

Living Black

IDEAS FOR LIVING UNIQUE TO THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

All about Soul Food: What it is and how to prepare it

"WANT TO EARN more money in 1973? Then you'd better eat some collard greens on New Year's Eve," says Mrs. Inez Yeargen Kaiser, an internationally known home economist and author of *Soul Food Cookery*.

During a recent visit to her home in Kansas City, Missouri, Mrs. Kaiser explained that money was scarce among Blacks in early slavery days. Since collard greens, a leafy vegetable that looks much like spinach when it's cooked, symbolized "green-backs," or money, the slaves adopted them as part of their traditional holiday menu . . . with the hope that they would help bring good luck, and more money, in the coming year.

Collards, as they are commonly called, are just one of the many Soul Food dishes served by most Black families throughout the year, but most especially during the holidays. But there are few people who can explain why these dishes are traditionally served during the holidays. Mrs. Kaiser is one of those who can.

"Blackeye peas have a particularly interesting history," Mrs. Kaiser noted. The first blackeye peas came from Africa aboard slave ships, and the fact that they survived their journey is almost more amazing than the survival of the slaves. With little or no food to eat, the slaves were still repelled by the raw blackeye peas their ship's masters gave them to eat. Even after being forced to open their mouths with hot irons placed under their chins, they would still not swallow the peas. Blackeye peas are extremely hard to chew when uncooked. The slaves stored them under their tongues and then stowed them with their belongings when mealtime was over. When they arrived in America, the women planted them. When eaten (cooked, of course) on New Year's Eve, they signify prosperity or good luck.

Today, blackeye peas are soaked overnight, and then cooked with salt pork, red peppers and seasonings. Often they are mixed with cooked rice and brought to the table heaped in an African-motif casserole.

Served with the collard greens and blackeye peas is

another Soul dish that has its roots in early Black history. Chitterlings, or chitlins, are a pork dish that taste far better than they sound. Chitterlings are, quite literally, the intestines of a pig; they're prepared with garlic, salt, pepper, red pepper and a whole potato. Since its beginnings as a humble dish served from necessity, chitterlings have now become something of a delicacy . . . and one that is a constant reminder to Blacks of a poor, yet inventive, heritage.

Another "must" dish during the holidays is sweet potato pie, served for dessert (it's delicious piping hot with whipped cream on top). In the early South, Blacks associated the American-grown sweet potato with an African root vegetable, the yam, from which they made a pie dish. Served today, it's not only meant to be mouth-watering, but to be a reminder of a former way of life.

Rounding off the menu are cornbread, or cornbread muffins, Soul slaw (made with red cabbage), barbecued ribs, and neck bones.

Mrs. Kaiser noted, while she prepared the foods you see here, how important Soul Food really is. "Food is a means of communication. When you get a group of people together, and they sample unfamiliar foods, it provokes conversation and can help bridge the gap between ethnic groups. For years Americans have accepted Ital-

ian, Chinese, Mexican and Irish foods as part of their diet."

Now Soul Food creates an understanding of how Americans live and how we have lived . . . and what better way to start a New Year than to understand.

Shown in the photograph above is a sampling of traditional Soul Food holiday dishes. Beginning at the left in the background and moving clockwise around the table are: Sweet potato pie, barbecued ribs, ham hocks on a platter with blackeye peas and collard greens, Soul slaw, cornbread muffins and butter, a relish tray and chitterlings. The recipes for Mrs. Kaiser's Soul Food dishes, all contained in her cookbook, begin on page 146. They include Blackeye Peas, Collard Greens, Chitterlings, Cornbread and Sweet Potato Pie.



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