

Just Recipes and Stories

by Darcy Mullen

When I was a kid, someone famous—like exceptionally, TV famous, yelled at me. Specifically, he yelled, "Little girl... Stories... are *just* stories...." This was in a ballroom full of twitching people witnessing my humiliation. The context doesn't matter here. It was just icky, from beginning to end. Time and time again I saw that stories are *never* just stories. Fast forward a bunch of years, and I find my way to literature and food studies in academia. I've devoted my life to chasing how our stories communicate the ways we sustain ourselves.

My friend, Mario, says—almost to the point of a catch phrase—that food is never just food. For me, the connection is in that food is never just food, in that the way we tell stories about food are never objective stories. We talk about, write about, represent food in coded ways. Recipes, food policy, documentaries on Netflix, pinterest boards, blogs, magazines, memoirs of *a year of X dieting*, diet books, heck even zombie comic books—all these pieces of culture about food reveal power dynamics. And spatial dynamics. They tell us who can do what and where those people can do it.

I count recipes as stories—they show, not tell, their politics. The gaps show a lot, sometimes more than the things actually written. Take for example the greatest find in my life as a researcher---- *Ramblin Chefs Georgia Tech!*

On the bumpy carpet of the Kenan Research Center, I found this community-style cookbook. Complete with plastic comb binding, familiar to kitchens of the '80s, this cookbook was compiled by the Georgia Tech Women's Forum in 1985. It's filled with the anticipated soup-can recipes familiar to fundraiser cookbooks. The contributors that are wives, or the family of male faculty, are identified through their husband's names, too.

It was hard for a woman to attend Georgia Tech, let alone teach here, in 1985—two years before the creation of the Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellowship, the faculty position I now hold.¹ The administrative titles listed next to non-spouses reveal the gendered division of labor embedded in the cookbook. It's clear what jobs these women just don't have.

Later, I tracked down the only other edition of the cookbook I could find: *Buzzing Around the Kitchen*, from 1997, which turns out to be largely the same text. These cookbooks are crystal-clear slices of time describing who was meant to do what in the institutional spaces I occupy. In the "International Tastes"

¹ <https://wcprogram.lmc.gatech.edu/brittain-fellowship/bf-history>

section there is "Hawaiian Sauerkraut Salad" (1997: 178), a recipe whose bland take on quote unquote ethnic flavors reads more like assimilation. Or racism. I wonder what America looked like from campus twenty years ago.

As a 30-something white woman, I am not surprised that a 30-year-old cookbook shows gender inequality. I am struck, however, that a cookbook made in the south would exclude southern food. For food rhetoricians, reading a cookbook is often an exercise in reading what *isn't* there. These cookbooks are missing southern food. In doing so, they exclude Black culture.

Food Historian Michael Twitty connects the foundations of southern cooking with techniques and knowledge from African cooking—look him up, he does a lovely job of this in his book *The Cooking Gene*.

That lineage is absent in the world of these recipes. These recipes reflect a lack of Blackness in a very Black food space. These recipes aren't just recipes—they are telling stories about the politics of race in a historical slice of *place* in Atlanta. Generously reading the gap of southern food in this one example of a storytelling cookbook can reveal demographics of transplants of kitchens to the south. Maybe? We all know academia means moving. (I moved here!) Or, it's Occam's razor.

These mirrors do not reflect Blackness because that's not the Atlanta these cookbooks could echo.

Another way to look at it is that this cookbook isn't *just* recipes, in the other sense of "just"—as in justice. They show the injustice in this slice of time. Flipping through this cookbook with a friend, our jaws dropped at seeing the easy naming of a dessert "Kongo Squares." There is nothing Kongalese or African about this recipe.

We made a quick check list of things in the modern American kitchen that could be traced back to the Kongo. Rubber in our kitchen gadgets, or all the rubber tires that inevitably brought everything into most kitchens. There's also the mineral Coltan needed to power a smart-device to search or pull up recipes in the kitchen (1997: 126). There's also food items like chocolate or coffee,

Africa has always been in southern kitchens from the history of who did what kinds of cooking, and continues to have a material presence in our kitchens. We have to find these presences in the traces they leave. We're finding them through gaps. In terms of gaps of what is *just* or unjust, well, those are decisions and a conversation bigger than what I can ask to here.

The important thing to me about reading food writing with this kind of eye, is to remember that there *is* a redemptive act in

recovering the gaps. There's an act of justice that comes with enumerating what the gaps are pointing us to. Our stories about food aren't only about what we like, or what traditions we pass along, or share around a table. There are stories in the margins, and in the gaps. Or recipes and cookbooks. And indeed, dear readers, stories aren't always just stories.