THE COOKING GENE

A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South

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Amistad
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

FIRST EDITION

Designed by Suet Yee Chong

Grateful acknowledgment to Stephen Crotts for permission to include his drawings throughout this book.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Twitty, Michael, 1977- author.
Title: The cooking gene : a journey through African-American culinary history in the Old South / Michael W. Twitty.
Description: First edition. | New York, NY : HarperCollins Publishers, 2017.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017003374 (print) | LCCN 2017004857 (ebook) (print) | LCCN 2017004857 (ebook) | ISBN 9780062379290 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780062379276 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780062379283 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: African American cooking—History. | Cooking, American—Southern style—History. | African Americans—Food—Southern States—History.
Classification: LCC E185.89.F66 T95 2017 (print) | LCC E185.89.F66 (ebook) | DDC 641.59/296073—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017003374

17 18 19 20 21 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

FUNTUMFUNEFU

There are two crocodiles who share the same stomach
and yet they fight over food.
Symbolizes unity in diversity and unity of purposes and
reconciling different approaches.

—THE ADINKRA WISDOM OF THE AKAN ELDERS

—

I dedicate this book to my board of directors, My Ancestors, without whom none of this would be possible, but more specifically

With respect to my Mama

With respect to my Daddy

For Meredith, for Fallan, for Gideon, for Kennedi, for Grace and Jack, for Malcolm, for Ben—souls in and out of the Newest South

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Sweet Tooth

In 1947, when my father was seven years old, my grandfather took him to the Deep South for the first time, to Lancaster, South Carolina, the home of the Twittys since the time of slavery. Daddy wandered into a store attached to a gas station, and as his father pumped, he eyed a jar of candy and asked the white man behind the counter, "Sir, how much is your candy?"

"What did you say to me, nigger?" The white man's voice was loud and strident.

My father had never been called a nigger before. My grandfather, hearing the commotion, walked in and stood at the door.

"Sir, how much is your candy?" Daddy didn't know what to do other than repeat himself.

The white man slammed his fist down on the counter, knocked the big jar of candy over, and charged at my father.

"*Now you listen here, boy, you teach your little nigger that down here*

the proper way to talk to a white man is 'yassuh.' You hear that, little nigger? Yassuh!"

My grandfather grabbed my father and threw him in the back of the car and sped away to the old farm. My grandfather never really explained to him what happened or why it happened or why the man was so mean. I have heard my father tell this story ten times, and not once does he become emotional, but I do. I cannot imagine someone belittling my father. He was a Marine, he served in Vietnam, he fought under the orders of the commander-in-chief, he was born here and his family had been here since the beginning of this country, but to that bastard in 1947 South Carolina, he was just a "little nigger," destined to become nothing and from whom nothing good would come. I wish there really were time machines.

Candy is the daughter of sugar. It all goes back to a man in New Guinea, or maybe it was a woman, since women were humanity's earliest gardeners and some of its primary farmers. Someone was thirsty and cracked a piece of *Saccharum officinarum* open to slake their thirst, and they got more than they bargained for. It wasn't just liquid, it was the rarest and most special taste in nature. It was quick energy. It was divine. Sugar became part of the genealogy of the tribes of New Guinea, and in one legend, a man having relations with sugarcane begat the rest of humanity. About ten thousand years ago, in some small, dark way, the discovery of humanity's most treasured taste sowed the seeds for my American experience. Without the impulse to find new lands for which to expand the production of sugar, among other interests, there might not have been a transatlantic slave trade.

Sugar bounced across the Eastern Hemisphere. In common knowledge, we massively underestimate the importance of this one crop to the history of race, food, and power. To scholars of food, race, and economics, the work of Sidney Mintz, among others, is a powerful indictment of the way in which taste can become political

and sway the stories of nations. Human intervention took sugarcane from New Guinea to Southeast Asia, from there to India, where it acquired its Indo-European names, owing their existence to *sharkara*, the Sanskrit word brought to us through Persian, through Arabic, through medieval Latin, originally meaning "gravel." From India, to Persia, to the Muslim world, to medieval Europe, where it was as much medicine as confectionary.

As sugar gained popularity, it was grown in the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt, bouncing from Cyprus to Crete, to Sicily, to the Iberian Peninsula, to the Canaries and Madeira, and later to the islands off the coast of Africa. Drawing on models left behind by the Roman *latifundia*, the idea and cultural presence of the plantation was born in the Mediterranean basin. These plantations were worked by a number of "slaves," a word most people are familiar with that may be traced to the word "Slav," of the ethnic-linguistic nations of eastern Europe. Slavs weren't black, but the workers on these early sugar plantations were often a mixture of Slavs, Africans, Middle Easterners, and local peasants. Slavery did not yet have a racial context.

Sugar diffused among Africans as not much more than a snack plant. Meanwhile, the proliferation of beverages that demanded sugar, and the greater democratization of sugar's availability, and its naturally addictive nature meant bad news for my ancestors and many, many more. According to some estimates, about 80 percent of all captives brought to the Americas were brought to regions where sugarcane was the main cash crop. No sugar, no slavery.

Sugar was by no means the only reason slavery began to grow and proliferate. It is spectacular, though, from the viewpoint of a descendant of the enslaved brought because of its power, that the black journey in the Americas is founded on a human sense—the sense of taste. Slavery began with food. We must not forget cacao, coffee,

rice, arrowroot, peanuts, corn, wheat, spices, and the other food that slavery in the Americas (as well as the Indian Ocean islands off the coast of Africa) produced—all feeding a particularly powerful need to consume between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, continuing into the twentieth with the legacy of colonialism, down to banana republics, pineapple plantations, and the politics of keeping white, Western consumers satisfied.

After consulting with scholar Lorena Walsh, I came to the conclusion that at least some of my ancestors might have originally been brought to the Caribbean for a few months or a few weeks—depending on the time of "seasoning." Although the majority of enslaved Africans brought to North America were direct importations, seasoning and stops in the Caribbean before disembarking in North America did happen with relative frequency, particularly in the earlier years of the trade. It's highly possible that my kin saw a cane field long before they saw a tobacco or rice field. Seasoning—forcing the exiled Africans to yield to the whip, understand their lot in life as inferior chattel, and accustom themselves to the grueling pace of labor on an American plantation—was brutal. Most Africans brought to the sugarcane regions did not live past seven years to a decade; hence, the trade to these areas hugely outnumbered that in Africans brought to mainland North America. The need to replenish the labor and keep the population going meant massive upheaval in West and central Africa.

In the Caribbean and South America, beginning in 1502, an engagement with sugar and the enslavement of Africans led to waves of forced immigrants having to adapt themselves to the New World. On the islands, all of the patterns that would become manifest in mainland North America came to life in the sugar lands. Enslaved Africans engaged with indigenous populations and poor whites, many of them of Irish extraction, even as they had to contend with

differences among themselves. Maroon settlements were created in the wilderness by formerly enslaved people taking their own freedom and forming societies on the margins against the plantation system. An in-between class of mixed enslaved people born predominately of European men taking advantage of their power over African women, and an evolving Afro-Creole culture made up of early, middle, and late arrivals.

Because of the similarities in climate, sugarcane was not the only crop to travel from the Old World to the New. Bananas (a word from the Wolof language of Senegambia) and plantains traveled from Africa aboard slave ships, leaving their secondary home after diffusing thousands of years before from Asia via the monsoon exchange. There would be no fried plantains or banana republics to speak of if it weren't for the slave trade dispersing these staples across Latin America. To the Caribbean and South America also came okra, kola (brought originally to make the water on slave ships more palatable), millet, sorghum (Guinea corn), several varieties of yams, cowpeas, watermelon, tamarind, hibiscus or sorrel (also known as "jamaica"), pigeon peas (Angola peas or *guandules*), oil palm (known as *dende* in Brazil, from Kimbundu *ndende*), and sesame. Many of these would later bounce northward on the same slave ships delivering the "leftover" human cargo, or seasoned Africans, to settlements in the colonial Southeast.

To know there is an archipelago of West and central African culinary influence beginning with the diffusion of crops across the Atlantic basin is only as important as the human story it tells. My own DNA results reflect cousin matches from across the black Caribbean and Latin America. I don't know why I was surprised, but I was. To call each other brother and sister was previously an act of ceremonial Pan-Africanism. Now it was official. I had relative matches from Brazil, the Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, Cuba, the

Dominican Republic, Haiti, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Some of these matches could be noise. But more than once, matches from specific countries came up again and again across different tests. Here it was, in front of my face: I was connected to some of these people because we represented families going back millennia in West and central Africa, split apart by the might of sugar. Some of us were split apart at the factories on the coast, others of us split apart during seasoning, others split by the separation of relatives as loyalist planters fled to the Caribbean after the American Revolution—all and any of these possibilities remain open. In one case, a woman with all four grandparents born in Haiti shared kinship with my paternal grandfather. Because he has unusually high genetic affinities with people living in Benin, a country not particularly important to the North American trade, this was striking to me, because it was a major source of enslaved people for Haiti like nowhere else in the New World. I can't help but wonder if our connection to this Haitian family represents siblings or other close relatives separated in the dungeons of Ouidah, the second most prolific port for the exportation of Africans to the Americas during the period (to the tune of one million human beings), with one person going to Port-au-Prince and the other going to Charleston.

THE CARIBBEAN KISS

Although it has been suggested by some culinary historians that the South owes a debt to the Caribbean for bean-and-rice dishes, this suggestion is tenuous at best. Most of the rice-and-bean or rice-and-pea dishes (hoppin' john, jambalaya *au congri*) in the South are essentially African in origin and arrived directly to New Orleans, Charleston, and Savannah via the trade in Senegambians for whom these dishes were staples. What is more likely to be true is that similar ethnic blocs arriving in different parts of the Americas brought with them similar foods. In Virginia and Louisiana, Africans from what is now southern Nigeria introduced black-eyed peas fried into cakes or fried into balls and eaten as a snack. In Brazil, a similar tradition, much closer to the source, emerged with the frying of black-eyed-pea fritters known in Brazilian Creole as *acarajé* fried in *dende* or palm oil. Africans from Kongo-Angola called their mush *infundi*, which cooked with okra became *funji* in Barbados, Antigua, and Barbuda and the Virgin Islands, and is also known by its Senegambian name *cou-cou* in the same places. Enslaved people picked and cooked the fruit of the ackee tree in Jamaica as they had in Ghana, along with a wide variety of tropical fruits they had known in the continent—a luxury their cousins in North America would not really know. Conversely, besides callaloo (a stew made from okra and water spinach) and a few other dishes like *couve* (collards that accompany the Brazilian national dish feijoada), there was a general lack of greens such as those known in the American South. Like their counterparts in the Caribbean, enslaved Africans in North America would make okra soup, oxtails, and pepper-pot soup and sell them on the street and at market along with fritters.

Beyond all of these connections was the presence of the black cook in shaping the eating habits of whites living in the islands. Clearly outnumbered, enslaved Africans instructed in British and French cuisines nonetheless had to rely on local ingredients and the know-how of Africans, and often grew up as charges of African women. Lady Nugent, a white visitor chronicling her time in Jamaica, spoke of eating fish, fried conch, ginger sweetmeats, jerked or "barbecued" hog dressed in the manner of "the maroons," a black crab pepper pot that included okra and hot peppers (likely Scotch bonnets), turtle soup, mutton, duck, turkey, chicken, tongue, ham, chicken, crab patties, and so much food that when the sweets and fruit arrived she said she felt "sicker than usual." Plantains, coconuts,

parrot soup, yams, and allspice assaulted her senses; "It was all astonishing as it was disgusting."

Slaveholder Thomas Thistlewood left ample records not only of his own exploits with the women he assaulted on his Jamaica plantation in the eighteenth century, but also of the life and culinary traditions of his enslaved chattel, having been introduced to the ways of Jamaican food by the cook named Phibbah when he lived on the Vineyard Pen estate. His writings are a bizarre and disturbing look at slavery in the sugar islands, but despite the dark and uncomfortable nature of the text, we learn a lot about what made the cooking of the enslaved in the Caribbean distinct. The African Jamaicans he knew were Twi-speaking Akan from Ghana, Igbos from Nigeria, Mandings from Senegambia, and Kongo-Angolans. Consider "*duckanoo*" taken from the Gold Coast, *dokono*, a bit of plantain, green banana, or sweet potato wrapped in leaves and boiled or baked.

The Gold Coast supplied the second largest number of Africans to Jamaica. *Fufu*-like dishes like *tum-tum*, taken from the sound of the long pestle hitting the mortar, made of boiled plantains and fish, make it into his writings, as does the esteemed pepper pot that was popularized by black women hawking it on the streets of colonial and nineteenth-century Philadelphia. In the "provision grounds" (and to this day, food is still called "provision" in the Caribbean) his enslaved workforce grew sweet potatoes and cassava, muskmelons and watermelons. Cassava was a particularly important food used for making *bammy*, or cassava bread, and *tum-tum*. Well known in central Africa, having replaced millet and sorghum as a staple, cassava "badly prepared" led Thistlewood to have "whipped Mirtilla and Nanny" for making themselves sick by eating it. Meticulous about his enslaved workforce's feeding upon saltfish (shad, herring, mackerel, and cod) and scraps, he noted sumptuous meals of roast pork with pawpaw sauce, stewed crabs, oranges and shaddock,

shrimp, stewed snook, roast turkey, French brandy, boiled pudding, and cheese for himself.

The islands were very different from what was to come on the mainland. The enslaved black folks there were living in a world of imported rice, hilly garden grounds with Angola peas, peanuts, breadfruit trees and mangoes, and occasional feasts of flying fish. It was the enslaved of the cane plantations who brought peeled sweet potatoes to the sugar boiling house, and dolloping molten hot syrup and skimmings on top of them may well have started the candied sweet potato craze.

In mainland North America there were, to be certain, touches of the Afro-Caribbean, most of them in the colonial and antebellum North. Whether it was master chefs and catering dynasties of Haitian origin in Philadelphia, West Indian–born tavern owners, enslaved Afro-Caribbeans in New York, pooling their money to buy tamarind and being experts in sea "turtle cookery," or chefs who passed down pepper pots, they all spoke to the island heritage of a substantial number of early black Northern communities. Black Northerners often lived in communities built in part by the shipping of foodstuffs (beef, grain, salt cod) to the Caribbean in exchange for sugar that was turned into molasses, which in turn became rum that bought my people from African elites. One hundred ten gallons of rum might purchase an adult; 80 might purchase a child.

In the colonial South, all Southern coastal cities had absorbed elements of the Caribbean basin. New Orleans, the northernmost outpost of the French West Indies, had many of the traits discussed above. In 1791, Haiti, the "jewel" of the Caribbean, began to give way to the spirit of revolution among enslaved Haitians, and in the course of the next decade, France lost the most profitable colony in the New World. Louisiana—a mixed economy with slaves raising

tobacco, rice, and indigo—became a slave society based on cotton and cane. Jean Étienne de Boré, Louisiana's first successful sugarcane planter, produced one hundred thousand pounds of sugar in 1795. By 1803, the whole of Louisiana was producing more than four million pounds of sugar, worth millions of dollars. Sugarcane plantations, considered poorly staffed if they held a populace of fewer than one hundred enslaved workers, began to source workers from the rest of mainland North America. After 1803, when France was forced to sell Louisiana, the domestic slave trade began in earnest, but from the 1820s to the Civil War, New Orleans became the largest slave market in America. King Sugar was the hungriest of rulers.

The American sugar barons were French, German, Anglo, or Spanish. But they were all part of Creole society, changing their names or personas to adjust. Their enslaved workforce was listed—in the case of the Evergreen plantation, men, women, and children were noted—as Creole, meaning Louisiana-born and likely mixed-race versus "Américain," enslaved chattel born on the Eastern Seaboard brought to Louisiana. Some were from Virginia, others South Carolina. There were even Africans, like Pierre, who was in his fifties when the log was created—and he was a "Congo." Some cut cane; some were blacksmiths, others brickmasons; some boiled sugar all night; others were maids, some were cooks—all were necessary.

You cannot mistake fields of sugarcane. They're twelve feet or more at their highest. The tops of the grasses are a brilliant green and the fields are thick and seemingly impenetrable. According to scholar Jean M. West, the average enslaved worker turned a field of sugarcane into five hogsheads of sugar or 250 gallons of molasses. Visiting plantations like Evergreen in Edgard, Louisiana, in what was once Sugarcane Alley and is now "Cancer Alley" thanks to environmental pollution, you can still see the sugar boiling pots and the cabins—built in the 1850s and abandoned in the 1950s or later—that still sit in situ, surrounded by the cane fields of the twenty-first century.

Going to the Evergreen and Whitney plantations, where the story of the enslaved is highlighted in contrast to the narrative of the enslavers, the parallel lives of black Creoles in rural Louisiana come to life. At Whitney, the owners have constructed a wall of remembrance holding the names of every documented enslaved person in Louisiana in the nineteenth century. Like their counterparts in the East they had names suggesting seasons, days, and holidays—names like Noel, L'Hiver, and Samedi. The placid ponds and bayou into which turtles and gators crawl, full of fat bass, are interrupted by the sculpted heads of Africans who recall young men beheaded and displayed on stakes in retaliation for slave rebellions. Here, you never forget what built these massive Greek Revival houses surrounded by banana trees and palmettos.

The enslaved lived on corn mush, field peas, okra, broken rice, mealy sweet potatoes and the leavings of syrup, the greens called *chou vert* (collards), and hot peppers from Mexico. A real treat was crackling obtained at the time of *boucherie* drizzled with cane syrup, and stews made from the backbone and whatever was at hand. They caught crawfish, snapping turtle, gar, and gaspergou, occasionally brightening their lives with sweetmeats like pralines made with the ever-present pecan and molasses. On occasion they caught wild game from alligators to deer to *"bec'rouche"* in black Creole (*bec rouge*, or ibis) and *gros bec*, or great blue heron, what their Gullah-Geechee cousins called "po' Joe."

To understand what an enslaved person went through on a sugar plantation, we go to Solomon Northup, made famous by *Twelve Years a Slave*, his account of being a free Northern black man who was kidnapped and brought to Louisiana to satisfy the need for more

labor. Northup had never seen sugarcane before and was unfamiliar with its cultivation until he was forced to cut plant, hoe, and cut cane in the field:

> The ground is prepared in beds, the same as it is prepared for the reception of the cotton seed, except it is ploughed deeper. Drills are made in the same manner. Planting commences in January, and continues until April. It is necessary to plant a sugar field only once in three years. Three crops are taken before the seed or plant is exhausted.
>
> Three gangs are employed in the operation. One draws the cane from the rick, or stack, cutting the top and flags from the stalk, leaving only that part which is sound and healthy. Each joint of the cane has an eye, like the eye of a potato, which sends forth a sprout when buried in the soil. Another gang lays the cane in the drill, placing two stalks side by side in such manner that joints will occur once in four or six inches. The third gang follows with hoes, drawing earth upon the stalks, and covering them to the depth of three inches.
>
> In four weeks, at the farthest, the sprouts appear above the ground, and from this time forward grow with great rapidity. A sugar field is hoed three times, the same as cotton, save that a greater quantity of earth is drawn to the roots. By the first of August hoeing is usually over. About the middle of September, whatever is required for seed is cut and stacked in ricks, as they are termed. In October it is ready for the mill or sugar-house, and then the general cutting begins. The blade of a cane-knife is fifteen inches long, three inches wide in the middle, and tapering toward the point and handle. The blade is thin, and in order to be at all serviceable must be kept very sharp. Every third hand takes the lead of two others, one of whom is on each side of him. The lead hand, in the first place, with a blow of his knife shears the flags from the stalk. He next cuts off the top down as far as it is green. He must be careful to sever all the green from the ripe part, inasmuch as the juice of the former sours the molasses, and renders it unsalable. Then he severs the stalk at the root, and lays it directly behind him. His right and left hand companions lay their stalks, when cut in the same manner, upon his. To every three hands there is a cart, which follows, and the stalks are thrown into it by the younger slaves, when it is drawn to the sugar-house and ground. . . .
>
> In the month of January the slaves enter the field again to prepare for another crop. The ground is now strewn with the tops, and flags cut from the past year's cane. On a dry day, fire is set to this combustible refuse, which sweeps over the field, leaving it bare and clean, and ready for the hoes. The earth is loosened about the roots of the old stubble, and in process of time another crop springs up from the last year's seed. It is the same the year following; but the third year the seed has exhausted its strength, and the field must be ploughed and planted again. The second year the cane is sweeter and yields more than the first, and the third year more than the second.

The cane was then taken to a mill where it was crushed for the juice:

> The juice of the cane falls into a conductor underneath the iron rollers, and is carried into a reservoir. Pipes convey it from thence into five filterers, holding several hogsheads each. These filterers are filled with bone-black, a substance resembling pulverized charcoal. It is made of bones calcinated in close vessels, and is used for the purpose of decolorizing, by filtration, the cane juice before boiling. Through these five filterers it passes

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in succession, and then runs into a large reservoir underneath the ground floor, from whence it is carried up, by means of a steam pump, into a clarifier made of sheet iron, where it is heated by steam until it boils. From the first clarifier it is carried in pipes to a second and a third, and thence into close iron pans, through which tubes pass, filled with steam. While in a boiling state it flows through three pans in succession, and is then carried in other pipes down to the coolers on the ground floor. Coolers are wooden boxes with sieve bottoms made of the finest wire. As soon as the syrup passes into the coolers, and is met by the air, it grains, and the molasses at once escapes through the sieves into a cistern below. It is then white or loaf sugar of the finest kind—clear, clean, and as white as snow. When cool, it is taken out, packed in hogsheads, and is ready for market. The molasses is then carried from the cistern into the upper story again, and by another process converted into brown sugar.

By the time Solomon Northup found himself in the sugarcane fields, a new system of sugar manufacture and filtration had been developed by a mulatto named Norbert Rillieux, the son of a white plantation owner and a free woman of color. Much like his contemporary Edmond Albius—a black man enslaved in the French colony of Mauritius who improved vanilla production by developing a method of hand pollination—or Antoine, the enslaved gardener at Louisiana's famed Oak Alley plantation who successfully grafted and improved the cultivation of pecans, Norbert Rillieux is the household name that never was.

The black cooks of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast were equally unsung heroes. Some were men sent to be trained in France and brought back to cook in well-to-do homes in New Orleans and Mobile. Others were called "Tante" (Creole for "Auntie"), women in

bondage who had cooked for white families. These were the women who turned the Jollof rice of their Senegalese great-grandmothers, brought during the earliest days of the Louisiana colony, into jambalaya; and the *akara* of their Yoruba grandmothers brought during the Spanish trade into the *cala* (*"Tout chaud!"*) made of rice or black-eyed peas sold on the streets of New Orleans. In kitchens equipped with duck-blood presses and African standing mortars and pestles, they took *kingumbo* from their Mbundu parents and made cayenne-spiked okra soup with a roux, taking the meat out during Lent; adding Choctaw filé powder in winter and spring; adding crab, oyster, shrimp, and duck in season. They practiced vodun on the side, brought from their ancestors from Benin, and with vodun came recipes to feed the deities of their religion, syncretized with Catholic saints including recipes for *fevi*—okra; only in Louisiana would okra carry the entire legacy of the slave trade, from Senegal to Angola—with Igbo, Kongo-Angolan, and Fon names.

THE OTHER CANE

Sorghum was an African grass cultivated for millennia, and its seeds and sweet stalk were being grown in mainland North America since the colonial period. Its cultivation was centered around the settlements of the enslaved in the form of "Guinea corn." In the 1850s, experiments with several varieties led to the attempt to popularize sorghum as a cheaper and temperate alternative to sugarcane. While it did not produce a granulated sugar, sorghum did provide a molasses that was widely popular among Southern and Midwestern farmers because it was relatively easy to raise and produced a cheaper, homegrown alternative to sweeten coffee and baked goods, and could be used as a condiment at the table.

Long before coming to America, sorghum was used to make a taffy in the Sahel in West Africa. But some books today have even

attributed sorghum to North American indigenes, and in the nineteenth century it was called "Chinese sugarcane." Sorghum seems to always have had an American identity crisis. Whatever story you want to spin, sorghum is one of Africa's more important contributions to plant domestication, and this should be recognized in an era when sorghum is now a hot commodity being marketed as the Southern answer to maple syrup. At least one variety has been traced to origins in southern Africa, a cultivar known as imphee grown in the Zulu empire.

My grandfather once gave me a jar of sorghum molasses at the end of one of my visits to South Carolina, and I didn't even know what the slightly metallic, earthy-tasting stuff was. My maternal grandfather, Walter, spoke of "stealing cane" in Birmingham from his neighbors' yards growing up, and he almost certainly meant sorghum. The South has a sugarcane belt and a sorghum cane belt, and my family tree straddled them both. My ancestors living in the Black Belt of Alabama made sugarcane molasses; my ancestors living in the Carolina upcountry and Virginia Piedmont made sorghum molasses. While the two have slightly different "cooking methods," the traditional method of extraction was the same.

Sorghum time was in the fall. "Making 'lasses" was a joyful time of the year and communities came together to get the job done. Sorghum time and cane syrup time were about black and Southern communities working together and being cooperative and interdependent. Sorghum masters were often, in many communities, older black men. It was one of the few environments where a soft sort of integration occurred with Southern whites and blacks interacting with each other over a foodstuff. Nobody got paid for use of their mules or mill; it was almost always bartered for things the mill owner could not provide his own homestead.

To see this, I went to a Mennonite farm. The sorghum cane

stood tall and was topped with its telltale reddish seeds, standing as a testament to Africa's presence out in the middle of very white eastern Tennessee. Speaking of very white, try being the only black guy amid a large family of Mennonites. I bought lemonade for the first time in my life from a stand run by barefoot Mennonite kids not far from the fields; and I don't believe their mouths closed the entire time. Chickens and goats and sheep crossed little country bridges. People had signs on their porch for sourwood honey, and another sign announced okra, tomatoes, gourd birdhouses, sweet corn, and hot-pepper jelly for sale. And the hills, blue and a green so dark it was almost black, were breathtaking.

"Can I help ya?" The leader of the skimming seemed perplexed as to why I was standing looking at him with a goofy smile.

"I'm not lost. We came a long way to watch you make sorghum."

"OK, what do you wanna know?" He still looked intrigued as to why I was so curious. I took it that the usual onlookers invited to come to Muddy Pond were hipster types and chefs looking for their new boutique ingredient.

"My granddaddy did this and his father before him, but I've never seen it done. Teach me."

Trust gained, Mr. Guenther introduced me to this family and I stopped being goofy long enough to smell the air—it was like being in a taffy sauna, very sexy for a bear who appreciates sweets. Mr. Guenther explained that the cane was cut midway in ripeness, then it was brought to the grinder, which was powered by a horse going around in circles as the cane was fed into crushing gears. The green juice, running through a cheesecloth or two, was then boiled and skimmed until it reached a thick golden brown color. I assure you there is nothing more beautiful than sorghum syrup being poured into a glass vessel, or more heavenly than hot, new sorghum on a piece of pound cake, itself sweetened with sorghum. It is sexy, it is

overkill, it is soul-making, it was so good that I bought more and ate them before G-d gave me two more days of life.

The family worked together, manning the steaming pans, and within a very short time, bottle after bottle filled. The mood was happy, and soon a game of catch ensued between the boys. I finished my smartphone videos, bought a jug or two along with some alleged Cherokee herbal potion, and set out for Nashville. I was happy but disappointed. I had seen the process but not the men—I guess I was still hoping to see my grandfather, and his father and his father before him feeding the mill, chasing the mule, boiling the cane, and celebrating with the three Ms—meat, meal, and molasses made by the women into plebeian delicacies. When my paternal great-grandfather, Grandpa Will, died, leaving my grandfather and his siblings orphans, apart from a hundred acres of land he obtained through mysterious means from Dr. Sidney Hinson (I think they were related), cotton seeds, and a few pieces of rusty farm equipment, he left his children salt pork, a sack of cornmeal, and twenty gallons of sorghum molasses. All of a sudden, the jar of molasses made sense. I still have a jar sitting on my desk, unopened, perhaps just so I can pass it down.

SUGAR'S REVENGE

Some stories just need to be passed on. In 1865, my great-great-great-grandmother Rosetta Merritt, enslaved on the Chadwick plantation in Russell County, Alabama, got into a fight with the former overseer who thought he had it in him to overpower Rose and rape and beat her. According to oral history he pulled her into the cellar of the Big House where they wrestled until she got the best of him and dunked his head in a barrel of cane syrup made on the place. Because he was known to be often intoxicated, nobody questioned her when he was found drowned up past the neck. I told you

that story just to honor my mother, who told me to retell the story in order to tell the world that her people fought back.

Sorghum Brined Chicken Roasted in Cabbage Leaves

½ cup kosher salt
½ cup sorghum molasses
3 cups chicken or vegetable stock; I prefer homemade of your choice
5 cups cold water
5 pound roasting chicken, whole
Kitchen Pepper (see recipe on page 24)
½ cup unsalted butter, softened; or lard or canola oil
One large cabbage

Preheat oven to 350.

Dissolve salt and sorghum molasses, into the stock. Allow liquid to cool. Add cold water.

Remove giblets. Wash and thoroughly clean chicken, and submerge in brine in a large bowl for 2 to 4 hours. Remove and rinse.

Mix 2 tablespoons of Kitchen Pepper with the butter, lard, or canola oil. Rub the chicken with the mix under and on the outside of its skin, being certain to cover the entire bird.

Put cabbage leaves at the bottom of the Dutch oven. Cover the chicken in the washed cabbage leaves and tie into a loose bundle, layering as many leaves as it takes to cover the bird. Add a little water or chicken stock to the pot, cover tightly, and put into the oven. Roast for 70 to 90 minutes. When the wings pull away from the twine and the juices run clear, the chicken should be done.