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THE LATEST

Netflix's 'High on the Hog' Retraces the Origins of Black Food Culture

Host Stephen Satterfield on the importance of understanding food origins, the Black food movement, and his favorite filming locations.

BY KWIN MOSBY

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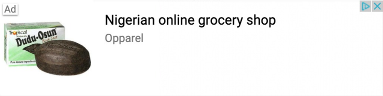
Last year energized a movement that demands the United States to recognize the pervasive social injustices against the African American community. It also provided underrepresented communities with an opportunity to tell their own stories and reclaim their place in American history. For food writer and sommelier Stephen Satterfield, the founder of *Whetstone*, a print magazine and media company dedicated to food origins and culture, that meant telling the origin story of African American food.

In Netflix's *High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America*, Satterfield starts in Benin—home to the Gate of No Return—where more than 1 million people unknowingly became part of the transatlantic slave trade. But the stories revealed in this four-part docuseries, based on Dr. Jessica B. Harris' book, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*, isn't just about Benin and America's unspeakable truths, it's about how African food and traditions were transported to America, and how this culinary legacy continues to thrive in various U.S. food scenes, including Charleston's Gullah country. Throughout the series, Satterfield learns about local food origins and historic African American contributions to popular American food staples like mac-n-cheese—and invites viewers to witness communal meals with chefs, cultural preservationists, culinary historians, and entrepreneurs, who discuss the resilience of a people and the ingenuity of cooking techniques used to prepare the food placed in front of them.

"I think a lot about food—how it connects us through time, across geography, from generation to generation," says Satterfield in the first episode. "It tells stories about where we've been, where we are, and where we're going." We sat down with him ahead of the show's May 26 premiere to talk about why the story of this culinary visual pilgrimage, steeped in American history, needed to be told.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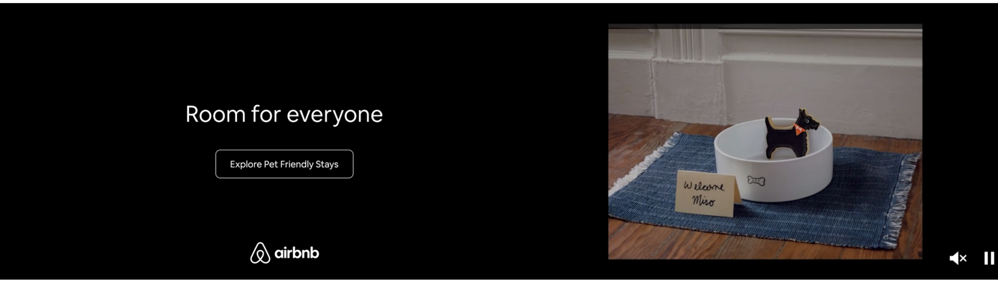
How did you become the host of *High on the Hog*?

It's so random. One of the executive producers, Fabienne Toback, and I have a mutual connection—longtime food and culture writer Jeff Gordinier. Jeff told Fabi that she should read Dr. J's book. He believed it would change her life. She read it and it did. Her inclination was that this was a story that needed to be told. And while she was pursuing the project, I think Jeff probably mentioned that he knew my work. Fabi and I started a conversation and it was really that simple. I really didn't have to consider whether or not I would say 'yes' to the opportunity. I did want to get Dr. J's blessing to be the face of this iteration of her material and scholarship. Once she gave me the blessing, I knew I had to do it.

How did Dr. Harris's book and expertise aid in your journey to these different places to retrace the origins of Black food culture?

My whole framework for Whetstone is based on an ideology of food origins. Our working thesis is that it's not possible to understand food without understanding its origins. So, we don't do recipes, we do origins. This is the same kind of framework for African American and African diaspora cuisines that Dr. J has been giving us since the 1970s. She's a living legend.

My ideas are all iterative from the work that she has been doing for so long. She always says, "I was in food when food wasn't cool." She's not lying about that. She has all the receipts. And so, for me, it was a surreal opportunity to be with her in Africa and to shoot *High on the Hog* with her because she has been such a profound influence in my own personal journey as an individual, [and] as a food professional as well.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In *High on the Hog*, how important was it to make the connection between the African food traditions seen in Benin to the Black food traditions that exist in the U.S.?

Our cuisine, as African American people, is really hard to understand without giving it that African context. The reason we begin in Dantokpa Market [in Benin] is because we can't start to celebrate our Black food traditions of the U.S. South and beyond without understanding the providence of those African traditions. I hope that it encourages people to think about the origins of their own diets and deepen their understanding and appreciation for their own respective food culture.

Host Stephen Satterfield (left) visits Benin in the first episode of the new Netflix series, *High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America.* Courtesy Netflix

Throughout the series, why was it important to mention how essential people are in preserving the legacy of Black food culture?

Our ancestors' traditions were oral traditions. Prior to writing things down, this is how we survived and exchanged knowledge for centuries. I feel strongly that there's power in the people. And I don't mean that in a cliché way, I really mean that. We can't control, for instance, the government expanding a highway and seizing the land owned by Gabrielle [Eitienne's] family in North Carolina. But her elders invested in her by passing down their farming knowledge, and you can see her pride in preserving her familial food traditions. Yes, you took her land, but now she's building power and capacity with Black farmers all over the state. That is so much more unstoppable than imminent domain.

Chef BJ Dennis is one of the descendants of Gullah grub. So, as long as we have BJ spreading his knowledge through his food, on his Instagram account, through videos—we are inspiring a new generation of culture keepers. Young Black folks are very excited about exploring and reviving these traditions, such as the hearth cooking techniques that Thomas Jefferson's cook James Hemings used that we see replicated at Hatchet Hall in Los Angeles.

What we are in danger of losing, more so than restaurants, is centering these land-based stories and the need to build knowledge back on the land and to protect the other Gabrielles of the world. That is for me where I'd like to see this concentration of mobilization move towards.

What was your favorite filming location?

I really enjoyed the Texas experience. I loved riding the horses around Houston with the Northeastern Trailriders, a group that pays homage to enslaved and freedmen who became America's first cowboys. I also loved being around Gabrielle in North Carolina. She's a cultural preservationist who uses community dinners as a way to preserve Black food traditions. The odds of filming a docuseries with one of your heroes around this very important subject matter is already such a rare experience and good fortune.

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Are you excited about any new culinary trends?

We're about to reach a new renaissance phase with Black food. There is a cultural reclamation that we are in the midst of that is so exciting. No one knows the implications yet, but I think they are going to be so profound. The culinary literacy of these next generations, and Generation Z, is going to be through the roof.

We were still getting Italian and Spanish cuisines on the Food Network when I was growing up. These kids now are going to be like, "This food is from Benin, this food is from Senegal, this food is from Ethiopia, this food is from Eritrea." Food regionalization, specialization, and knowledge are now readily accessible through technology and this current generation of people like BJ Dennis, Gabrielle Eitienne, Toni Tipton-Martin—all work descending from Dr. J. I know that the groundswell that they are creating for future generations is going to be solid [for them] to build upon.

Satterfield with chef BJ Dennis Courtesy Netflix

What food writing has grabbed your attention lately?

Toni Tipton-Martin, who is featured in episode four, wrote *Jubilee*, a collection of recipes spanning over two centuries. Her work over the past decade has been really instrumental to the Black food movement. Of course, culinary historian Michael W. Twitty, who has a second book out, called *Rice: A Savor the South Cookbook*, and is featured in *High on the Hog*. Bryant Terry just launched a new imprint with Ten Speed Press, and he wrote *Vegetable Kingdom* and *Afro-Vegan*. He's been a major culture keeper.

And then more on the land-based tip, Leah Penniman of Soul Fire Farm wrote the ground-breaking text, *Farming While Black*, a really dope reframing of the Black farmer's relationship to the land. And I have to mention Dr. Monica White, who wrote *Freedom Farmers*, which talks about the resilience of Black people and our diet. She's brilliant!