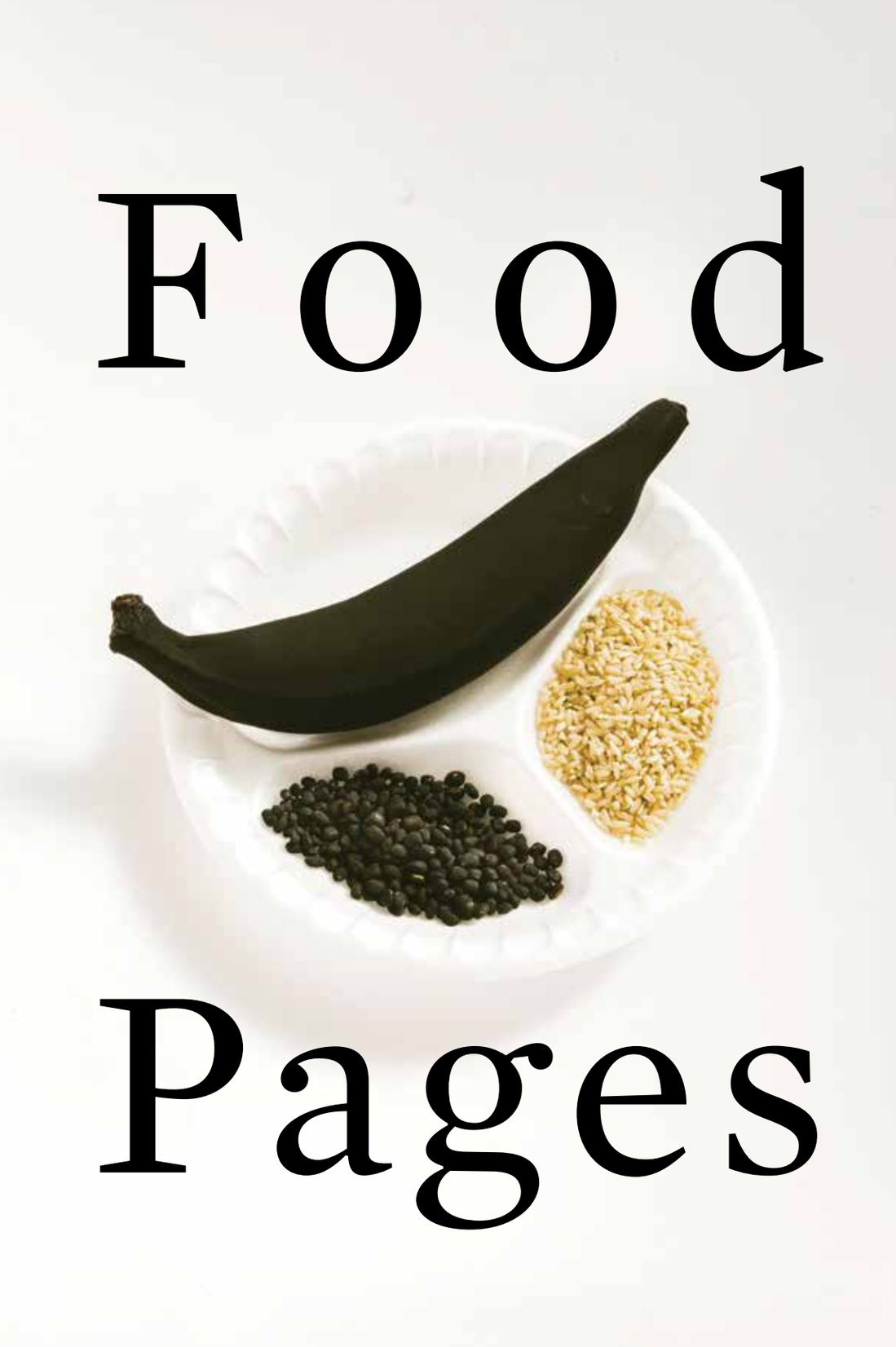
Black Food on White Pages

Reading the Lupton Collection

BY RAVI HOWARD



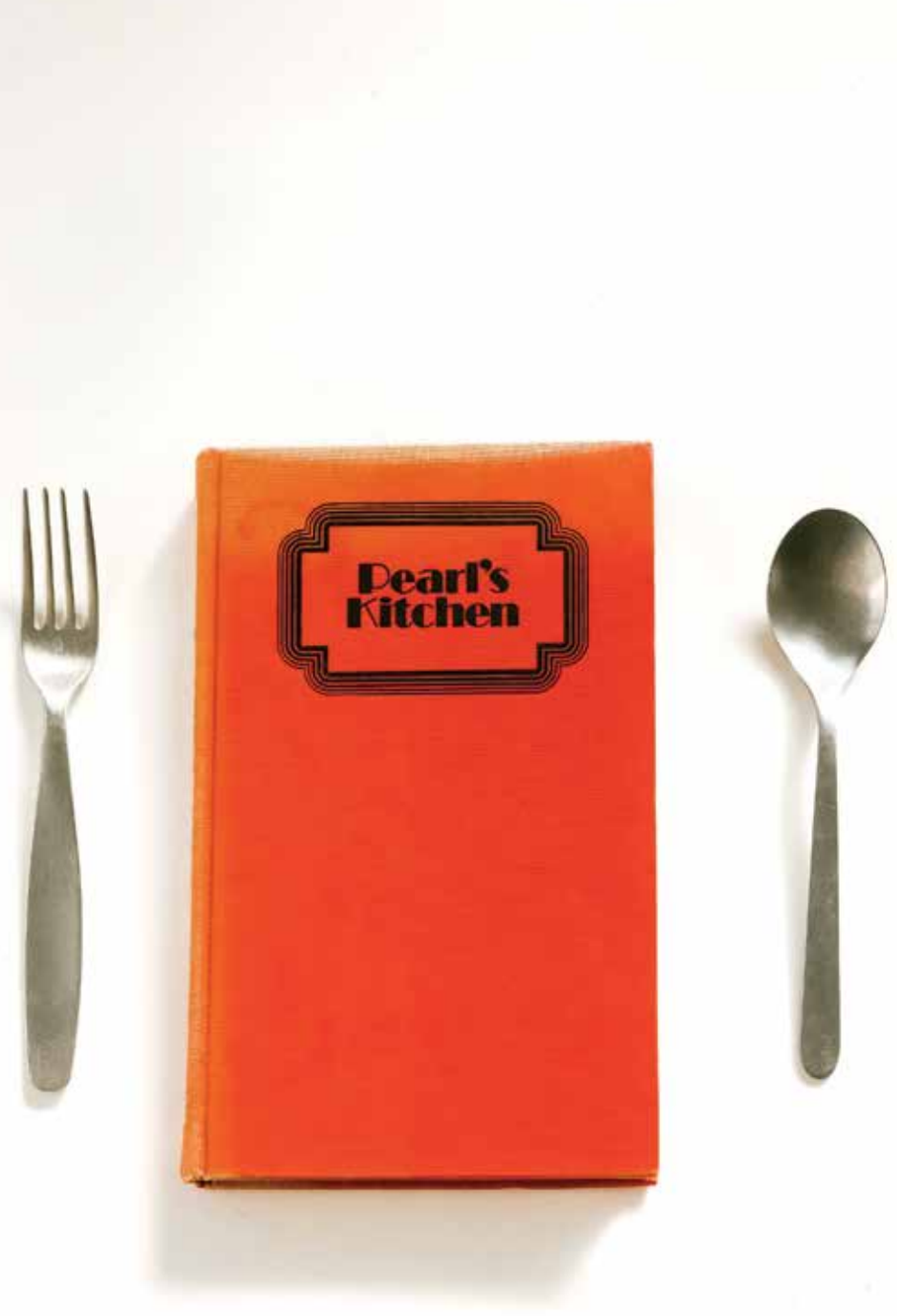
In a 2012 interview with *The Guardian*, Toni Morrison recounted the time her white employer complained about her cleaning skills, and Morrison asked her father for advice. "'Go to work, get your money, and come home. You don't live there.'" He told her that she was not obliged to live as they saw her in their imagination.

I thought about that idea—go to work, get your money, and come home—as I traced the history of black writing about food in the David Walker Lupton African American Cookbook Collection at the University of Alabama, one of the largest collections of African American food books under one roof.

Reading through the archive, I followed an arc from the service-based narratives of the early nineteenth century to mid-twentieth-century books that described homecomings for the cooks and leisure time their predecessors rarely enjoyed. Thinking about those more recent books, I was guided by Toni Tipton-Martin and her description, in *The Jemima Code*, of the work of Edna Lewis as a first-hand narrative. Those personal stories, I realized, revealed a closeness between the cook and the audience, a relationship that was hard-won and much different than kitchen work focused on service to white families.

I wanted to start at the beginning to see what the chronology told about this collection. Robert Roberts' 1827 book, *The House Servant's Directory*, became a popular reference book for black workers, written to help them satisfy their employers. The servants' main concerns were the tastes of the employers and their guests. Roberts structured the book as a collection of letters to two men, Joseph and David, described as his young friends who were just entering the service profession.

> Now, my young friends, you must consider that to live in a gentleman's family as a house servant is a station that will seem wholly different... this station of life comprises comforts, privileges, and pleasures, which are to be found in but few other stations



Photos by Oriana Koren

> in which you may enter; and on the other hand many difficulties, trials of temper, &c. more perhaps than in any other station in which you might enter.... Therefore, my young friends, when you hire yourself to a lady or gentleman, your time or your ability is no longer your own, ... and my sincere advice to you is, always to study to give general satisfaction to your employers, and by doing so you are sure to gain credit for yourself.

I was drawn to these lines: *Many difficulties. Trials of temper. More perhaps than in any other station. Your time and ability are not your own.*

Understanding how Roberts' early life shaped that advice necessitated a look outside those pages to consider his biography. He was born in South Carolina between 1777 and 1780. We do not know whether he was once enslaved. He arrived in Boston as a young man in 1805. Later, he married a woman named Dorothy Hall. Three of Dorothy's brothers, James, Aaron, and William, were abducted and sold into slavery. James was sold to New Orleans. William escaped his captors in the West Indies and fled to England. He sent word home twenty years later. Aaron was never heard from again.

The man addressing the letters to Joseph and David was also grieving the loss of his brothers-in-law James, William, and Aaron. What was on the menu at his employer's home the day after the first of the three was kidnapped? How did the trip to the market or the fishmonger feel as Roberts carried this news? Roberts did not warn his young charges of this kind of terror. The price of candor at that time was too high.

Beyond the choreography of service and expert direction on cooking, another set of instructions lived in his book. Servants learned how to enjoy success and sidestep danger. Roberts included pages on troubleshooting during dinner parties. He prescribed the following in the section entitled, "To Cure Those Who Are Given to Drink."

> Put, in sufficient quantity of rum, brandy, gin, or whatever liquor the person is in the habit of drinking, three large live eels, which leave until quite dead, give this liquor unawares to those you wish to reform, and they will get so disgusted against it, that... they will have quite an aversion to it afterwards; this I have seen tried and have the good effect on the person who drank it.

"This I have seen tried." There was something upbeat and even humorous in the way he made everything plain. Roberts knew that he could not refuse service to an inebriated guest of his employers. So he follows the roundabout paths of black culture, through the eels that wriggle in the glass of a whiskey bottle.

This is the black countermelody: a duet, in which one voice is public and another private.

This job will diminish you if you let it. Even if you push back, that may not be enough. Still, here is a path.

Just as Roberts outlined the perils of Boston in the early 1800s, Liza Ashley's *Thirty Years at the Mansion* described the challenges of entertaining and cooking for Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus in the 1950s.

> Since the state did not appropriate the funds to hire enough help, the Faubuses brought in prisoners from

> Cummins to help in the kitchen and the yard.....Since Mrs. Faubus did not have very much experience in cooking and running a household, I did most of the planning of the meals...We worked six days a week and never had Sundays off....We also worked all the holidays because the Faubuses always had lots of company.

Liza Ashley was serving Faubus when black teenagers integrated Little Rock's Central High School in 1957. She was there when the federal troops arrived. Ashley's daily routine in the midst of upheaval added a new layer to a familiar history.

She described President Eisenhower sending troops "to shield" nine black students. The word choice was subtle, but Ashley seemed to show a kinship with the students. Although a friendship developed between Ashley and the Faubuses, who named a granddaughter Elizabeth in her honor, such bonds did little to weaken the hold of segregation, a system that Governor Faubus defended. In his book *South to An Old Place*, Albert Murray challenged William Faulkner's loving memory of the black woman who helped to raise him. Murray asked whether that love transferred to her children, the sorts of kids who integrated high schools in the 1950s and became activists in the 1960s.

I wonder how Liza Ashley negotiated the affection of the Faubuses. I wonder what she heard around their table. I wonder how she felt when she saw and heard all that anger directed toward the students of Central High. She described the Governor as a quiet man who liked to sit in the kitchen and eat the pound cake that she baked. Ashley's recipe offers the simplicity of a beloved staple—a pound of butter, half a dozen eggs, three cups of sugar—measured against the complexities of her role. I imagine Governor Faubus eating a slice of pound cake in silence. I imagine Ashley's silence, too, and all the questions that were never asked.

MAKING YOUR MONEY and coming home was central to the story in *Dori Sanders' Country Cooking: Recipes and Stories from the Family Farm Stand*. Born in 1935, Sanders recounted the homecoming of her Great Aunt Vestula, who spent much of her adult life as the live-in help on plantations around Charleston, South Carolina.

> By the time Aunt Vestula moved in with us, she was too feeble to cook, but she was always in the kitchen when my mama was cooking.... While my mama cooked, Aunt Vestula tried to instruct her....Aunt Vestula often reminded her to pick a few shallots or leeks to sauté along with the fresh wild mushrooms, or to be sure to add just a little mild sherry.... But sometimes my mama *would* cut up an onion or a clove of garlic that she hadn't planned on using.

Sanders' descriptions of rationing and scarcity made her writing vivid. She wrote about Seed-Ordering Day and described the family gathered around the catalog. Her prose presented a Southern lushness, but not the kind that glossed over the toil of the black cook or farmer or laborer. By isolating what was precious, Sanders revealed the family's limited resources. Abundance, in the form of crops like okra and squash, was seasonal, and often uneven. Aunt Vestula savored the sherry that came from the employer, but the bottle was only so big. Her taste for that ingredient

was unsustainable.

Speaking to frugality, Sanders told the origin story of her grandmother's molasses bread. One day while cooking, her grandmother filled the oven, leaving only two spaces that were too narrow for a common baking pan. She found a solution. Coffee cans.

Consider the landscape within this oven, the space so precious that all of it should be used. There was plenty of room in Dori Sanders' own oven, but the coffee can was as much a part of the recipe as molasses, raisins, and dried apples. The continued use of that coffee can brought to mind a time when space was limited.

Dori Sanders' resourcefulness allowed her to see beauty in things that would be killed and rooted out. Her recipes for the poke and dandelion, a kind of flower offal, were given the same kind of attention as the sweetbreads, gizzards, and innards in other books in the Lupton collection. There was a respect for what may be unworthy elsewhere. There was a place for it on her table.

Like Roberts, Sanders' family had to use conceits to move toward freedom. She shared the stories of enslaved laborers who took that step in the garden.

> Some plantation owners wouldn't allow slaves even to have a garden. They didn't want slaves wasting time or valuable land on private gardens. The wanted them working in those cotton fields. According to our handed-down tradition, many slave women would say to the plantation overseer, "Oh, I just want me a few buckets of hollyhocks, a few little rows of flowers." Well, the overseer couldn't find an excuse to deny a woman her little flowers, which required almost no care, so he'd give her permission. The slave women would plant their flowers – and behind the tall hollyhocks, they would hide a kitchen garden.

Again, that countermelody. The voice of service used trickery to gain a bit of land and time. Sanders' writing conveyed this kind of leverage and the creativity required for survival. Many recipes in the Lupton Collection served as structured reenactments of leaner times. Making the recipes—or simply reading them as literature—can be an act of an imagined or performed remembrance.

Black domestic servants were required to play a role, and so many of the Lupton holdings outlined domestic stage direction. However, cookbooks written by black entertainers provided insight into their lives away from the expectations, away from the life that Toni Morrison's father referenced—a limited space in the white imagination. I read with the countermelody idea in mind, considering the Hollywood character versus the off-duty individual. In many cases, wealth and success gave them more freedom and candor.

For *Pearl's Kitchen: An Extraordinary Cookbook (1973),* the Tony Award–winning actress and singer Pearl Bailey began alone at her kitchen table, the place she called "the center of my silence."

> It is almost two in the morning and I am sitting at my kitchen table alone.... Sitting here thinking of yesterday and cooking for tomorrow, I have written this book. It is a cookbook, but not a typical one. I'll tell you how to make some wonderful dishes all right, but I don't want to do just that and nothing more. While I am telling you *what* I cook and approximately *how* I do it, I want to try to communicate *why* I cook. Practically speaking I don't have to cook at all. I could make arrangements to have all of that done for us. I cook because emotionally it is necessary for me to cook, and I want to explore this mystical satisfaction, this meaning and joy that comes from my activities in the kitchen.

I was taken with that passage. And I was also taken with what you won't find in her book. She was less concerned with the precise measures of the standard cookbooks. Her precision came in her prose. So often, a recipe was wrapped in a story. The absence of details invited creativity. She named one of her recipes Baked Sole Spontaneous. "Just about the time I closed the oven door, I had this weird idea." So she added a little something: Accent seasoning salt and Parmesan cheese. Reading the collection, I peered through the open door of spontaneity. I glimpsed a freedom to take recipes and do what you would with them. If you didn't have fresh, use put-up or store-bought.

The invitation was clear. Substitute as needed. Season to taste. Come as you are.

Another moment of silence and solitude gave a notable contrast to the crooning stage presence of Johnny Mathis, a star I imagine in filled venues. Mathis created a much different performance space in his 1982 cookbook, *Cooking for You Alone*. Mathis' cookbook had a plastic cover embossed with music notes, and it could be folded like a music stand and set on a piano. The recipes were designed to mimic sheet music, composed in the key of solitude.

It was a love song to the self. A meal at home, alone, is a worthy occasion for ground beef benendict or sherried chicken thighs. He wrote, "While the recipe is for another dinner-for-one, it easily multiplies by two or four since this may well become one of your favorite company entrees." If you're having company over, that is fine, but it's a choice and not an obligation. The inner voice controls the story and the setting.

Pearl Bailey and Johnny Mathis told us that these books were the story of a journey away from their audiences or customary direction. We, the readers, could direct, perform, and alter as we needed, or better yet, as we chose. Maybe that ingredient, choice, was what the earlier volumes didn't allow, at least not openly.

In those service narratives, there was only one way, and missing the mark was disastrous. But by the 1970s, there was room for improvisation. There was freedom. As the great American songbook delivered standards interpreted by the likes of Bailey and Mathis—"Sweet Georgia Brown" and "Chances Are"—these books gave the same opportunities to a generation of home cooks.

This is what is beautiful about the Lupton Collection. We get this sense of black ownership and the power of recognition. A powerful part of this is the feeling of the freedom, the autonomy, to improvise. A silent musing, time to think, to create, and to get the mental rest that makes that possible.

Toni Morrison learned the importance of the sojourn, to make your money and return to a place that is yours. The writers of the Lupton narratives followed that same journey, a long slow arc from the required work of service to the creative labor that let them define the tastes and feeling of home.

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