Food

Black Chefs Talk About the Importance of Gathering for a Meal to Celebrate Juneteenth

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Courtesy Matt Dutile

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"Food is very personal to me and so Juneteenth is an opportunity for us to come together and invite different types of people to the table to share in food and conversation," says chef and TV personality Carla Hall.

By Kwin Mosby on June 19, 2020

On June 19, 1865, word finally reached 250,000 slaves in Galveston, Texas that President Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation granting all slaves their freedom. And since 1866, Juneteenth has become an annual celebration that started out as church gatherings in the Lone Star State. The tradition spread across the South and centered on food festivals during the 1920s and 1930s. Today, activists are campaigning for the U.S. Congress to make Juneteenth a national holiday; even though it is recognized as a state holiday or special day of observance in 47 of the 50 states in the U.S.

The historic event is celebrated in a variety of ways: parades, rodeos, street fairs, cookouts, and family reunions. And since food has always been an integral part of Juneteenth celebrations, we decided to talk to a few Black celebrity chefs, who enlighten us as to why breaking bread with others is the perfect way to commemorate this cultural milestone and they also reveal what special dish they would bring to celebrate the holiday.

Carla Hall

Chef Carla Hall believes that the holiday is a way to come together by "inviting different types of people to the table to share in food and conversation." *Courtesy Melissa Hom*

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Most people may recognize Carla Hall from the TV show, *The Chew*, which ran for seven seasons. Since then, she's embarked on a number of new projects, including *Crazy Delicious*, scheduled to debut this month on Netflix. The Washington, DC-based chef started a lunch delivery service years ago and that's when she realized that she was chasing her grandmother's Sunday suppers. In Paris, Hall quickly learned to satisfy her passion to nurture by preparing meals and inviting family and friends to sit for a communal culinary experience. "Food is very personal to me and so Juneteenth is an opportunity for us to come together and invite different types of people to the table to share in food and conversation," said Hall.

The fun-loving chef also sees the holiday as a way to educate and shutdown false perceptions about the African-American culture and food, such as watermelon. “I think there has been this minstrel stereotype about Blacks and watermelon, but watermelon came from Africa,” said Hall. “Not only was it a source of nutrients, it was also a source of hydration.” A food historian, Hall sees Juneteenth as a time to celebrate our freedom, but also as an opportunity to flip the narrative about preconceived notions about African-American culture. In her words, “information is power.”

My Juneteenth dish would be...

Hall would make her tasty watermelon salad, which includes 4 ½ pounds of watermelon, red radishes, red wine vinegar, extra-virgin olive oil, red onion, kosher salt, freshly ground black pepper and mint leaves.

Marcus Samuelsson

Chef Marcus Samuelsson with a bowl of Poppa Edie's Shrimp and Grits . *Courtesy Angela Bankhead*

Chef and restaurateur Marcus Samuelsson has won multiple James Beard Foundation Awards and is the author of multiple books, including *The Red Rooster Cookbook: The Story of Food and Hustle in*

Harlem. The celebrity chef owns restaurants world-wide, including MARCUS Montreal, Ginny's Supper Club, and Marcus B&P Newark. With social-distancing methods in place, his restaurant Red Rooster Overtown (Miami) is scheduled to open in the near future, meanwhile, Red Rooster Harlem continues to be one of New York City's most celebrated restaurants. Samuelsson understands the inherent connection between culture and food because every item listed on his menu at Red Rooster Harlem is directly related to the food served during the Great Migration that took place from 1916-1970.

The famous chef also understands why food is essential to annual Juneteenth celebrations. "Black food is American food. A lot of our food came here through slaves during the slave trade—whether it's rice, okra, or special barbecuing techniques," said Samuelsson. "Our food gives us the opportunity to tell people who we are as African-Americans and it represents our heritage in this country." Samuelsson believes that breaking bread with others during this historic celebration can be a cultural unifier and allow time to discuss a variety of topics, including race relations.

My Juneteenth dish would be...

In addition to cornbread, Samuelsson would create his own version of collard greens and black-eyed peas for a Juneteenth celebration. He would also bring a shrimp and grits dish similar to what he serves at Red Rooster Harlem. His Poppa Eddie's Shrimp and Grits is made with gumbo stew, chorizo, okra, and creamy stone ground grits.

Brian Washington-Palmer

Chef Brian Washington-Palmer and his Shrimp, Chicken, and Sausage Perloo. *Courtesy Brian Washington-Palmer*

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Chef Brian Washington-Palmer's dream to cook started at 16 years old when he lived in Berkley, California, when his mom got him his first job at a local restaurant. Much later in life, he moved to Paris, where he said the famous food city became his gateway to travel around the world and to explore different cuisines. Food became his motivation to travel. Since 1998, Washington-Palmer has opened several unique venues, including Ruby's Vintage Harlem, scheduled to reopen at the end of June. Patrons will also have the option to stroll into chef's new pop-up, Sexy Taco, located in a space adjacent to Ruby's.

According the enterprising chef, Juneteenth celebrations have centered around food and sharing, similar to a potluck, but it's the passing down of history and stories from one generation to the next that has always appealed to him. "I know it was about freedom, but that communal aspect is important," said Washington-Palmer. "It's almost like a family gathering, when you're younger and you sit down at some point, you ask grandma and grandpa to tell you about the olden days." Similar to Carla Hall, he believes the cultural interactions among family during this celebration are equally as important as the food.

My Juneteenth dish would be...

Washington-Palmer would bring Shrimp, Chicken, and Sausage Perloo, a one-pot rice dish with origins in West Africa. Originally served with seafood, there are now many varieties, including his family's South Carolina version, which is a cross between paella and Jambalaya.

Dayana Joseph

Chef Dayana Joseph with her famous Oxtail Bucatini. *Courtesy Carlos York*

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Chef Dayana Joseph was born in Haiti, but she has lived in the United States since she was seven years old. As the Executive Chef at APT 4B in Atlanta (scheduled to open in July), she wants to showcase her love for Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Diasporic cuisine, creating dishes that use unique ingredients from around the world, such as chocolate from Jamaica, honey from Haiti, beans from Ghana and spices from Ethiopia. It's all part of her effort to elevate the cuisine.

Joseph's Haitian culture is near and dear to her heart, but she embraces African-American culture 100 percent and celebrates it daily. She said there are cultural similarities in celebrating holidays across the African Diaspora. "I think as Black people, when we celebrate, there are always two things present—there's music and there's food," said Joseph. "I think food is an important part of our culture and every time we gather, there's always a bit of food in front of us."

Joseph calls food an unspoken language and an expression of love that come in the form of old recipes passed down from one family member to the next. Most of the time the dishes aren't written down, but simple ingredients transformed into traditional dishes. "When people were enslaved, they used the bare minimum to make what they could, and that bare minimum is amazing… it's delicious," said Joseph. "I think there's a lot to be said about our resilience and our power to create something out of nothing."

My Juneteenth dish would be…

Chef Joseph believes no Juneteenth celebration is complete without her Oxtail Bucatini Pasta with Spring Herbs, which includes an oxtail, short rib, Bucatini pasta, veggies with a side seasoning made with garlic, cilantro, parsley, shallots, and leeks.