FOOD LITERACY, ONE PLATE AT A TIME

Nutritionist Sadé Meeks is on a mission to empower her clients to make healthy, affordable choices.

BY CHARLIE PAPPAS

THE BEST STORYTELLERS SHOW RATHER THAN TELL. THEY BUILD SCENES THAT ILLUSTRATE a point so a reader or viewer can imagine themselves in the middle of a world the writer has created. Sadé Meeks is doing a version of that right now in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi—through food. After receiving a bachelor's degree in culinary arts from Mississippi University for Women and then going on to Cal State LA for her master's in nutritional science, Meeks returned to Jackson to further her work. The thirty-year-old's goal is to improve the food- and nutritional literacy of residents in underserved communities. She knows she's not the first to try. Yet, through her organization Growing Resilience in the South, or GRITS, Inc., Meeks shows her clients how to supplement their diets with whole foods that proliferated in backyard gardens for generations: green beans, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, collards, cabbage—the sorts of staples traditionally picked fresh and prepared the same day. Her message isn't simply that healthy foods help fight or prevent conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, but that they are ancestral foods that, when prepared healthfully, have the power to connect the eater to their forbears' foodways. Those foods can have the same impact, she tells them, whether they're plucked from the garden or purchased on sale at the grocery store.

It is not easy work. Take the differences between white and brown rice. White rice is a bedrock ingredient in many Southern dishes and meals. But it has come to be viewed as the unhealthy option compared to brown rice, which typically has more fiber. Meeks tells clients to go ahead and cook the white rice but to monitor portion size and pair it with plenty of green vegetables and other ingredients that balance the meal. For her efforts, Meeks won the Southern Foodways Alliance's 2023 John Egerton Prize, which each year honors an individual or organization whose work addresses issues of race, class, gender, or social or environmental justice through the lens of food.

As Meeks says in a video for GRITS: "We may not be able to control all the stressors on the outside, but we can work toward improving the internal stressors. We can start by reconnecting with the foods that generations before us grew up on, thus improving our resilience." She spoke with SFA about her vision for the future and why nothing beats her grandmother's tomatoes.

Charlie Pappas: ***What narratives are present in the discussion of food advocacy today?***
Sadé Meeks: A lot of what we see in the media is a stereotype that portrays Black cultural foods as just soul food, and it portrays soul food as coming from the scraps that the enslavers gave to Black people—but that's not the complete narrative. A part of my job is helping to complete these narratives. When you see it, your whole point of view about food is changed. One way that I like to do this is by talking about my enslaved ancestors and their gardens. Even though they had the leftovers, they also were able to grow collards, mustards, and even kale in their gardens. Those are the stories that I'm trying to connect more people to.

CP: ***What is nutritional literacy? Why is it important to the work that you do?***
SM: Before you can grasp nutritional literacy, it's important to understand *food* literacy, the ways that we interact with food—not just how to cook foods, but how to access foods, how to read food labels. Food literacy is a broader understanding of food and nutrition. I did my graduate thesis project on a food literacy cookbook, and part of what I was trying to argue is that a lot of the time, it's not that people don't want to be healthy. Sometimes they don't know how to access foods, what resources are available to help them resist food insecurity, or how to cook. Food literacy is a skill that enables you to be resilient in whatever environment you're in. One day you may be food secure, the next you may be food insecure. If you have strong food literacy skills, you can navigate those challenges more easily. When I was in grad school I had a level of food insecurity, but I also had a strong level of food literacy because of my background in culinary arts. I was able to navigate shopping at the ninety-nine cent store with ten

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Photographs by Brittny Miller

Sadé Meeks presents a cooking demonstration in Jackson, Mississippi, 2023.

dollars and prepare foods that were still nourishing. I understand that was a privilege because I had that skill set. I knew that other people may lack food literacy skills, and they couldn't manage their food insecurity in the same way. That's when I began to focus more on food literacy and not just nutritional literacy.

CP: ***Why is it so important for you to be doing this work in Jackson now?***
SM: What is going on could be described as a renaissance in Jackson. There are so many young creatives and artists doing their thing here. As a dietitian, I understand that I'm an artist too. Before I came back, I wasn't calling myself an artist, but I needed to be here to see myself and see GRITS in the way that we are meant to be. Being here has positioned GRITS to step into its fullness, not just as a nutrition or food organization, but as a creative organization that uses storytelling as an art to connect people to food. I've been able to connect with so many artists. We all love the South, and we all tell stories in our own ways. It's a powerful thing when all of those art forms come together. I didn't know that then, but in hindsight, I realize that's why I needed to be back in Jackson, to have that connection.

CP: ***How does food work as a mode of storytelling?***
SM: When I learn about something, I want to connect with it, especially when I learn about the cultures of food. If my grandmother tells me about something, I want to use it. It makes me feel connected to her history. I remember a story my grandmother told me about how she went to Chicago to visit her sister, and she had some tomatoes. [My great-aunnt] said, "My sister got some tomatoes from Mississippi." Before she knew it, she didn't have any tomatoes left for herself—everybody wanted her tomatoes! It's a funny story, and after she told it to me, I made some tomato soup. Hearing stories like this makes me want to create memories with different foods.

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