

ONE FOOT IN THE SOIL AND ONE IN THE OCEAN

An excerpt from *Bress 'n' Nyam*

BY MATTHEW RAIFORD

THE GULLAH GEECHEE ARE DEFINED BY THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO WATER. It is where we go to feed our families. It is where we return time and again to seek guidance from the ancestors. My family are descended from the Freshwater Geechee, the ones who reshaped the land to craft irrigation systems for rice fields from the brackish rivers and creeks. The Saltwater Geechee farmed cotton and indigo on the Sea Islands and later steered the flat-bottomed bateaux to harvest oysters, which was one of the region's strongest industries until its collapse in the middle of the last century. Even as a mainlander, I have always had one foot in the soil and one in the ocean.

When my mom cleaned houses on St. Simons Island, I learned from the old timers at the pier how to fish. I had a little string tied to my finger, with bait on the end. I would just drop the string in the water and feel the fish playing with the bait. I eventually caught enough fish to sell so that I could buy my own fishing pole. I met a man there who taught me how to make my own crab net. Because of rising and warming seas, loss of ancestral lands to developers, and my own generation's leaving to find jobs in cities, this way of life—the self-sufficiency to never know hunger—is disappearing.

When I was a little older, when my dad went to work at the port docks in Brunswick, he would leave me at Overlook Park to fish for mullet. I used the “snatch” method of throwing out a handful of chicken mash to call forth those gray, oily fish; then I'd toss in a three-pronged hook to snatch as many as I could.

I think that's why I'm so drawn to a tradition we have here called the Blessing of the Fleet. Every Mother's Day in Brunswick, the old Portuguese ritual of asking for the safe passage and prosperous haul of the fishing and shrimping fleets takes place. Shrimpers festoon their trawlers in brilliant flags and parade



down the Brunswick River to the ocean, where the priest from St. Francis Xavier drops a flower anchor into the sea to honor the souls of departed fishermen.

The Gullah Geechee people say that “de wata bring we and de wata gwine tek we bak.” It's a reminder that how we treat our waters reflects how we treat each other.

FRIED FISH AND GRITS

My great-grandfather Horace used to go fishing early nearly every morning. He'd catch a mess. Sometimes he brought back whiting, other times croaker, butterfish, or drum. He'd start a stew of tomatoes, onions, and fresh okra pulled fresh from the field, then dredge the fish in cornmeal and panfry it in a skillet. This was our breakfast, our bacon and eggs.

Serves 4

FOR THE FISH

- 4 fish fillets
 - 1 teaspoon sea salt
 - 1 cup buttermilk, store-bought or homemade
 - 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
 - 1 cup cornmeal or all-purpose flour, based on your preference
 - 1 cup vegetable oil
- CheFarmer's Grits**

FOR THE STEWED OKRA

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 onion, finely diced
- 1 pint okra, sliced
- 4 large beefsteak tomatoes, roughly chopped
- 2 teaspoons sea salt
- ½ teaspoon cracked black pepper

In a large bowl, season the fish fillets with the salt and pour the buttermilk over the fillets. Set the bowl aside until ready to fry.

In a shallow bowl, combine the pepper and cornmeal or flour.

In a deep cast-iron skillet, heat the vegetable oil on high heat until it reaches 350° to 375°F, according to a deep-fry or candy thermometer.

Pull each fillet out of the buttermilk and dredge through the cornmeal or flour mixture, and then place each fillet in the hot oil. When the fillets have turned a dark golden brown all over, remove from the oil and drain on paper towels.

In another skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Once it turns brown, add the onions and the okra and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes, salt, and pepper and continue cooking, stirring frequently, until the skin on the tomatoes begins to blister. Remove the stewed okra from the heat.

To serve, spoon a healthy dose of grits on a plate. Set a fillet on the grits, then spoon the okra and tomatoes over the fish and grits. You'll be ready to face the day after a plate.

CheFarmer's Grits

Basic grits require only four ingredients: water, grits, salt, and pepper. They are cooked low and slow until they alchemize into a creamy porridge that is fabulous morning, noon, or night. The quality of your grits matters, and I suggest investing in either Marsh Hen Mill or Anson Mills brands, because they both rely on heirloom grains and old-world production methods. I do, however, add some special ingredients when I want to push my grits over the top.

Serves 4 to 6

- 3 cups water, more if needed
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 cup stone-ground grits
- ½ cup buttermilk
- ½ cup heavy cream, more if needed
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon pecan oil

In a heavy-bottomed medium stockpot,

bring the water with the salt to a boil. Add the grits and stir, bringing them back to a boil.

As the grits begin to thicken, add the buttermilk and cream, then reduce the heat to a simmer, stirring occasionally for 45 minutes until the grits are creamy and thick. If the grits start to thicken quickly, add equal parts water and cream. Stir in the butter and oil just before serving.



Excerpted from Bress 'n' Nyam: Gullah Geechee Recipes from a Sixth-Generation Farmer.

Copyright © 2021 CheFarmer Matthew Raiford and Amy Paige Condon.

Photography © 2021 by Siobhán Egan.

Reproduced by permission of The Countryman Press, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company.

All rights reserved.