



LOCAL
ENVIRONMENTAL
AGRICULTURE
PROJECT



Notes from the Roanoke Change Academy's First Discussion of *The Cooking Gene* March 22, 2021

We began the session with a brief introduction of the purpose of this series. Led by Book City Roanoke, LEAP for Local Foods, and the Roanoke Public Libraries, and hosted by Christina Nifong of Nourishing Stories, this discussion of Michael Twitty's *The Cooking Gene* hopes to use the lens of this book to have a broader conversation about food equity, access, social justice, and personal and social history.

Recipe: Christina Nifong prepared the recipe for black-eyed pea hummus on page 80 and presented her results. She discussed the symbolism that black-eyed peas have in some cultures for luck.

Background: To ground the group in Twitty's background and experience, Christina presented some information on Michael Twitty's life and work.

- Born in 1977, Michael Twitty's interest in cooking was notably sparked on a visit to Williamsburg. He converted to Judaism at the age of 22 and began a blog called Afroculinaria at the age of 33: <https://afroculinaria.com>.
- Twitty's crowd-funded Southern Discomfort Tour began in 2012. On his journeys, many of which are described in *The Cooking Gene*, he "visits places critical to his family history while conducting genealogical and genetic research to discover his roots and food heritage." <https://afroculinaria.com/about/>
- The group then broke to watch Twitty's 2016 TED Talk: <https://youtu.be/8MEIzoJ2L6U>

Discussion: The group then considered this passage from page 72: "In Jewish culture, much like continental African and African Diaspora cultures, food is a mnemonic device. Whether it's matzo or hoecake, our civilizations value symbolic food, and passing down foods and food memories from generation to generation, and with them stories as history, pushes us across the globe.... What I'm speaking of is recovering the narratives across time, connecting all of us into one idea -- that our food has not just been fodder for our journeys, but embodies the journeys themselves."

We asked: How can food embody our journey? What role can food have in our stories?

Responses included:

- Food allows us to form interactions with people.
- Food can lead to unexpected connections (to people, to memories, to places) and attachments to them. Eating the local food while traveling can help us learn more about the place.
- It can also reflect specific times, places, social situations, and hierarchies. For example, the ways people eat, including what they eat and how quickly, may reveal what they learned growing up or in particular settings at particular times.

Discussion Questions: The group split into breakout rooms to discuss the following questions. We then returned to the large group to have a brief discussion about each.

- 1) Why is knowing his personal history important to Twitty? Why is it important to you to know your personal history?
 - Knowing personal history helps us understand where we came from and who we are. Sharing family recipes helps share family stories, but there is a question of how far is too far to dig into family history.
 - This group discussed localized family recipes, including Jello salad, snickers salad, and arroz con pollo.
 - Food is essential and could become a huge part of a person's history. Food can also be a place to let your identity shine through.
- 2) Twitty writes (p 42) "The kitchen no longer felt safe if I couldn't use it to tell the truth." What does he mean by that? What role does food play in Twitty's story? What does it play in your life/family/culture?
 - This group discussed Twitty's moment of coming out and how he felt that his sense of identity was no longer welcome or safe in the kitchen anymore.
 - Cooking is his art form and he had to bring his true self to his work. It was important to be passionately himself. Food is a major part of his identity, as is the Jewish tradition.
 - One participant noted that the phrase "groaning table" is used often, and asked us to consider how the burdens on the table went beyond the physical objects—the dining table is often where we unload the day's troubles.
 - The kitchen is a place to learn the stories behind the recipes and a place to share new things.
 - Humans have a tradition of gathering and telling the truth around food (ex: coffee shops and how everyone always stands around in the kitchen to talk)
- 3) "There is being American and then there is being Southern, and when you move across its face its face, the South feels endless." (p.7) What is Twitty saying here? What role does being Southern or being from a certain place play in your story?
 - The South has a history of space and a sense of rootedness to its places. Its meaning is so subjective. We have ideas of what Southern food is, but there is so much variation
 - Some parts of what is considered the South don't see themselves that way.
 - The Southern accent is complex—it can be an image to overcome or to embrace
 - When did the concept of being Southern (and of Southern food) develop? Is the concept of Southern cooking shorthand for the concept of food that had its origin on the plantations?
 - Many Americans see the South as a place that has pulled away from the U.S. and never quite came back—it has a lingering bad reputation among many people in the rest of the United States. It's both justified and not a fair assessment. We confront and overcome this by telling the authentic stories (ex: the story of the whistling walk).

- 4) "... the dance of pounding, kneading, sweating, choking, and smelling connects with something timeless, all of the movements that came before you become you." (p71) To Twitty, doing the work of his ancestors teaches him their stories. How can actions connect us to our past?
- Consider how visceral food can be and how food is connected to memory. The physical action of growing and preparing food could be a way of connecting people together
 - Look at the stories behind the names of food. Hush puppies are called such because, when African-Americans were trying to escape or were carrying food from the kitchens to the dining rooms, they would throw these pieces of food to the dogs to keep them quiet and out of the way.

For Further Reading and Viewing

A profile of Michael Twitty:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/his-paula-deen-takedown-went-viral-but-this-food-scholar-has-more-on-his-mind/2016/02/12/f83900f8-d031-11e5-88cd-753e80cd29ad_story.html

Michael Twitty's newest book, *Rice*, just out this

month: <https://uncpress.org/book/9781469660240/rice/>

Michael Twitty's websites/blogs: <https://afroculinaria.com>, <https://thecookinggene.com>