

Biscuits and Collards

The Role of Food in Southern Identity

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November 2021

Introduction

Southern Americans are historically prideful people. They cherish family, tradition, and keeping history alive. At the core of these honored traditions, food resides, bonding generations of individuals. Food crosses social and economic boundaries uniting communities and leaving an enduring message of Southern legacy, culture, and history. This research sets out to prove that Southern food creates an identity more significantly than any other identifier for Southern people.

Existing research shows that food has a significant influence in creating southern identities. Much like music, folklore, religion, and hobbies, food has its proper place in defining individuality. Recipes are passed down through generations, with each region offering its flare, signifying its unique southern culture. Unfortunately, no research has been conducted on food as the leading contributor to Southern identity, leaving it as just another character influencer.

Southern food is not merely a tradition to be passed on from generation to generation for the means of comfort. It is not just a means to build trends upon and reminisce on better times. Instead, Southern food is the essential factor to maintain the history and human identity in the American South. The food of the South is timeless and gives richness to this region and its people that influences identity above all other factors.

“In a south that no longer seems to remember its heart, our food may be the best part left. It is the opposite of the bloody past, the doomed ideals, and our still-divisive, modern-day culture; it is a thing that binds us more that it shoves us apart, from each other and the rest of the world” (Bragg 127).

Literature Review

Origins and Objective

Southern food has an origin story as rich as its history. Native American's were the first to settle what we know today as the American South, teaching early settlers how to harvest crops like corn, squash, and beans. As time progressed, the South mainly consisted of European settlers who brought their spin to Southern food, as well as West African slaves bringing rich stews and hearty seafood dishes. The combination of these three cultures made Southern food what it is commonly known for today.

The South was agriculturally based and presented a harsh climate of steaming hot summers, hurricane-like winds and rain, and crop-killing frost and snow in the winter. Historically, the region also endured wars, poverty, and droughts, leading the residents to survive with insignificant food sources during hard times. While culturally, African American slaves were given meager supplies to make their meals, this did not differ significantly from poor farmers in rural areas during times of famine. Thus, the harsh conditions of the South further shaped this iconic food group. "A lot of Southern cooking comes from just figuring out how to keep things from spoiling in the heat" (Moskin 3).

Out of necessity from harsh climates and lacking food sources, Southern food found its beginning. While other parts of the country began industrializing, the South continued to live off the land, making innovative food practices necessary. Collards stewed with a ham hock are a clear example of a poor Southern meal born out of necessity. Collards were easy to grow in harsh climates, and a ham hock is the cheapest cut of meat, consisting of a ham bone surrounded by primarily connective tissue and very little meat covered in fat. Today, collards are served in fine dining establishments with little thought to their humble beginnings.

Diversity

Although Southern food across various territories has remarkable similarities, regional dishes are not all created equal. Creole food is much different from Cajun food, and Carolina barbeque is entirely different from Alabama barbeque. As people moved through the American South, immigrated from around the globe, and held onto certain cultural traditions, food changed. Herein is the beginning of food identity for Southerners as they cling to their food preparation more than any other custom.

“Soul food” is another term given to the classic Southern foods. The origin of the term soul food derives from African American’s migrating to northern states and taking their Southern food recipes with them. Having never experienced this type of cooking, Northern Americans gave the food its name, piggybacking off the new and popular African American music of the time, “soul.” Although soul food and Southern food are not notably different, the term gives identity to African American Southern cooks and their role in creating the iconic food of the South.

Affects

Southerners’ role with food is complex and offers several varieties, histories, and experiences. Yet, the function of food’s significance is universal and at the very core of Southern identity. Food in the South encourages unity among different people, and its nature of the size and lengthy cook time requires a community of eaters. Furthermore, Southern food sends a message of its people, their culture, and their history. “We Southerners have a way of remembering important moments in our life through our food more than anyone else because it is our life here. Food is what we think of morning, noon, and night. So, it makes sense that if there

is anything that can bring Southerners to a common ground, it's our food. Not religion, not football, but food" (Mims 2014).

While Southern food plays a role in Southerners' identity, it also leaves a lasting impact on the rest of the world. Today, chefs from all over the world are using traditional Southern cooking techniques and dishes on their menus, creating fusions with their native cuisine. Television and print dedicate entire series to Southern ways of cooking, featuring comfort meals and rustic food preparations for every occasion. "The rest of the world is waking up to the multicultural reality of the New South: Korean-Southern fried chicken, Vietnamese-Cajun crawfish, tacos stuffed with barbecue. And new studies and discoveries by historians of African American food like Toni Tipton-Martin, Adrian E. Miller, and Therese Nelson are fueling debate over the origins of the Southern culinary tradition" (Moskin 2).

Future

Southern food has traveled to all parts of the world, adapting to fit the culture and times while remaining true to its origins. In recent years, Southern food has become more popular, and despite more recent health food scenes, it continues to prevail. While the source of ingredients may change, the soul of Southern food remains the same. This iconic comfort food remains a part of numerous communities and is kept alive by culinary teachers sharing its rich tradition. Thus, Southern identity through food remains, and the respective research methods will show its continued importance and significance.

Research Methodology and Analysis

Focus groups and individual interviews will be the qualitative methods of research conducted. Focus groups will lead the research methodology to gain a broader grasp of food understanding.

Interviews will follow the focus groups to narrow in on personal experience free of outside judgment. The sample group used for both methods will be the same and consist of a single person from each category (food service, agricultural, administrative, construction, and homemaking) from each state (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.) Thus, these research methods would secure 80 individuals to gain perspective on Southern identity through food.

Focus Groups

Southern food is about community cooking and passed-down generational recipes. Southern food spawned out of hardship and necessity, producing emotional and nostalgic feelings in those who grew up on this type of food. Therefore, gathering data in a group setting will spark conversation between the subjects and allow for a deeper understanding of food significance to Southerners.

The following questions will be asked in online video group settings, with an estimated total run time of 1.5 hours. These questions were chosen to inspire meaningful discussion and gain insight on Southern food culture and identifying factors:

- Where are you from and what is your profession?
- When you think of the American South, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
- What is one of your favorite childhood memories?
- How did your family and people in your community celebrate the holidays? Do you still practice any of these traditions today?
- What is your first food memory?
- What was your favorite food growing up? Do you still eat it today? Can you make it yourself? Have you had it prepared by anyone else and how did it compare?
- What defines Southern food to you? Is there one food item that you believe is an iconic Southern staple?
- How does Southern cooking play a part in your identity as a Southerner?

Interviews

While conducting focus groups are an excellent means for sparking discussion and gaining valuable insight on community and influence, the participants in the sample group may answer differently when in front of their peers. Therefore, private interviews with the sample subjects will hopefully lead to more personal understandings.

Interviews will be held privately over the phone and recorded, with an estimated average of 40 minutes in length. The following questions will be asked to generate personal memories and emotional insights:

- Where are you from and what is your profession?
- What is your first food memory?
- Do you consider Southern Food and Soul Food the same thing? If not, how are they different?
- Do you think people not from the South can properly cook and prepare Southern food? Can food be prepared the same and not taste the same?
- How would you define yourself? Has this changed over time?
- What would be your last meal and why?
- How does Southern cooking play a part in your identity as a Southerner? Would you say it is one of the top or actual top identifying factor for you? If not, what is your top defining factor that identifies you as a Southerner?

After gathering the raw data from the focus groups and personal interviews, a thorough analysis of the information will begin. First, the available content, timing, and tone of the answers will be categorized and logged concerning the state, age, and gender. Results will give a general understanding of patterns among participants and set the initial groundwork for analysis. Most importantly will be the thematic and discourse analysis of the raw data. Themes and patterns detected among participants will start the framework to link and divide individuals across state lines and offer incredible insight into identifying factors as a Southern person. Further, relating these patterns to cultural and historical knowledge of Southern communities

will show how the importance of food has changed over time and where it currently stands as an identifying factor in Southern lives.

Conclusion

Several factors contribute to the identity of a Southerner. Land, religion, family, music, local lore, and history all play a part in individual and community identity and appear in the previously stated research methods. However, food plays a significant role when identifying the American South more than any other cultural tradition. People are proud to boast about their family's legendary pie that won awards or delight to share a stew recipe that has been passed down to cure any imaginable ailment. Independent from class or social structure, people love to talk about food, and more importantly, it binds people together in a way that no other component can. Southerners know strife, and if they are lucky enough to escape it, they know their familial stories of more challenging times. Food is a way to escape hardship and create little luxury where there may be no other way. Therein lies the reason for food being the sole element in Southern identity.

Limitations

The research in this study would go further if qualitative ethnological research were possible. Since I am researching if food is the foremost identifier for Southern people, immersing in Southern communities would offer a great perspective. So often, surveys can lead to skewed responses, and focus groups and personal interviews can influence the subject to answer out of a sense of commitment or desire. Joining Southern individuals in their daily lives would offer a raw and unfiltered look at how they engage with food and what part it plays compared to others in their lives.

Recommendations

Further researchers studying the role of food in Southerner's identity should look more in-depth at distinguishing racial aspects. While Southern food is often described as similar among black and white Southerners, the origins, emotions, and identifying food elements may differ significantly. Notably, the origin story of Southern food may prove very different among different races and communities and may create emotionally varying results when determining the historical role of food in the South. The results may challenge the outcomes of this research and therefore would prove necessary to grasp the complete picture of food identity for Southern Americans.

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