

GREENS, ONCE REMOVED

A family recipe

BY MICHELLE S. JOHNSON

THE NEXT-TO-LAST TIME I SAW MY SISTER Martha, we cooked the meal we'd been planning for months. My older sister Donna and I left Kalamazoo, Michigan, for Martha's home in Hobart, Indiana. We'd packed dried black beans, all my seasonings, and Donna's secret ingredients for her signature cornbread. This was my first road trip with "Big Queen," the name she adopted for my use these last couple of years. Between bites of our Creole takeout, we talked about family history.

Donna, Martha, and I share a father, yet we did not grow up together. Twenty-three years separated Donna, the eldest sister, from me, the youngest. We experienced three distinctly different versions of Roy Smithon Merricks, and, for "grown people's reasons," saw each other only intermittently when I was a small girl. We reunited in 1986, almost twenty years after my mother remarried and ten years after our father passed. Donna and I intensified our relationship as sister-historians, archivists, and friends, and saw Martha on two or three extended occasions during that time. We don't know why, but we lost touch with Martha for nearly thirty years after her mother passed.

When my nieces found me on social media in 2018, our relationships blossomed. We basked

in discovering each other and ourselves. With Martha now back in the fold, our conversations often centered food, exploring shared tastes, preferences, and cooking techniques. My thirty-five-plus years as a vegetarian sparked many questions from my sisters, and I felt a keen desire to prove the flavor of my cuisine. My greens served as my proof that vegetarian greens slammed, and I liked showing them off.

The evening we arrived in Hobart, Martha shared the plans she'd coordinated for our feast the next day. My niece LaShanda and I would make a trip to an Ethiopian restaurant in Valparaiso to snag Martha's favorite sambusas; LaShanda would pick up fried chicken from Strack and Van Til; and Martha and Donna would each add their special cornbread to my beans and greens. We'd cap off Saturday evening with a sisters' pajama party at the hotel.

The next day, we executed most of Martha's plan. As I prepared the beans in Martha's kitchen, my niece LaDonna and her family arrived with a huge bunch of fresh greens for me from their urban garden in Merrillville. When cooking for others, I'm usually more restrained with salt and heat than when I'm cooking for myself, so I held back

Photos courtesy of the author



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on the crushed red pepper that my father used in his greens. It's unclear if Donna refused to make her cornbread to keep her secret recipe, or if she simply deferred to the middle sister that day, but Martha proudly let us watch as she added creamed corn and finely diced jalapeños to her batter.

WHEN I WAS A CHILD and teen, my stepfather—or “second father,” as I thought of him—demanded that I disremember my biological father. I privately recollected and cherished times spent with my biological father in Chicago, Kalamazoo, and at Paradise Lake in Cass County, Michigan. A jazz drummer and bass player, stylishly bespectacled, with a mustache and goatee framing his legendary smile, Roy Smithon Merrick's circuitous life coursed through Kansas City, Missouri; Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids, Michigan; Harlem, New York; and the South Side of Chicago. While my father moved frequently, Michigan remained home base for his mother, my grandmother Woods. She lived on two iconic Kalamazoo streets for twenty-six years.

Grandmother Woods was a source of mystery and fascination for me and my sisters. We have little information about her life between her youth as Annabelle Chaney in Natchez, Mississippi, and her arrival in Kalamazoo as a woman in her early thirties. Based on family stories, we know that she worked in Kansas City, my father's birthplace. She gave birth to him in 1916, at age fifteen. The two of them first appear in federal census documentation in 1930, living in Kalamazoo's Bottoms on Harrison Street, one of the main arteries of Black settlement west of the Kalamazoo River. Harrison Street extended through East North Street, another heavily Black corridor.

Sometime between 1930 and 1935, my grandmother and her lodger-turned-husband, Auzie Woods, purchased a large, two-story house on Krom Street, a short but culturally important vein of Black Northside Kalamazoo. Auzie paved for the city as an “asphalt man,” while my grandmother cooked



long hours in kitchens, including in tea rooms.

Tea rooms were a national trend in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Typically owned or run by women, they usually served lunch and light suppers in settings that ranged from homes to private clubs. Sometimes chefs cooked the food at home and brought the dishes to the tea room; other times, they fixed light sandwiches and small meals on site. Entrepreneurial Black women opened their homes as tea rooms, frequently offering high-end dining experiences.

In Kalamazoo, at least seven tea rooms emerged, starting as early as 1909. As with all the other places my grandmother worked, we don't know the name or type of establishment where she created meals, but we suspect it was white-owned. Black women operated and promoted tourist homes as close to Kalamazoo as Battle Creek, Three Rivers, Lawrence, and Grand Junction in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, but *The Green Book* shows no establishments in Kalamazoo.

While the specifics of what my grandmother cooked for patrons of tea rooms, hotels and private clubs are unknown, we know a great deal



FAR LEFT: The author with her father, Roy Smithon Merricks, circa 1965; THIS PAGE: The author (l) with her sisters Donna Alford (center) and Martha L. Johnson (foreground), 2018

about what she cooked at home. As a little boy in the 1950s, my father's cousin Malcolm, moved from Natchez with his parents to Grandmother Woods' Krom home. He remembers that my grandmother cooked greens regularly and recalls his father eating greens five days a week.

Donna remembers my grandmother's greens as the first she ever ate. That dinner stands out, some seventy years later, not only because of her initial exposure to greens, but also for the rare occasion of having steak as a child. She wonders if my grandmother brought the meat home from the private club where she worked as a cook.

Grandmother Woods' passing in 1956 was a turning point for all of us. Martha, her mother, and my father left New York and moved into my grandmother's house. Donna's meals with our father became sporadic—takeout from downtown restaurants like the Kalamazoo Fishery or hot dogs from the Coney spot, eaten at the house on Krom. Donna taught herself to cook greens when she married Lee, a Louisianian, in 1970. Her greens recipe—a mix of turnips, mustards, and mostly collards—shifted over time, but always

included salt, pepper, and onion. Over the years, she cut back a little on bacon grease from the skillet. Later, she included turkey knuckles and sometimes a little jalapeño. She fondly remembers buying all types of greens soaked in salt water from a man who hailed from Okolona, Mississippi. Every summer, for decades, he drove his red truck stocked with vegetables around the Northside. Even with the vendor's soak, they required cleaning—and, Donna insists, “they were fresher and better if they had a little dirt on them.”

Martha didn't like to talk about the past—digging in her history with my father and her mother was delicate and rare. Later in life, she preferred to share enthusiasm for her favorite television shows and the antics of

her puppy, Titus. She delivered passionately detailed accounts of the foods she loved, which were often the same foods LaShanda tried to restrict. She'd relish the victory of getting to eat what she wanted. She was born in Harlem, New York, in 1943, while my father was pursuing his music career and driving a cab. By all accounts, his wife Mattie followed him to the clubs. Rearing Martha became the honor and blessing of her aunt in New Rochelle. That aunt passed around the same time as Grandmother Woods, and the family of three moved to Kalamazoo shortly thereafter. Martha fondly recalled our father's greens, flecked with red pepper flakes.

Because my grandmother passed before I was born, everything I know about her comes from conversations and primary sources. Luckily, my mother was a story gatherer who fervently wanted to me to know my family history. She never met my grandmother, but relayed my father's stories—that my grandmother was a fantastic professional cook and that my father learned from her. I don't remember my father's dishes at all. My mother said he made exceptional steak, and she vividly

recalled my father’s greens, seasoned with ham hocks and, of course, a little crushed red pepper.

EIGHT MONTHS AFTER OUR sisters’ reunion in Hobart, I received the call that Martha had passed away at home. I was on a road trip in Washington state. Before I caught my flight back to Kalamazoo, I comforted myself with Ethiopian food in Oakland, California. The grief borne of unasked questions still stings and surprises me. In all the conversations that we had about greens—her intense curiosity about my recipe and the liquid smoke I add—I never asked her how she made her own.

Almost a month after she passed, I posed that question to Martha’s daughters via text message. LaShanda wrote, “She didn’t use a recipe. She would soak the greens for an hour or so. She would cook them with smoke meat for hours. That’s all I got, but they were delicious!” She sent a picture of Martha smiling in front of a grocery produce cooler piled close to two feet high with fresh collard greens. She’s wearing her brown winter down jacket and matching baker boy cap. LaShanda took this snapshot as Martha shopped for Thanksgiving in Gary, Indiana, in 2016. I saved it, and it has become one of my favorite photos of her.

LaDonna texted, “I know she used pepper juice in them as well. She cooked them down for hours.... I love this,” followed by two red heart emojis. And Shari, the oldest, offered, “I know she used smoked pork meat, but I use smoked turkey & pepper juice & minced garlic.”

I’ve come to see greens as the tie that binds my sisters to me, and the three of us to our father. And greens remain at the heart of the family. Donna’s husband raises them on the Louisiana family farmland he manages. LaDonna and her husband grew collards in their urban garden again this year. Kalamazoo’s now-shuttered Fuel Vegetarian restaurant featured my greens, seasoned with heat and smoke, and my Pot Liquor Soup on their menu. Collards ground the economic development project I began on Kalamazoo’s Eastside, just across the river from the Bottoms. This year, four hardy collard plants survived the Michigan winter. By June, they were still growing strong in last year’s beds. 🍴



TOP: Produce from Ampersee Wellness Garden in Kalamazoo, MI, August 2021; BOTTOM: Martha Johnson shops for greens in Gary, IN, November 2016

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