

# African-American Cuisine

- ◆ Southern-style cooking of Black Americans, labeled as “Soul Food” in the ‘70s, has its roots in American slavery. Most African slaves came from the countries along the coast of West Africa and were taken to North America, South America and the South Sea Islands. They arrived in America stripped of everything but their memories.
- ◆ Meals put together by the women were often made from food the slave owners had thrown away—pig feet, ham hocks, and intestines (chit’lins). Wild greens, fruits, wild game and produce from small gardens were also used in meals. Using their cooking methods from Africa, the women put together savory dishes, which today are still traditional foods for many African-American families.
- ◆ Slaves used large amounts of fat, salt and sugar to season their food because it was available. Salt was used as a preservative since they had no refrigeration. Unlike us today, slaves spent long hours in the hot sun working hard and burning off the calories of the foods they ate. Our lives have changed since then. While Soul Food is nutritious, it is often heavy in salt and fat. Too much fat and salt in meals can increase the risk of heart disease and cancer. The challenge is to keep the traditional flavor and “soul” of the meal while reducing the fat and salt.
- ◆ Until recently African-American recipes, like folktales, were handed down by word of mouth. Traditional cooks did not use measuring cups, measuring spoons, timers or written recipes. They cooked by using their senses, using a pinch of this and a dash of that. They knew food was finished cooking by how it sounded or how it looked. Fried chicken was turned based on the sound it made in the frying pan and corn bread was cooked until golden brown.
- ◆ African-American cooking varies from state to state depending on the African nation from which their ancestors came and the region of the US they settled. After the Civil War, freed slaves migrated to the north bringing their traditional cooking with them. Meals had ingredients based on the local availability of food as well as some ingredients that came from other cultures.

## Traditional African-American Recipes that Remain Popular in Illinois Today.

### **Hopin' John (Black-eyed peas and rice)** Serves 8.

*African slaves that came to this country were farmers. This is why they were so good at tending crops in southern fields. Food prepared by the women after working 16 to 18 hours in the field was often a one-pot meal. Black-eyed peas were transported from Africa to the West Indies and then into the Carolinas before the 1700s. Traditionally black-eyed peas are served as the first meal of the New Year and are said to bring good luck. There are many versions of how Hopin' John got its name. Some say it was a custom to have the children hop around the table once for luck before eating the dish. Some recipes combine the rice with the black-eyed peas while others serve the peas over the rice. But black-eyed peas and rice are always served together.*

1 pound dried black-eyed peas, picked over and soaked overnight in 6 cups cold water  
 1/2 pound smoked turkey or ham hocks  
 1 onion, chopped (about 1 cup)  
 1/2 cup chopped green bell peppers  
 1 whole cayenne pepper or 1/2 teaspoon cayenne flakes  
 1 cup cooked rice

1. Place the peas and water in a pot over moderate heat and add the smoked meat, onions, green pepper, and hot pepper. Bring to a boil and reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer for 1 to 1 1/2 hours, or until the peas and meat are tender. Remove the hot pepper.
2. Remove the skin and bones from the smoked meat and cut the meat into small pieces. Return the meat to the pot.
3. Add the cooked rice to the pot and heat about 5 minutes. Additional salt is not needed as the smoked meat contains enough salt to season the peas. Serve with corn bread.

Note: For a quick version of this recipe, a 20-ounce package of frozen black-eyed peas can be substituted. Cook frozen peas, onion, and peppers about 40 minutes then add 1 cup chopped cooked ham and 1 cup cooked rice. Add salt and black pepper to taste.

**NUTRITION FACTS (per serving) - Calories 220 ~ fat 1.5 g ~ calories from fat 15 ~ sodium 230 mg ~ total carbohydrate 36 g**

### **Cracklin Cornbread** Serves 8.

*On southern plantations, hogs were slaughtered in the fall. The only meat many slaves ate were the pork skin and fat. The slaves cooked the fat and skin in a skillet until it crackled, "cracklins". The "cracklins" were used to season vegetables and cornbread while the leftover lard was used for frying chicken and wild game meats. This recipe is a somewhat healthier version of the traditional recipe. In this recipe, bacon is fried to a hard crisp with the fat removed. The bacon is then added to the cornbread in place of cracklins. Although best cooked in an iron skillet, an 8-inch-square baking pan can be substituted for baking the cornbread.*

2 Tbsp. vegetable oil  
 1 1/2 cups cornmeal  
 1/2 cup flour  
 2 Tbsp. sugar (4 if you like it sweet)  
 2 tsp. baking powder  
 1 tsp. salt  
 1 egg, slightly beaten  
 1 cup skim milk  
 2 Tbsp. vegetable oil  
 4 pieces bacon, cooked to a crisp and chopped

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Add 2 tablespoons oil to an 8-inch iron skillet and heat in the oven for 10 minutes while making the cornbread.
2. In a medium bowl stir together cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt.
3. In another small bowl slightly beat egg, milk and oil together.
4. Add egg mixture and bacon to dry ingredients. Mix just enough to combine.
5. Carefully remove skillet from the oven, pour batter into hot skillet. Return to oven and bake 25 to 30 minutes or until cornbread is golden brown.

**NUTRITION FACTS (per serving) - Calories 220 ~ fat 10 g ~ calories from fat 90 ~ sodium 530 mg ~ total carbohydrate 29 g**

### **Mustard and Turnip Greens** Serves 10.

*Traditionally wild greens or greens from small gardens were seasoned with smoked meat such as ham hocks, fatback or a ham bone. Sometimes greens and vegetables with different flavors were mixed. Pot likker, the highly seasoned liquid that remains after greens are cooked, is rich in vitamins and minerals. When greens were served, the leftover pot likker and cornbread were often served the next day.*

*In slave kitchens meat was often scarce. In the song "Ham Bone". . .*

***"Ham bone, ham bone, where you been?  
Around the world and back again"***

*. . .refers to the practice of sharing a ham bone to season greens. The ham bone was shared with different slave families and then returned to the owner. Even today many African American cooks would not think of cooking greens without ham hocks or fatback, but smoked turkey parts can be substituted producing the same flavor with less salt and fat.*

1 pound smoked turkey, use wing or leg or 2 ham hocks  
 1 quart water  
 2 pounds mustard greens  
 3 pounds turnip greens  
 1 onion, sliced  
 1 dried cayenne pepper or 1 teaspoon pepper flakes

1. Rinse smoked turkey parts. Place in a large pot and add enough water to cover. Over high heat, bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer covered 45 minutes to 1 hour (ham hocks simmer for 1-1/2 hours, more water may be needed during simmering). The meat will not be completely tender. It will continue to cook with the greens.
2. Meanwhile, pick through the greens, removing tough stems and yellow leaves. When using fresh garden greens, inspect each leaf for insects and insect eggs.
3. Thoroughly wash and rinse the kitchen sink and then fill with cold water. Add greens to water, using clean hands swish greens through the water using a back and forth and up and down motion. Swish and lift greens out of the water one handful at time. Place in a colander to drain. Rinse the sink and refill with cold water. Repeat until all the grit is removed from the greens, two to three times.
4. Check meat. It should be semi-tender. About an inch of water should be left in the pot. Adjust water if necessary. Increase heat to high. Add as many washed greens as will fit in the pot. Cover and cook down until the greens are wilted. Using a long-handled fork, stir. Then add more greens until all the greens are in the pot. Add onion and pepper, stir.
5. This part is a bit tricky. Reduce heat to medium. Cook greens covered, until tender. They will turn dark green as they cook. Young tender greens will cook in as little as 20 to 30 minutes while older commercial greens may take an hour to become tender. Continue stirring and cooking, taste for doneness. Add more water to the pot if necessary.
6. When greens are tender, remove smoked meat. Remove skin and bone and chop meat. Return it to the pot and mix with greens. Serve with cornbread.

**NUTRITION FACTS (per serving) - Calories 110 ~ fat 1.5 g ~ calories from fat 15 ~ sodium 440 mg ~ total carbohydrate 13 g**

### **Sweet Potato Pone** Serves 8.

*Sweet potato pone is often called sweet potato pudding and it is served along with the regular meal in a Soul Food kitchen. It can be used as dessert, although Southerners often eat sweets along with the meal. There are many variations to this recipe. This version is popular in New Orleans and the Carolinas where sweet potatoes are a major crop.*

4 cups grated sweet potatoes (about 3 medium)  
 1/2 cup light brown sugar  
 3/4 cup evaporated skim milk  
 4 Tbsp. butter or margarine, melted  
 1/4 cup dark corn syrup  
 1 egg plus 2 egg whites, beaten  
 1 teaspoon grated orange rind  
 1/2 tsp. cinnamon  
 1/2 tsp. ground nutmeg

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. In a large bowl combine all the ingredients. Mix together until well blended.
3. Pour the batter into a greased (spray with vegetable oil) 9 x 5 x 2-1/2 inch loaf pan. Place on the middle oven rack and bake for 2 hours or until the top is browned and the pone shrinks from the sides of the pan.

4. Cool in the pan for 20 minutes before turning out on a plate. Serve warm or cold, cut into slices. For dessert, top with nonfat whipped cream and sprinkle with cinnamon.

**NUTRITION FACTS (per serving) - Calories 270 ~ fat 7 g ~ calories from fat 60 ~ sodium 160 mg ~ total carbohydrate 50 g**

### **Jiffy Peach Cobbler** *Serves 8.*

*Peach cobbler is an all time favorite among African-American families. The following recipe is not the traditional two-crust, deep-dish version, but it is quick, easy and delicious.*

1 cup all purpose flour  
 1 cup sugar  
 1 1/2 tsp. cinnamon  
 1/2 tsp. nutmeg  
 1 tsp. baking powder  
 1/2 tsp. salt  
 1 beaten egg  
 1 cup milk  
 1 tsp. vanilla extract  
 1/2 cup butter or margarine (1 stick)  
 1 can (15 oz.) sliced peaches with juice  
 1Tbsp. brown sugar

- 1 Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine flour, sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, beaten egg, milk and vanilla. Beat until well-blended and no lumps remaining. Set aside.
- 2 Melt butter or margarine in a 2-quart baking dish in the oven, the butter should be very hot. Remove baking dish from the oven and pour in flour mixture. Pour peaches and juice over flour mixture.
- 3 Sprinkle brown sugar on top. Bake 1 hour.
- 4 To serve, top warm cobbler with a scoop of ice cream, vanilla yogurt or whipped cream.

**NUTRITION FACTS (per serving) - Calories 320 ~ fat 12 g ~ calories from fat 110 ~ sodium 160 mg ~ total carbohydrate 51 g**



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