



DIRTY PAGES

Poor Man Rice Pudding

AS TOLD TO ERIN BYERS MURRAY BY SERIGNE MBAYE

Dirty Pages is an ongoing recipe exhibit in Nashville. In this installment, we hear from Serigne Mbaye, a senior line cook at Commander's Palace in New Orleans. Since his teenage years, he has worked his way through numerous restaurant kitchens. He pulls from those experiences to recreate a rice pudding recipe from his youth.
—Erin Byers Murray

I WAS BORN IN NEW YORK, BUT when I was five, my parents sent me to a boarding school in Senegal, where I spent my childhood. My parents were going through a lot, and I was the young one, so it was easier to ship me away. I got there, this kid from America, five years old, and everything changed. It was not a fun childhood. But by the

time I was nine, I was cooking for everyone at the school. When you cooked, you got known. People respected you and if you was in trouble, people could help you. They'd say, "He that guy that know how to cook."

We used to make this dish called sombi, a rice pudding. Every night for dinner, we would eat white rice with some type

Photos by L. Kasimu Harris

of sauce, then we'd save the rice and in the morning, make this sombi. It didn't taste great because it was not seasoned correctly. It was cheap. We'd only put sour cream and salt and that's it. But you ate it because you had no option. If you didn't eat that, you wouldn't eat till lunch. It was terrible but even as a young kid I knew that no matter how simple the dish, there was always a way to make it better.

I saw my parents only a few times within the nine years I was in Africa. I had to be reintroduced to them at age fourteen, when they brought me back to the United States. I learned this later, but back in the late 1980s, my mom came to America and opened up a Senegalese restaurant [in Harlem]. The restaurant closed a couple of years before I was born. Cooking is a big part of my mom's culture. In Senegal, people will teach you—but they aren't going to teach you their secrets. My mom did. She ended up teaching me everything I need to know.

I started working in kitchens in high school—I worked as a dishwasher at two different jobs during my senior year. Then, I got the chance to become a salad cook, doing *garde manger*. I worked in a Japanese restaurant, then a Cuban restaurant. Later, I got accepted into the New England Culinary Institute. So, after I went to culinary school, I ate rice pudding somewhere and I'm like, "This reminds me so much of Senegal." I got home and tried to make it and was like, "If I could just incorporate some of the techniques I've learned, I could see this come to life." 🍴

POOR MAN RICE PUDDING

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup uncooked short-grain rice
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup coconut milk
- 1/4 cup honey
- 1/3 teaspoon salt
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/3 cup fresh fruit (berries, peaches, or whatever is available)

Bring the water to a boil and add the salt and rice. Reduce heat to low. Cook for 15 minutes.

Add honey, coconut milk, and sugar to the rice. Stir constantly over medium heat until the rice is creamy and thick, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat.

Add butter, vanilla, and fresh fruit. Stir until creamy and serve at once.

