

December, 2011

God bless you and Merry Christmas. In this year when so many people are facing economic challenges, I'm sharing a memory of simple pleasures and humble food made special. As always, this story is my Christmas gift to you. I trust you will enjoy it.

Christmas Soul Food

Cinnamon and savory drifted out the open door scenting the brisk winter evening. The warm, aromatic air seemed to curl around me as an embrace. Mrs. Goodman welcomed us with buoyant good will.

“Merry Christmas Charlie! Hey Say-rah! Did you bring ‘em?”

Our hostess grinned down at the stacks of aluminum foil-covered trays we carried.

“I made plenty,” said Big Chaz with a conspiratorial smirk.

The marble foyer sparkled with sophisticated Christmas decor. Dudley, the local florist, had evidently spent the previous day decking these halls with pine boughs and fresh flowers. I felt a little lightheaded as we stepped from the cold into that remarkable olfactory stew.

“Y’all just bring those trays right through heah,” directed our hostess, pointing perfectly pinked fingernails into the north end of the foyer. Victoria Goodman had grown up in poverty, but she was a beautiful lady who had “married well” as we say in the South. That day, in December of 1964, she was the perfectly groomed mistress of an elegant, plantation-style home and a massive cotton farm. Victoria’s husband, Eldridge, was a passionate farmer as well as unassailable blue-blooded southern aristocracy. “Richer than Croesus,” mother had called him. But Mrs. Goodman, though surrounded by wealth and historic propriety, was thought a little coarse and rough around the edges by the local Junior League. My parents adored her for their shared history.

Christmas carols floated in from the grand piano in the front parlor. A fireplace somewhere nearby was putting off wood smoke and the muffled shuffling of falling logs as embers flared and dimmed and fell away.

I passed close enough to Mrs. Goodman to catch a whiff Chanel #5. It was mother’s favorite fragrance too.

“Jimmy, you and Pete help these folks.”

I handed my trays to Jimmy but Daddy said, “No, Sarah and I can take these to the kitchen, ya’ll help Bob get the rest of ‘em out of the car, then get him suited up to help with the serving.”

I burst back outdoors, drinking in the cooler air like a thirsty retriever. Pete was beside me. His white gloves glowed in the gathering darkness and he used one gloved finger to polish a print from the ancient brass that decorated the black enameled door. “Son!” he whispered as an imprecation against whoever had marred his brass.

I hurried to match my pace to Pete’s long strides.

“What’d your daddy make this time?” Pete asked, his words puffing into the chill.

“Butterfish rolls.”

“Huh. Dey any good?”

“Get you some.”

Hungry people will eat anything. Faced with searing hunger, even the most fastidious of us may resort to eating unspeakable organs of untouchable creatures. Dietary sensibilities are thrown out the window when humans are faced with deprivation. Whole societies have embraced innovative methods of gathering, preparing, cooking, and eating anything digestible. Soul food, as we know it today, originated out of necessity and evolved into art.

Our family's connection with soul food was deeply rooted in the Great Depression. Food gathered on the land and available far into the winter became staples. Collard greens, dried beans, salt pork and vegetables canned from the fall garden made up the bill of fare.

During the Depression my grandfather, Alfred Darnell, owned property in northern Tennessee and southern Kentucky. It was about the only thing he had; the land, his wife, and his sons and daughters. He raised tobacco, corn, wheat and Tennessee Walking horses. My father grew up farming just above the subsistence level. He plowed with a single-shovel, walking behind a jug head mule. Daddy never lost his appreciation for simple food. The smell of turnip greens and ham hocks simmering all day on the stove top could bring tears to his eyes when he came home after a long day at work.

When it came time for Daddy to train his own children, he endeavored to expose us to all the glories of soul food: mustard greens, fried corn, stewed tomatoes, and any part of a pig that he could get to lie down on a biscuit.

Chitlin's are pig parts. Good chitlin's are a pinnacle of gourmet soul food achievement. Chitlin's, when properly prepared, are cleaned for hours, then boiled with red pepper, bay leaf and black pepper in a wash tub far away from the house. Daddy's version was then sliced, dipped in egg, battered with fine flour, deep fried and served on a plate covered with paper towels.

My father referred to chitlin's as redneck calamari. We didn't know what calamari was, but we knew it had an exotic sound that made it much tastier than fried hog guts. Big Chaz habitually enticed us to eat entrails by giving them playful names. The testicles of calves were dipped in cocktail sauce and called "Rocky Mountain oysters." The gonads of lambs were dubbed "abalone steaks." The testes of roosters he named "butterfish rolls."

To our credit, we embraced consumption of mysterious dishes as a rite of passage. Young gentlemen were expected to politely eat anything that was set before them with thankfulness.

Pete led me to the back door of the kitchen. If the front foyer had been serene and fragrant, the back kitchen was bustling with wild activity, shouted orders, and the exotic ambrosia of a feast in the making.

Eldridge had supplied several haunches of roasted beef that were being sliced with shining carving knives and arranged on silver serving trays with bowls of horseradish sauce. Several turkeys were being similarly prepared. Marinated shrimp and mushrooms and artichoke hearts swam in crystal bowls and artistic molds of crab mousse were surrounded with crackers. Curried cheese balls were lined up near the asparagus rolls in preparation for serving along with toasted pecans and a variety of holiday cakes on decorative pedestals.

We set our trays on the hors d'oeuvre counter beside the ones Daddy and Mother had left. I tugged up a corner of the foil and offered Pete a sample. "Get you some." Pete removed a glove and popped one of the appetizers between his lips. "Umm, ummm! That Mr. Charlie sure can cook. What'd you call these?"

“Butterfish rolls,” I said, sliding my arms into the stiffly starched sleeves of the white waiters’ jacket Jimmy had brought me.

“Hmmm,” Pete said, sucking his teeth, looking up and to the right as if trying to recall, “I think I had these once or twice before. Butterfish, hmmm? Like from the chicken of the sea? Sho good.”

Like me, Pete had been schooled in the proper way to consume exotic dishes. “Thank you,” he nodded with a twinkle of large white teeth and a broad wink at Jimmy and me. “Mis-tah Chaaaa-lie’s butterfish rolls.”

So, white-gloved Pete, Jimmy, and I glided through the arriving crowd of Decatur, Alabama’s elite citizens offering drinks and trays of “Mr. Charlie’s special butterfish rolls” to the elegantly clad sophisticates. Even the most finicky of the connoisseurs offered profuse praise for my daddy’s gourmet cooking skills.

I admired Big Chaz as he enjoyed the gala evening. He was a tall, good lookin’ slick-headed man in a beautifully cut tuxedo who had just bamboozled a room full of the upper echelon of his society to eat rooster testes and love them.

As the evening progressed, I had the joy of offering an hors d’oeuvre tray to one of the snootiest of the Junior League crowd. “Oh, my, my Victoria, aren’t these butterfish rolls marvelous?”

Victoria popped one in her mouth, swallowed, and said, “Ummm! Oh yes, I’ve been eatin’ these since I was a little bitty girl.”

“Oh? Was the fish caught fresh or were they frozen?” asked her snobbish guest with a particularly patronizing tone.

“Well” Victoria crooned with a smile, “it isn’t really fish.”

“What is it then?”

“You’ll just have to ask Charlie about that. But as I understand it, you start with a rooster.”

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My daddy had some explaining to do that evening at the Goodman’s Christmas open house, but it all ended well. All the guests really did enjoy those exotic butterfish rolls, no matter where they came from, and laughter is good for digestion.

Constance and I, along with our staff and their families, wish you a Merry Christmas, and a year full of health and blessings; always remembering that the greatest gift of all came from our heavenly Father in the life, death, and resurrection of His dear son, Jesus.

May you and your family share good food, good fun, and make lasting memories together this year.

I’m looking forward to seeing you soon.

Robert N. Darnell, C.Ac.,D.C.,Ph.D.

If your friends and family would like to share this Christmas story, please go to www.doctordarnell.com