Aural Traditions

Johanna Obenda

What does good food sound like? The taste of good food, while not objective, is easy to recognize—rich, flavorful, fresh, spicy, sweet. There's also the scent of good food, of course: the aromas produced from heating ingredients over the stove, the smells that linger on your clothes, the way a great dish can greet your nose before it ever comes into sight. Sight—there's that too, consuming food with our eyes in advance of ours stomachs. We admire the vividness of bell peppers waiting to be chopped. Our gaze follows the smoke winding up from the BBQ pit. Children around the dinner table, heavy with anticipation, peek out at their plates while heads are bowed for grace. Then there's the physical sensation—the chef's hands breading the trout, the way each bite of cornbread feels between your teeth, the cold drip of the ice cream from the cone onto your forearm. When we think about good food, emphasis is often placed on these four senses: taste, smell, sight, and touch. But what does good food sound like? Good food is multi-sensorial. It is flavorful and visual, yes—and also aural.

Each kitchen has its own soundtrack, the specific buzz of the microwave, the flickering of a gas burner, the drip of the faucet—and then, sometimes, there's the music. When we arrive at Miriam Jones's Pawtucket home for filming, she recalls the sounds of her childhood house in 1960s Kershaw County, South Carolina. Her grandmother, who raised Miriam, her brother, and their 11 aunts and uncles, kept an orderly house and kitchen. On Sunday mornings, the sounds of the local gospel station—which played the songs of Luther Reddit Bloodborne, Albertina Walker, Mahalia Jackson—were a sign that it was time for the kids to get up and help clean. On Fridays however, the mood was more festive as the Jones family and their neighbors greeted the weekend with outdoor fish frys. At one of these events, one might hear the latest tracks from James Brown or The Temptations. Around the kitchen table on the weeknights, there was a different type of music in the air—a melody of laughter and joy. Miriam recalls the way her grandmother created an air of fun and geniality when the family got together to eat:

> The dinner table was very jovial. And we used to have a lot of fun. We sort of were known as a family that really, really loved each other because we used to laugh with each other so much and tease and play. But overall, we got along. We didn't have a lot.... We shared a lot of love. I have great memories of childhood, and it was a lot of fun in the segregated South.

At the filmed cooking sessions, many of the families highlighted in *Memory Dishes* cite a song or a certain type of music that remind them of good food. In the Powell household, Neva and her daughter Nia gather the ingredients and objects to make oxtail and rice and peas. Neva asks the videographer if she can play some music while she cooks. For her, it almost feels wrong to cook without her kitchen playlist—a mix of neo-soul tunes. As she plugs in her phone to the speaker and Erykah Badu softly enters the space, I am reminded of my own family's kitchen. Growing up, my mom would play a unique rotation of songs as she cooked. There was soothing jazz in the morning, Afro-Latin music in the evenings, and Soukous classics when my dad prepped Congolese food on the weekends. Certain types of music were so associated with certain meals that they felt essential to the cooking process. I understand what Neva means about needing her playlist. The music is much more than an accompanying melody—it's a key ingredient.

There are layers to the kitchen soundtrack. Some pieces play clearly in the air like music, while others can be harder to isolate. These tracks are, what I consider to be, sounds of making. These are the noises that are created in the process of cooking. In the kitchens of *Memory Dishes* there are sounds found in homes around the world: the thwack of a large knife on the cutting board, the flow of water running from cold to hot, and the rustling of produce bags and other packaged items. But then there are details more specific to people of the African diaspora. For example, each family uses a large iron pot, ubiquitous with African, Caribbean, and African American cooking. Cast iron pots and skillets are at the epicenter of Black cooking in this country. Enslaved African Americans not only worked tirelessly over open fire hearths to cook for their owners, they also used these pots to sustain themselves and their own communities. Forced to make new lives for themselves in the Americas, African descendants blended traditional West and Central African one-pot stews were with Indigenous and European staples. In the *Memory Dishes'* kitchens, these pots not only speak to this history, but they also voice contemporary realities. The sizzle of the curry goat (a traditional Jamaican meal) mixes with sazon (a popular Latin American seasoning) reflecting a blending of diasporic cultures in the area.

Photo of Mahalia Jackson during a performance.

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In addition to recording history, these sounds of making also reflect personal and cultural transformations. In their respective cooking sessions, the women of the Aubourg, Alcantara, and da Graça families each bring out a pilon or mortar and pestle. In their home countries—Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Cape Verde—the pilon is used to blend spices. Each family acknowledges that they don't use it much in the U.S., opting for the quicker option of the blender, but they still bring it out to demonstrate. The pestle hits into mortar with a loud thud, crushed herbs the only barrier between their union. Margarida da Graça recounts learning how to use the pilon in Cape Verde to grind cornmeal, "it's like a rhythm, so you have a back and forth." The rhythm of the pilon has, for the most part, been replaced by the grind of the blender in their kitchens.

This is not the only noise that echos change for the families. There's the hum of the refrigerator, the flurry of the food processor, and the soft jingle the rice cooker makes

when its done. These sounds reflect an adaptation from earlier methods of preparation. However, some sounds in the kitchen speak to an aural retention. There are the conversations between the women as they prepare the food, which occur in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Cape Verdean Creole. Bichara Aubourg and her sister Fabiola, move around each other in the kitchen as if they've choreographed a dance. Their speech, a back and forth between Creole and English, a near reflection of their movement. Language is an essential part of the food. As Bichara notes, "It is in the language... and the recipes are very oral." There are English translations for many of the foods and utensils, yes—but it is not the same. How does one pass down a dish to a next generation that does not know the dish's tongue? Bichara and Fabiola think about their teenage sons. There are many barriers that might prevent them from cooking Haitian food. First, they are boys, and women traditionally do the majority of cooking in Haiti. Secondly, they are not fluent in Creole—the language of Haitian cooking. However, Bichara and Fabiola are hopeful for the future, hopeful that their sons will learn to make Haitian dishes from watching and hearing their mothers in their Rhode Island kitchens.

Finally, there are the sounds we don't hear in the kitchen. There are the dishes we no longer cook because they evoke the laughter of a loved one who has passed on. There is the grandmother's voice in the back of our mind, reminding us to stir the rice before it sticks. There are the sounds related to meals past—roosters crowing, leaves rustling, children playing—that are absent in our current kitchens. We bring all of these silences with us as we cook too, through memories. When I set out to work on *Memory Dishes,* I imagined the exhibit to explore the ways recipes and cooking practices of the African diaspora are shared intergenerationally as a part of an oral tradition between women. What I also found during the process is that there are aural traditions shared between families as well—from the music played in the kitchen, to the sound of the concón scraped from the bottom of the pot, to a mother's recipe held in the ear. These aural traditions shift through time and are reimagined—as the sound of the pressure cooker replaces the crackle of outdoor fire—but they remain in the way they inform the foods we make. Witnessing the families of *Memory Dishes* cook and eat together, I am reminded that good food is not just what we taste or see, but what we hear. The long, evolving aural tradition of African diasporic cooking connects us with both our ancestors and generations yet to come.

Coda: A Final Definition

Dr. Jessica B. Harris,
excerpt from *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*

African Americans have a long love affair with food, one perhaps unequaled in the history of the country. For centuries we've brought the piquant tastes of Africa to the New World. With particular relish we eat *(nyam)* "grease" and "grit," whether it's a bologna sandwich and a peanut pattie tucked into the bib of overalls for a workman's late-night supper of chitlins and champagne eaten off fine bone china. Some of us delight in a sip of white lightning from a mason jar in a juke joint, while others delicately lift little fingers and savor minted ice tea or a cool drink while fanning and watching the neighbors on the front porch. Good times or bad, food provides a time for communion and relaxation.

It's so much a part of our lives that it seems at times as though a Supreme Being created us from a favorite recipe. There was a heaping cupful of cornmeal to signal our links with the Native Americans, a rounded tablespoon of biscuit dough for Southern gentility, a mess of greens and a dozen okra pods for our African roots, and a good measure of molasses to recall the tribulations of slavery. A seasoning piece of fatback signals our lasting love for the almighty pig, and smoked turkey wing foretells our healthier future. A handful of hot chilies gives the mixture attitude and sass, while a hearty dose of bourbon mellows it out and a splash of corn liquor gives it kick. There are regional additions such as a bit of benne from South Carolina, a hint of praline from New Orleans, and a drop of at least twelve types of barbecue sauce. A fried porgy, a splash of homemade scuppernong wine, and a heaping portion of the secret ingredient called love fill the bowl to overflowing. When well mixed, it can either be baked, broiled, roasted, fried, sautéed, or barbecued. The result has yielded us in all hues of the rainbow from lightly toasted to deep well done.

We are now a new people. All the world comes together in us and on our plates: Africa, the Americas, Asia, and beyond. We eat hog maws or pickled meat, potatoes or plantain, sweet potatoes or yams or both. Our greens are collards or callaloo or bok choy, and we serve them with everything from a ham hock to a smoked turkey wing to tofu. We savor fine aged *rhum agricole* and still know how to throw back a good Mason jar of corn liquor or a glass of cachaça.

With a start like that, it's not surprising then, that we have our own way with food. We've called it our way for centuries and incorporated our wondrous way with food and eating into our daily lives. We have rocked generations of babies to sleep while crooning "Shortenin' Bread," laughed to the comedy of "Pigmeat" Markham and "Butterbeans and Susie," danced the cakewalk, tapped our feet to the music of "Jelly Roll" Morton, shimmied with wild abandon to gutbucket music in juke joints, gotten all hot and sweaty over salsa or sat down with friends and "chewed the fat." We've had the blues over the "Kitchen Man," searched for our "Sugar Pie Honey Bunch," called our "Sugar Honey," and longed to be loved like "Lilac Wine." When we found the one,