

The Roots of Southern Food

By ReadWorks



A plate of food at Martha Lou's restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina is a beautiful sight to behold. Vibrant, brightly colored vegetables sit side by side on a white plate. Stewed okra, turnip greens, fried chicken, and cornbread are on the plate. Sweet iced tea is in a glass, and for dessert there is banana pudding.

The food Martha Lou cooks is called "Southern Food" or "Soul Food." It's served across the American South and in cities throughout the North as well. This kind of food is tasty and comforting. It's the kind of food your mother might make to cheer you up if you had an especially bad day. But this simple meal is the result of hundreds of years of trade across oceans. The Southern food you eat today is the result of cultural exchange between Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans.

Before the first Europeans arrived in North America, the Native Americans living in various parts of the continent had different diets, depending on the plants and animals in their region. Some of the vegetables Native Americans ate included tomatoes, corn, squash, and pumpkins. Generations of Native Americans improved the plants by always selecting seeds for the next crop from the tastiest vegetables. They also hunted animals such as squirrels and bison. Each tribe had their own cuisine and cooking habits, but they shared many of these common ingredients.

When the Europeans first arrived in North America, they had never tasted American plants before. The first European settlers brought their own seeds with them. Spinach, turnips, and radishes are all vegetables that came from Europe. In time the Europeans began to eat the American vegetables as well. Because corn, squash, and tomatoes were originally from America, they were sometimes easier to grow in America than the European vegetables. Over time a new “American” diet evolved with dishes that used vegetables from both Europe and America.

But Southern food doesn’t only come from European and Native American cultures. Many of the vegetables and grains eaten in the South today came from Africa. In the 1600s, the first Africans arrived on the shores of North America. They came against their will and were sold into slavery. These Africans brought their own food with them across the Atlantic Ocean. Dozens of delicious plants grew in Africa. Eggplant, yams, black-eyed peas, watermelon, and some kinds of rice all come from Africa. As more and more Africans were brought to North America, these vegetables took root in American soil. Rice fields covered the wet marshlands along the coast of South Carolina. Black-eyed peas sprung up across the Deep South, from Florida to Louisiana.

Slavery in the United States lasted until the 1860s, when the Civil War ended it. After the end of the Civil War, many African-Americans still lived in the Southern states. Over time, the food culture of African-Americans and European-Americans in the South grew closer, and became what we now call “Southern Food.”

In time, the vegetables from Europe, Africa, and America were grown side by side in gardens and fields. They also found their way onto the dinner plate together. Think about what was on that plate of food at Martha Lou’s Southern Food restaurant: stewed okra, turnip greens, fried chicken, and cornbread. Each of these foods comes from a different place. The okra and tomatoes come from Africa and America. Turnip greens come from Northern Europe. Chickens originally came from the jungles of Asia and were probably transported to America by Polynesian or Chinese sailors. And cornbread? Native Americans have been making something like cornbread long before European settlers arrived in North America. When the Europeans arrived, they made their own version of European breads using corn instead of the wheat they had used on their home continent.

Southern food spread throughout the United States when African-Americans from the South moved to major cities across the country. From 1900 to 1970, more than 6 million African-Americans moved to big cities in the North and West. They left the South to seek fair treatment

and more opportunities. They brought with them the foods and traditions of home. Fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and other dishes from the South became known as “Soul Food.”

Southern food is still changing today. As new immigrants from other parts of the world move to the South, they bring their own food traditions. There are now Asian-Southern restaurants in Atlanta and Caribbean-Soul restaurants in New York City. New patterns of migration and trade will change the foods that we eat and create a new definition of what we call “Southern” or “Soul” food. In 50 years, a plate of food at Martha Lou’s restaurant just might include jerk chicken or soy sauce beside the cornbread.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What kind of food does the passage describe as “the kind of food your mother might make to cheer you up if you had an especially bad day”?

- A African food
- B Asian food
- C Southern food
- D European food

2. European settlers brought seeds with them to North America, which caused European vegetables to grow in the new settlements. What was the effect of the growth of European vegetables in North America?

- A A new diet evolved that used both European and American vegetables.
- B European settlers began to eat vegetables that were native to America.
- C European vegetables were more difficult to grow in America than native ones.
- D Native Americans began to prefer European vegetables to American ones.

3. “Southern food” combines Native American, European, and African foods.

Based on this evidence, what conclusion can you make?

- A Different regions have different diets, depending on what food is available.
- B Southern food is still changing today as new immigrants arrive.
- C A new “American” diet evolved using food from Europe and America.
- D New types of food can be created using food from different places.

4. When European settlers came to North America, they brought their European seeds with them. When Africans were brought to North America as slaves, they brought African food with them.

Based on this information, what can you infer?

- A It is difficult to transport food across the oceans.
- B People are attached to the food from their home.
- C Early settlers and immigrants did not like American food.
- D People are not attached to the food from their home.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A how Southern food came about in the United States
- B Martha Lou’s restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina
- C vegetables grown by Native Americans before European settlers arrived
- D how Southern food spread throughout the United States

6. Read the following sentences: "Some of the vegetables Native Americans ate included tomatoes, corn, squash, and pumpkins. Generations of Native Americans improved the plants by always selecting seeds for the next crop from the tastiest vegetables. They also hunted animals such as squirrels and bison. Each tribe had their own **cuisine** and cooking habits, but they shared many of these common ingredients."

As used in this sentence, what does the word "**cuisine**" most nearly mean?

- A a type of vegetable
- B cooking without meat
- C style of cooking
- D style of farming

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

When Africans were brought to America as slaves, they brought plants from North Africa with them. _____, North African plants began to grow in America.

- A However
- B Meanwhile
- C For instance
- D As a result

8. Southern food is the result of cultural exchange between which three cultures?

9. How did slavery in America influence the development of Southern food?

10. Explain how cuisines are changed and affected by the interactions of cultures. Support your answer with information from the passage.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 980

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8. Southern food is the result of cultural exchange between which three cultures?

Suggested answer: Southern food is the result of cultural exchange between Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans.

9. How did slavery in America influence the development of Southern food?

Suggested answer: When Africans were brought to America to be sold as slaves, they brought food from their home continent with them. These foods became incorporated in what would become known as Southern food.

10. Explain how cuisines are changed and affected by the interactions of cultures. Support your answer with information from the passage.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. Students should indicate that cuisines are changed and affected by the interactions of cultures, because each culture has different foods that they eat. When two different cultures meet, they can exchange foods, which can then be combined to create a new cuisine. In the passage, Europeans came to America and brought European vegetables with them, and also began to eat American vegetables. This mixing of food cultures created a new "American" cuisine.