JUST ABOVE MY HEAD

When I make greens and dressing, I imagine that my ancestors are with me.

BY KIDIOCUS KING-CARROLL

WE STOOD IN THE PRODUCE SECTION OF the Save A Lot at Silver Mill Court in Milwaukee, surrounded by leafy, cruciferous vegetables—dark, emerald green and deep purple; curly and voluminous. It was 2001. I was nine years old, and my brother was eight. Our grandma gripped the buggy with both hands and pondered her choices. "Collards," she said aloud.

A middle-aged Black woman standing nearby turned to us, her tongue sassy and imperious. "Those are mustards," she corrected. "I'm from Pine Bluff, Arkansas—I know my greens!"

Grandma, always quick on the take, snappily replied, "I'm from Arkansas, too. And I *know* my greens."

The woman sneered and pushed her buggy away while my grandma stuffed our cart with bunches of collards, mustards, and turnips. That night, I watched patiently as she washed and destemmed the greens before simmering them in a metal stockpot with salt pork and ham hocks. She also prepared sour cream cornbread, so fluffy and sweet that it could be cake. When I crushed the cornbread into the potlikker, that liquid gold soaked it up, and I could finally take a bite.

Pinto beans and cornbread, white rice, fried green onions, mixed greens, fried catfish, smothered pork chops, and rabbits and raccoons obtained from Bill the Butcher were regular dishes at the dinner table when my grandma cooked meals. My mother called this "country food," and she did not altogether disdain it—pinto beans with hot water cornbread and sliced raw onion were dinnertime staples throughout my childhood. But the sight of a coon in the freezer was anathema to her. I found the deliciousness of that greasy, tender meat with a side of candied sweet potatoes undeniable, even as the sharp-toothed coon head peeked up from the roasting pan.

The Southern food that that shows up on my dinner table is not the same Southern food that shows up on the table of the Black folks three houses down from my mother's home, or even within our extended family in Milwaukee and throughout the Midwest and the West Coast. Culinary traditions of the Delta region of Mississippi and Arkansas informed the foods we often ate in our Milwaukee household. Rice. Catfish. Coon. Sweet Potatoes. Egg pie. These are Delta foods. They are the foods that my ancestors hunted, farmed, and cooked to provide sustenance for their families, and those recipes made their way north to Milwaukee by car, bus, and train.

Illustrations by Alex Aldrich Barrett

I learned to cook from sitting in the kitchen watching my grandma stir, whip, beat, bake, boil, and fry various foods into delicacies during her periodic stays in my mother's house on the North Side of Milwaukee. Grandma was born in Drew County, Arkansas, and learned to cook from her mother and from the folks she was in community with. Some dishes she learned from my grandfather, who'd been born on the other side of The River in the Hill Country of Marshall County, Mississippi, and had learned to cook from his people. My mother was more hands-on. By the time I left for college and returned home for holidays, I found myself making meals under her diligent supervision. She'd watch as I cleaned chitlins, cooked dressing, grated and sliced cheeses for the macaroni dish, and baked various pies. After taste, she might say it needed more salt, or vanilla, and I'd add and stir until everything was just right.

The dish that necessitated the most care was our family's dressing, which has evolved over the generations and over the miles from the Deep South to the Upper Midwest. My maternal great-grandmother Arguster didn't use boxed breadcrumbs when she labored in her kitchen in southeastern Arkansas—she used white bread that she'd dried herself. The boxed breadcrumbs made their way into the family recipe courtesy of my grandfather Hubert. My mother and I made our own contribution to the dressing: jarred chicken bouillon paste. We believe it yields a richer stock, but my grandfather would have dismissed it as unnecessary.

In *The Cooking Gene*, culinary historian Michael Twitty notes, "In cooking, your informed imagination fills in the blanks. The dead and the living cook with me, and things once forgotten come to life." My ancestors are not physically with me as I prepare foods that have come to define my culinary heritage as a Black Midwesterner, but I imagine that they are just above my head, guiding my hand as I nourish my family. The dressing that I make is informed by family history and innovation, but sometimes my innovations don't work. I will let the fresh sage burn in the brown butter, use too much black pepper, or buy the wrong breadcrumbs. And sometimes it only turns out exactly the way that I want it when I make it in my mother's kitchen.

In the years since that run-in at the Save A Lot, "I'm from Pine Bluff, Arkansas—I know my greens!" has become a recurring joke between my grandmother, my brother, and me. When we want to make a humorous, sometimes spurious claim to culinary tradition or superiority, we might say, "I make my *famous* cornbread from scratch because I'm from Pine Bluff, Arkansas!" Still, tradition is important for my family because it connects us to our past and honors how we have come to be. For our family, there must be an Old Country: somewhere that exists in the time before, a place that calls us into being and will always be home. Food is the connective force that allows us to forge a new sense of place while honoring all that existed before. That connection was never really discussed in my family. It was a feeling that manifested in the care of cooking a meal with recipes passed down from our people in Arkansas and Mississippi—or in the humor of claiming to be a better cook than everyone else.

Greens and dressing are significant in my family because of the labor required to prepare them. Both recipes demand quality ingredients, rich and layered stocks, and time. I've witnessed entire days

dedicated to shopping and cooking to build a good flavor profile. Greens and dressing are typically prepared for holiday gatherings in my mother's home and represent the closeness of Black family life for me. When I need a reminder of home and familial intimacy, I devote myself to cooking a pan of dressing—I bake and cube the cornbread a day in advance to dry it out, dice the vegetables, lay out my seasonings, and prepare the stock. And when I taste the dish, I think of the immense care that has brought me to this place in time.

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