

of us perforce must eat.” The plate was political long before Americans were thinking about GMOs and sweetened beverage taxes.

Dinner in Fredericksburg included crab flake cocktail, green tomato pickles, baked ham with wine sauce, candied yams, corn pone, black-eyed peas, and pippin salad. Actually, that was the first dinner: Another dinner was served at 11 p.m., featuring smoked turkey, fried chicken, corn pudding, and spoon bread. It’s not clear whether the *New York Times* reporter was on hand to cover that snack.

The judges declared Woodrow Lee’s fried chicken to be best of the bunch. The head chef at the Beverly Hotel in Staunton, Lee had learned how to cook from his grandmother, Ida Lee, the head cook at Mary Baldwin College. Ida Lee had died about a year before the contest. She wasn’t around when her grandson received a letter from the Childs Company, one of the country’s first restaurant chains.

In the 1880s, when New Yorkers were despairing over swill milk and Typhoid Mary, Samuel and William Childs opened a restaurant clad in white marble. It looked clean, and the prices were reasonable. By the 1920s, there were more than 120 Childs locations. In 1925, William Childs made a disastrous business

decision: Inspired by his concern for customers’ health, he removed all meat products from the Childs menu. The company was still in a tailspin by the late 1940s, when Childs wrote to Woodrow Lee for his recipe. That is all to say: the saga that began when a New York humorist poked fun at Southern cooking ended when the Childs Company began serving Virginia-style fried chicken in Brooklyn.

Even though Southern food was making inroads up North, Shane wouldn’t give his hosts the satisfaction of shifting his culinary allegiances. As the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* put it, “he didn’t exactly break out a Confederate flag and sing Dixie.” But the fastidious George Frederick was moved by a watermelon pickle.

At the close of the event, a reporter caught up with him over dessert. He wrote, “Frederick fingered a bit of moist fruitcake and added reflectively, ‘It is a highly commendable enterprise to hold these tournaments. So many states are content with bragging about themselves rather than improving.’” The reporter politely refrained from pointing out that the event wasn’t entirely Virginia’s doing. It was jump-started by a food writer, judged by food writers, and covered by food writers, who gently nudged American food forward. 🍷

Hanna Raskin is food editor of The Post and Courier in Charleston, SC. She writes about the past so frequently that while reporting this story, she taught a librarian how to use microfilm. She delivered a version of this piece at the 2016 Food Media South conference.

REBEL RECIPE

A POTLUCK DINNER LESSON

by Erika Council

“YOU CAN MAKE THE potato salad. I bet you make that really well.” At least that’s what I think the woman said, while handing me a sign-up sheet for our neighborhood potluck dinner. Surely she did not just say that. I looked around the room. I was the only black person. She assumed because I am black, I could cook anything. Including potato salad.

I ignored her, hoping she would recognize her error. Instead, she tried again.” We’re hoping you would make potato salad for the dinner,” she said. “That’s like, a soul

food specialty, right?” She leaned in closer, whispering, “soul food,” as if saying it out loud might cause her to lose standing with Jesus.

At this point, three other women joined the conversation and waited for my response. Mentally counting to 600, I tried to temper my patience. This didn’t work.

“Soul food?” I repeated, making a grand gesture of looking over my shoulder as I whispered the word. “You know, I’ve never made potato salad. Is that like tuna salad?” This was, of course, a lie, but I said it with a straight face. The four women looked at me in disbelief.



Erika Council

ROASTED POTATO SALAD

For a vegetarian spin, toast the potatoes in olive oil or grapeseed oil and skip the pancetta. Serves 6.

INGREDIENTS

1 Tbsp. olive oil
1 cup pancetta, diced
12 fingerling potatoes, halved (any white potato on hand will do)
Kosher salt to taste
1/2 cup of mayo, such as Duke's
1 Tbsp. yellow mustard
1 Tbsp. freshly squeezed lemon juice
2 Tbsp. fresh chives, minced
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
2 cups arugula leaves

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Heat a large cast iron skillet to medium high. Add the olive oil and pancetta and cook until crispy, about 10 minutes.

Using a slotted spoon, remove the pancetta and drain on a paper towel-lined plate. In the same skillet, add the potatoes and cook in the fat for about 10 minutes or until they turn slightly golden.

Place the skillet in

the oven and roast the potatoes for about 15 minutes, or until they are golden brown and tender on the inside.

While the potatoes are roasting, whisk together the mayo, mustard, lemon juice, chives, and pepper in a large bowl. When the potatoes are finished, fold them into the mayo mixture. Toss in the arugula and pancetta. Serve while warm.

Among this group, it seemed a pre-conceived notion that potato salad is a soul food specialty and that I, the only black person in the room, should be the resident expert. I promised to see what I could do.

What was their idea of potato salad? Does it have fried chicken crumbles or collard greens mixed in? (On second thought, that sounds like something I should try.) In my family, potato salad was always a Sunday supper staple. The ingredients were straightforward: mayo, mustard, potatoes, eggs, celery, and tangy pickle relish.

My friend's German grandmother made great potato salad. She had soul. Maybe I should have asked if she was available to cook for the dinner. Instead, I kept my promise. I created potato salad that

looked and tasted nothing like what they expected. To fingerling potatoes roasted in pork drippings, I added chives and lemon juice. I tossed everything with mayo. Since this was supposed to be a salad, I threw in arugula. I held off on the fried chicken crumbles and collards.

On the day of the community dinner, I placed my large bowl on the table. The dish received a few odd looks before people dug in. Soon after, folks went back for seconds. They whispered about how the dish was strange, but delicious. Today, three years since launching my Sunday supper series, that potato salad has become one of my most requested dishes. When I'm asked how it came to be, I laugh and say, "Well, let me tell you a story." 🍷

Erika Council is the Atlanta-based writer and photographer behind the award-winning blog, Southern Soufflé. Her Sunday supper club features soulful renditions of classic Southern cuisine.

GRAVY

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