enough to be fat had become rather complicated and difficult. The skinny Haitians, meaning the vast majority, were angry about neoliberalism and structural adjustment and *la vie chère*, but just now they were most furious of all at the *grans manjes*—big eaters. That mood was feeding into the carnival season—this year's most popular carnival song was a denunciation of the *grans manjes*. Therefore it was not safe for fat people to show themselves in public. You could always exchange your Armani for a suit of rags

when you wanted to go slumming, but slipping out of sixty pounds of excess avoirdupois was quite another matter. For the time being, the fat Haitians kept behind the high walls of the fortresslike houses in enclaves like Petionville, or (more rarely) behind the tinted windows of their Mercedes Benzes.

In fact, the only heavy Haitians I ever saw (outside the airport) were the three gargantuan coal-black women who served the tables at the little restaurant of the Hotel Internationale in Cap-Haïtien. The fat ladies were wonderfully generous with food—they would give you both legs of a chicken atop a gigantic heap of *riz ak pois*, with a bowl of rich gravy on the side. If you ate there slowly and carefully, according to the Haitian eating habits you had now adopted, you were nourished enough to hold on for two days.

When we arrived the choice was the chicken and rice or some sort of spaghetti concoction, and as I mistrusted the spaghetti, I said that I preferred *manje Ayitien*. One of the *gras mamans* looked at me coldly (truly those women always looked sullen but this was because their thick, fat cheeks squeezed their eyes into rather unpleasant expressions) and said, "Chicken is *not* a Haitian food." Whereupon I understood that her rolls of blubber were evidence not of greed or gluttony but of thrift—the lady's fat was her bank account.

The Haitians, meanwhile, had taken to eating some

rather odd things. Spaghetti with butter and ketchup had become very popular, perhaps because it was believed to be American food, perhaps only because it was cheap and high in carbohydrates. Ensure had evolved into a popular after-dinner drink. In the capital, all sorts of processed, packaged foods had become more common since the intervention—certainly this sort of thing kept better, and the packaging helped to make it safe.

For now, and for some time after you returned to the United States as well, you were better off with rice and a little beans, but not too much. If that did not teach you about being Haitian, at least you learned about hunger in the midst of plenty. Your attitude toward food would not revert to normal even when your intestinal complaint improved. When you went to the grocery store you were apt to fall into a sort of fugue state; there was too much, too many choices; it was impossible to choose, and you came near the brink of panic. You were allowed to eat whatever you needed, and there was no harm in making your food interesting and tasty, but overeating now felt truly shameful. Whenever you saw people wasting food, you pretty well wanted to kill them.

At Hinche we selected *gros bouillon*, which I figured was the safest bet since it would have been boiled a long time; besides, I had always wanted to try it. Under the light of a not-quite-full moon we walked to the restaurant where *gros bouillon* was prepared. Some forms of progress

had landed in Hinche from afar: the support mission had paved the central streets and square with durable-looking hexagonal blocks, and to counterbalance the Shell station surreally positioned on the perimeter, in the center there was a colossal church that also looked to have been dropped from a spaceship, magnificently domed and painted blue and white. The moonlight was so vague that our skin color did not seem remarkable; besides, everyone in town was solemnly concentrating on a news broadcast in Kreyol that seemed to play, stentoriously, from every door and window we passed. At the *gros bouillon* restaurant we were the first guests to arrive, and they wanted to turn on the electric lights for us, but I demurred—the dim interior was more pleasant and also gave us better camouflage.

*Gros bouillon* was a thick and yellow stock, floating with chunks of potato, plantain, yam, carrot, small cylindrical cassava-flour dumplings, and a few tiny and knotty pieces of goat meat that clung to shards of bone. After twenty hours without food the impact of this nourishment was indescribable. A single long table filled the whole space of the restaurant; we shared it with several small parties of Haitians who happened by. In the comforting darkness we ate slowly, silently, with profound respect; eating had become a form of prayer.