

IN THE SMOKE WITH MARIE JEAN

A barbecue woman who built a freedom fund

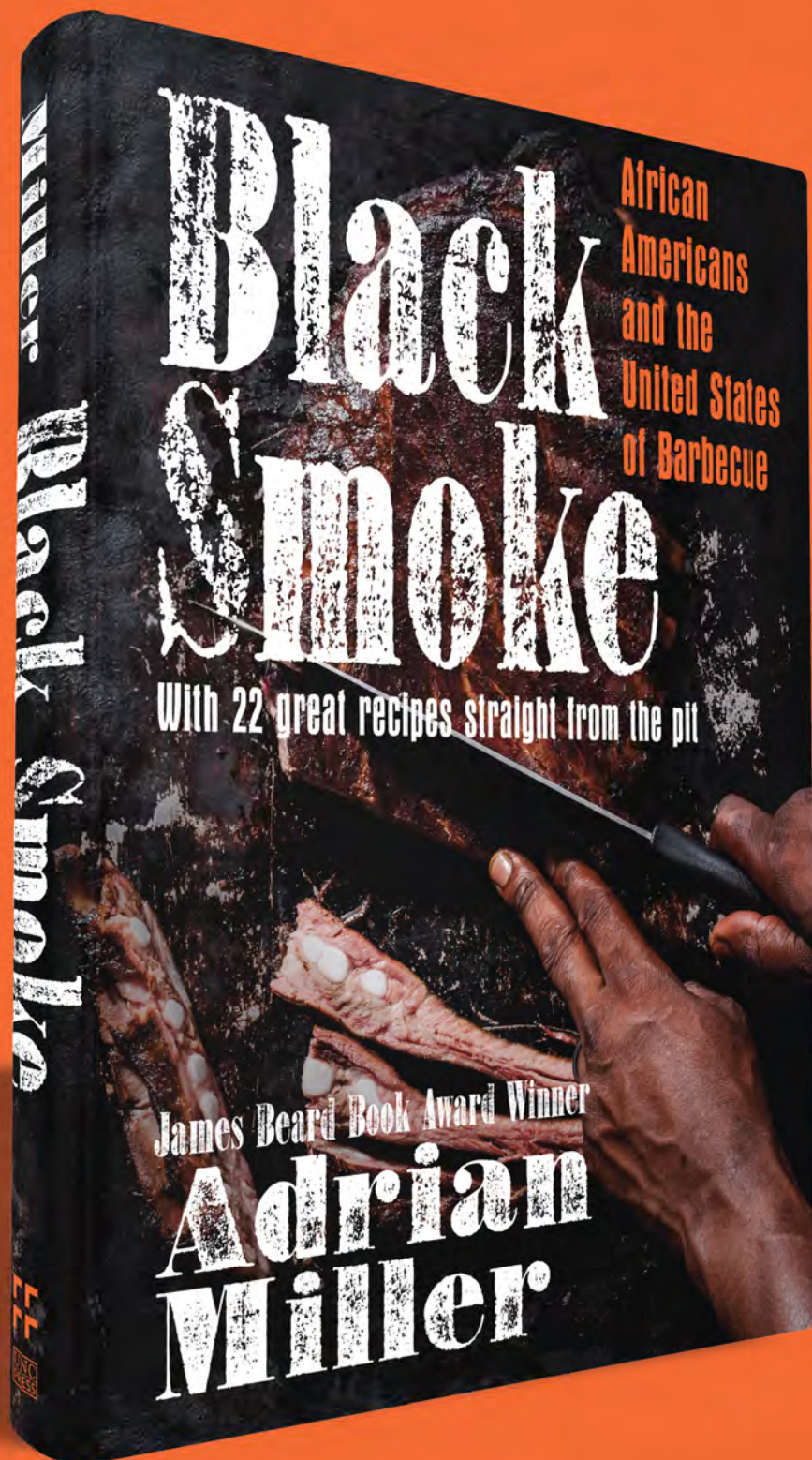
BY ADRIAN MILLER

For many people, barbecue and “Bro” culture often go hand-in-hand. It’s all about dudes mastering the primal art of cooking meat over wood. Yet, in African American barbecue culture, Black women are a deep part of the tradition. My late mother, Johnetta Miller, was my family’s Barbecuer-in-Chief. That’s why I was thrilled to find the story of Marie Jean (Mary John in English), a pitmaster in nineteenth-century Arkansas. The idea of a Black woman telling dudes how to barbecue is just mind-blowing. I hope you enjoy her story. —AM

“AN IMMENSE BARBECUE WAS prepared. Buck’s Tavern cooking was represented in superior style. Col. James Scull owned cooks unequalled in the culinary art in this or any other land, who occupied the first position. Mary John, the memory of whose splendid dinners at the Post of Arkansas, will never be forgotten by the few survivors of her day, was on the grounds, superintending.”

Let what you just read sink in for a moment. That part about “superintending” means that an enslaved African American woman named Marie Jean was in charge of a July Fourth, 1840, barbecue

in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, when the town was a little more than a year old. Today, we would call this person a pitmaster. Just picture it: an enslaved African American woman telling a large, likely all-male, team of cooks and waiters, how to properly pursue one of the manliest of culinary pursuits . . . *in the South, two decades before the Civil War*. She shattered the forced invisibility of so many before and after her. Without the passage above from the memoir of Judge J. W. Bocage, one of Pine Bluff’s city fathers, we may never have known of Jean’s prowess as a pitmaster.



Marie Jean’s story is so gratifying. Barbecue is presented as such a hyper-masculinized, “for boys only” world that I’m surprised no one is currently marketing a barbecue sauce to, um, improve male performance. We know that women were, and continue to be, integral to fish smoking traditions in West Africa. We also know from Marie Jean’s example, and that of so many others, that Black women have been in the barbecue game for a long time. Unfortunately, their stories remain hidden. I’m reminded of the lyrics from the James Brown song, “It’s a Man’s World”: “It’s a man’s world. It’s a man’s world. But, it wouldn’t be nothing, without a woman.”

Marie Jean (spelled “Jeanne” in some sources) was a biracial woman who was born enslaved in Arkansas sometime during the 1780s when the French claimed that territory. On July 11, 1793, and quite possibly at a very young age, she married a white man named Michel Baune, who hunted as a profession. The marital notice indicates that the marriage “legitimized” their three children. Her marriage didn’t change her legal status as an enslaved Black woman, and it is unclear how long the union lasted. She was owned by different people before Colonel James Scull purchased her in 1811. Scull was a white Brit who resided at Arkansas Post, a bustling trading center and the first European settlement in that area. After the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the influx of U.S. citizens necessarily changed the area’s dominant cultural influence from French to Anglo-American. Marie Jean, well into adulthood at that point, had her name Anglicized, and from that point on, she was called Mary John.

A few months after the July Fourth Pine Bluff barbecue, Mary John had earned, and saved, enough money to do

something that changed the course of her life.

Know all men by these presents that I, James Scull Senr., of the County of Jefferson of the State of Arkansas, have for and in consideration of the sum of eight hundred dollars current money of the United States to me in hand paid before the ensembling and delivery of this bill of sale, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, given and granted, and by these presents doth give and grant unto my slave Mary John her freedom, said Mary being a negro about fifty years old, to have and enjoy the same during life, free from the claim of all persons whomsoever, claiming by or through me or my heirs. In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 13th day of September 1840.

So, how did John earn enough money to buy her freedom? Could it have possibly come from barbecue? In *A Savory History of Arkansas Delta Food*, Cindy Grisham suggests as much, noting that John “made her name catering large events at the plantation homes along the Arkansas River.” Whatever her financial source, the fact that John could even build a freedom fund is remarkable.

Once free, she stayed at Arkansas Post to be an entrepreneur, despite the risk of reenslavement by remaining in the antebellum South. An Arkansas County contemporary of Mary John named W. H. Halliburton wrote in his *History of Arkansas County*: “Arkansas Post, the seat of justice of the county (1845–50) was the only village or trading-post within the county limits. Twelve families, with the total of less than one hundred souls, comprised the population of this village. An old free negro named Mary John kept here, the only hotel or public house in the county, which was, perhaps, the most celebrated in the State for the perfection

Marie Jean spent most of her adult life in Arkansas Post, the oldest European settlement in what is now Arkansas. She kept an inn and barbecued and catered throughout the area in the 1840s and 1850s.



of its cuisine.” Why Jean remained, we don’t know. Perhaps she was so supremely confident in her public reputation that she didn’t fear recapture.

Only scraps of information have survived to give us a window on Jean’s life. The 1850 Arkansas county census lists “Mary Jean” as a sixty-two-year-old Black woman living at Arkansas Post with W. H. Hand, a thirty-three-year-old man and laborer from North Carolina. There is no indication of his race or what their relationship was. Other than this, there are few official records of Jean’s business affairs and her family.

Sadly, the most complete description of Jean’s life came to public attention after her death. On May 30, 1857, the *Weekly Arkansas Gazette* ran this obituary using her Anglicized name:

MARY JOHN is dead—she died some weeks since at the Post of Arkansas. Reader, you may ask, who is Mary John? We will tell you. She was a free negress, as black as the ace of spades, some sixty-

five years of age, and weighing smartly over two hundred pounds. She was the servant of the late James Scull, Esq., and in the early days of Arkansas, when he and his good lady kept an open house for everybody, Mary John was the cook—and such a cook— Delmonico, if his were at stake could not get up such coffee and venison steaks as Mary John did. She was keeping a boarding house at the old Post, at the time of her death, having purchased her freedom some fifteen years ago. She was much respected, and her death is mourned by many, and among them, her old mistress and her master’s children.

Despite some racial condescension, this obituary is extraordinary for its time. It appeared in a majority newspaper with a white readership, Jean’s full name is mentioned (a rare occurrence then for a Black person), and she’s acknowledged as an accomplished professional. Her life was, and remains, testament to the fact that sisters have a long legacy of doin’ it and grillin’ it for themselves. 🍷

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