



# ON BECOMING *EBONY'S* FOOD EDITOR

That iconic, psychedelic test kitchen is only part of the story.

BY CHARLA L. DRAPER

Photo courtesy of the author

WHEN I DRIVE THROUGH CHICAGO'S Bronzeville neighborhood, I often remember experiences from my childhood. This happens when I ride by the now-refurbished Wabash YMCA on 37th and Wabash Street, where, in 1926, Carter G. Woodson and colleagues created what is now Black History Month; when I pass St. Elizabeth School, where Daddy played basketball with Art White, the first Black referee for the Big Ten athletic conference; when I see DuSable High School, which counts the magazine publisher John H. Johnson as an alumnus; and when I steer past the former site of the Washington Park YMCA, where Daddy taught me to swim in a pool that seemed as big as a lake. There is so much history in Bronzeville—and, while I couldn't have known it as a little girl, there are so many connections between that South Side community and the work I eventually did at *Ebony* magazine.

Like me, my parents were born in Chicago. Both my father's and my mother's parents were part of the first wave of the Great Migration. Born in Alabama and Louisiana, they arrived in the city in the early 1900s. When Black folks began to settle in Chicago, they were relegated to an area known as the "Black Belt," a narrow strip from



PREVIOUS: The author at the *Ebony* test kitchen exhibit at the Museum of Food and Drink (MOFAD) in New York City, February 2022; LEFT: The "Date With a Dish" mock-up the author created for her *Ebony* interview; ABOVE: The *Ebony* test kitchen at MOFAD

LEFT: Courtesy of the author



ABOVE: Courtesy of MOA/FD

The test kitchen was outfitted in a multicolored, psychedelic-style pattern. The appliances were cutting-edge, but there was not a fork, spatula, or pan to be found.



Photography for an *Ebony* feature on summer cookout recipes, styled by the author

12<sup>th</sup> Street to 51<sup>st</sup> Street, which soon became overcrowded and overpriced. Residents nicknamed the area “Bronzeville,” which most found more appealing than the “Black Belt.”

As a child, I did not realize the neighborhood’s cultural importance. The iconic *Chicago Defender* newspaper was founded in Bronzeville. Black-owned businesses flourished there, as did the arts and literature, in what would later be called the Chicago Black Renaissance movement.

I was born into a family of talented and resourceful cooks. My maternal grandmother, Gongga, had a reputation for baking light, lemon-flavored pound cakes, and I attribute my love of baking to her. Daddy’s mom, whom the family called Big Mama, was an exceptional country cook. I remember her breakfasts of eggs and brains and suppers of gumbo and fried rabbit.

In college, I chose to major in home economics, hoping it would lead to a job I would enjoy. Shortly after graduation, I accepted a position in the

Kraft Foods test kitchen in Chicago. It felt like a dream job: in addition to developing recipes that showcased the company’s products, I learned about product research and development, advertising, marketing, food photography, and food styling.

While at Kraft, I began to study *Ebony*’s “Date With a Dish,” a popular section created by the magazine’s first food editor, Freda DeKnight. Through “Date With a Dish,” DeKnight explained in the 1948 cookbook of the same name, she sought to dispel the notion that, “Negroes, the descriptor at that time for our race, could adapt and cook only the standard Southern dishes.”

Applying what I was learning at Kraft, I took note of the recipes and food stories *Ebony* published, analyzing each one for informativeness and accuracy. DeKnight had passed in 1963, and by the early 1980s, it seemed to me that the magazine could benefit from a food editor who understood the needs of both home cooks and advertisers. Why not me?

ABOVE: Photo by Tom Fialak; OPPOSITE PAGE: Courtesy of Ann Camille Saunders

IN A ROUNDTABOUT WAY, I can trace my interest in *Ebony* magazine to my preschool days at Rosenwald Nursery School. There, as a three-year-old, I met Ann Camille Saunders, who became a lifelong friend. (Her double first name spoke to her family's Southern roots.) In 1949, Ann Camille's mother, Doris Saunders, became the librarian for the Johnson Publishing Company. She conceptualized and built a repository of the African American experience that informed the company's advertising strategy and contributed to the success and influence of *Ebony* and later *Jet* magazines.

Mrs. Saunders was still at Johnson Publishing Company when I began to think seriously of working there. I'd pepper her with questions: Did they have a food editor? Did she think I could land the job? At first, Mrs. Saunders dismissed my interest and even tried to scare me off with stories of Mr. Johnson's strict managerial style. She told me that he liked to take a seat in the building's lobby as the staff arrived for work. Any tardy employees would face Mr. J, who would remind them—without mincing words—what time they were expected to be at work! (I didn't believe this story until I witnessed it firsthand.)



Finally, Mrs. Saunders suggested I create a mock-up of an issue showing how the food pages could be strengthened. I took on that challenge, literally cutting and pasting text and images to reimagine a feature on potatoes from the September 1980 issue. Soon thereafter, I secured a meeting with Mr. Johnson and some of *Ebony*'s editorial staff.

Walking into the glass-walled conference room that day, I felt nervous but spoke confidently. I left the meeting feeling that I had made a clear case for the value an in-house food editor could bring to the magazine. When one editor asked if I had selected the ugliest feature I could find to use as an example, I thought of Thumper from the movie *Bambi* and demurred.

An entire year passed before I got the job.

I was in for a reality check when I arrived at *Ebony* in the fall of 1982. The test kitchen was outfitted in a multi-colored, psychedelic-style pattern everywhere—the opposite of the neutral-beige color scheme that prevailed in The Kraft Kitchens. The appliances were cutting-edge, but there was not a fork, spatula, or pan to be found. It was a striking kitchen, but not a functional one. My first task was to get the *Ebony* test kitchen up and running so that we could unveil an updated food section in time for the new year.

I moved on to develop an editorial calendar for a year's worth of "Date With a Dish," creating a tool that the magazine's advertising department could share with potential clients in the food industry. We also needed an element that would create new interest and maximize reader participation. Thus the "Reader Favorite Recipe" was born. I believe the initial idea came from a reader letter regarding an age-old question: Is sugar an acceptable ingredient in cornbread? (The reader in question was adamant that it was *not*.)

Also on my early to-do list was identifying and securing a photographer who specialized in food. Photographer Thomas Firak took our images to a new level, making "Date With a Dish" that much more attractive to both readers and advertisers. Each month, I selected recipes to photograph that would appeal to cooks of various skill levels. I always included at least one for novices, one for experienced home cooks, and one for experts.

The author (far left) and her friend Ann Camille Saunders (second from left) at Ann Camille's birthday party, circa 1958



ABOVE: *Ebony* exhibit at MOFAD; RIGHT: Photography from an *Ebony* feature on fish recipes, styled by the author

For example, if we were featuring recipes for pasta, we might photograph a simple spaghetti with meat sauce, a slightly more advanced lasagna layered with spinach, and a carbonara which required stirring an uncooked egg into the pasta at just the right moment.

I could not have done my job without an exemplary administrative assistant, Ava Gardner (yes, that is her real name). Whether we were proofing copy, prepping recipes, packing boxes, or creating an ad presentation, Gardner helped me stay on task.

Strengthening the food pages at *Ebony* was challenging, but the payoff was knowing that the changes made a difference. Our readers responded with gratitude, unsolicited suggestions, and a willingness to share their personal recipes. With “Reader Favorite Recipe,” the volume of responses clearly showed *Ebony’s* audience was paying attention and eager to engage. Each month, the winner’s recipe was published with the reader’s name and city of residence. That home cook

earned bragging rights and a \$100 prize.

In June 1983, I was asked to prepare a presentation for the annual advertising sales meeting and provide an overview of objectives, results and plans for the 1984 calendar. As the last editor to share results from my department, the food section, I was excited to present the accomplishments of “Date With a Dish.” The all-male senior editorial staff had other ideas. As I took the podium, every one of them got up to leave the conference room. I had learned those first few months at the magazine that there was no love lost between the senior editors and the food department. I’m not sure why the animus existed—was it because I was the new kid on the block? Because I understood food marketing? Because my initial interview had zeroed in on their shortcomings? Or was it because I reported directly to Mr. Johnson? In any case, their blatant rudeness took me aback. When they reached the door to exit, Mr. Johnson boomed, “Sit down, you might learn

Courtesy of MOFAD



something!” The editorial staff learned the food section showed significant growth in reader engagement and a 50 percent year-over-year increase in food-related advertising revenue.

I see the *Ebony* story as a Chicago story. Chicago has always been a food town and the foodstuffs of the city are heavily influenced by immigrants, from Chicago’s Haitian founder, Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable; Southerners, bringing the affordable and highly seasoned meals of the South; and other African and Caribbean aromas and pungent flavors we’ve come to love. In Chicago, the food and hospitality industries have long been rich soil for growing Black businesses. In the 1980s, African American entrepreneurs were building and developing loyal clienteles. Eateries such as Lem’s BBQ, Army & Lou’s, Gladys’ Luncheonette, Edna’s, and Izola’s restaurants, were go-to options when folks didn’t want to cook. Parker House Sausage,

Michele’s Maple Crème Syrup, Baldwin Ice Cream, and Argia B’s Mumbo Sauce were offered in restaurants and at grocery stores, and were options when people were cooking at home. In “Date With a Dish,” I created editorial topics that made it easy for home cooks to use these products, by sharing sample menus, recipes, and serving suggestions to promote product sales. I also believe we played a part in helping keep Black-owned brands top-of-mind for our readers—and on their grocery and shopping lists.

During my two years at *Ebony*, I experienced some of the challenges and characteristics found in family-owned and -operated businesses. Overall, my experiences at the magazine were gratifying. Those years affirmed my professional knowledge of, and appreciation for, food, marketing, and the strength of the Black consumer. I remain deeply proud of all I learned and accomplished there. 🍷

Photo by Tom Firak

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