

The Terrible Beautiful Meal

A Ruminatio

This meal has ingredients that constitute the terrible, beautiful, delicious history of Caribbean life. A History of the Mouth (so to speak). Seen through the eyes of a Bajan migrant living, writing and cooking from Tkaronto or Toronto on Turtle Island in a territory now called Canada, history collides in unexpected ways in this food. These are my ruminations and free associations with tidbits of the historical and the nostalgic thrown in—a cook-up, if you like.

The Salt fish of the gravy carries the history of enslavement and Canada's colonial role as a part of the British empire. Salt fish was exported from the east coast of Canada to feed the slaves. Rum and molasses was part of the historic exchange. Rum infuses the history of Canada's east coast, but many who live there will deny knowing anything of slavery. However, the absented presence of slavery lives everywhere in Canada's east coast. Preparing a meal on ongoing colonial occupied land, using ingredients from the history of slavery to make a luscious beautiful, tasty sauce is a history of the mouth—but it is also a corrective to what some mouths refuse to speak—their implication in the terrible history of our now intimate encounters.

Of course, since the cod industry has been largely destroyed, cod fish is now a delicacy. But as a child I remember it as a marker of poor people's food, reminding us of the history of slavery. Now fish cakes or fitters is fancy party finger food. But in my childhood a "Bread and Two"—two fish cakes and a salt bread bun—was simultaneously considered fast food *and* a measure of one's poverty. And of course, men who (it was assumed) drank too much rum had lots of hot sauce added to their Bread and Two "to soak up the rum." From Jamaican salt fish and ackee to salt fish fritters to salt fish gravy, salted cod is a foundational part of who we are, who we have become.

The okra in this meal is the link back to a West African past. As a child growing up in Barbados, if people grew anything in their backyards, it was okra. In Barbados okra and rice, okra slouch and of course coucou are the ways I remember having okra most often. But living with my Somali husband, sauteed okra and tomatoes has become one of my favorite ways to have them—a little cumin, black pepper and the okra is ready to yum. Okra is this powerful link between African and its diaspora. And okra is this beautiful binder not just in dishes like Gumbo but across Black diasporic relations—it binds *us*.

Because I was playing with lands, ingredients, slavery and colonialism I have to have the element of sugar cane and all that flows from its terrible and brutal history. In the lamb ribs I balanced the heat of the pepper with sugar cane syrup. And to the cake and the topping, I added rum and sugar cane syrup. The making of a chocolate cake with that ingredient reminds us that slavery is not behind the continent yet and that all of the exploitative moments of African and Black life remain with us still. The pomegranate seeds remind me that when I was a child many people had pomegranate trees in their front yards. You hardly see this now. The absence of those trees now recalls for me the late [Kamau Brathwaite's letter and lament](#) on CowPasture Barbados and its transformation. The Caribbean is a place where not only were large numbers of people brought there against their will, but the flora and fauna was as well. It is a place of destruction of peoples, land and environment and the survival of it too. I read somewhere that pomegranates arrived in the region via the Bahamas.

The ingredients I cooked with constitute a history of the mouth, a terrible beautiful history of creativity, survival, ingenuity and ongoing life—here, there and across the many seas. The Caribbean, on every front, remains a font of invention—in the region and beyond the region. Because, you see, the Caribbean is both a geography and an idea. This meal is a history of the terrible beautiful thing the Caribbean is *anywhere* you encounter it.

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