It started with a glass of pineapple rum. Osayi Endolyn, a black food writer, asked a white bartender at a cocktail bar in Nashville the brand name of the pineapple rum on the menu. The waitress hesitated. “It’s Plantation. Plantation Rum,” she said quietly. She scurried away. That awkward interaction sent Osayi on a journey to investigate the reoccurrence of the word plantation in the food world.

A few years later, Osayi has a slightly different question: what are white people trying to evoke by using this word? Because plantation isn't a culinary term. It doesn't indicate certain spices or cooking methods. So what purpose does it serve in the names of so many foods and drinks?

Osayi sends Dan out on a mission to talk to other white people in the food world – restaurant owners, recipes writers, bloggers, cookbook authors – who use the word plantation in their food branding. In the process, we try to learn something about whiteness in America.

This episode features conversations with the following individuals:

Chef Vinnie Carbone - owner of Carbone’s Ristorante (formerly Southern Plantation Restaurant)

Blair Lonergan - Creator of the Seasoned Mom blog.

Tom Gumhold - retired owner of the Plantation Supper Club in Wisconsin (recently closed)

Anne Butler - owner of the Butler Greenwood Plantation Bed & Breakfast

MaryAnn Dwyer - owner of The Beach House Kitchen blog

Britton Thrice and Ruthie Frierson - current publisher + creator of the Junior League of New Orleans Plantation Cookbook

Osayi Endolyn is a writer and editor. This fall she wrap up a 6-month period guest editing Eater's Young Gun section dedicated to newer industry talent (that's at Eater.com). Osayi has an essay called "Trapped In, Dining Out" featured in Charlotte Druckman's forthcoming anthology, Women On Food (releases 10/29). Osayi's limited column on restaurant culture “Counter Service” is part of the Oxford American’s web series, the By and By. That’s at OxfordAmerican.org.

Interstitial music in this show by Black Label Music:

- "Dreamin' Long" by Erick Anderson

- "Legend" by Erick Anderson

- "Rooftop Instrumental" by Erick Anderson

- "Hang Tight" by Hayley Briasco

- "Lawless" by Lance Conrad

- "Steady" by Cullen Fitzpatrick

- "Private Detective" by Cullen Fitzpatrick

- "Iced Coffee" by Josh Leninger

Photo courtesy of David Lee, flickr.

Close Transcript

COLD OPEN - OSAYI IN THE BAR (ESTABLISHING THE PROBLEM)

OSAYI: I was in a bar in Nashville and I was looking at their cocktail menu, and one of the drinks had the spirit listed, and it was pineapple rum. So I asked, "Can you tell me which brand this rum is?" and I pointed to the item on the menu. She kind of looked away from me and then looked back, and was very quiet, and was like, "It's Plantation Pineapple Rum." "So what was that?" "It's Plantation. It's Plantation." "Plantation oh okay." She's like, "Mm-hmm," and she just walked away.

This is Osayi Endolyn. She’s a food writer and friend of the show. We met up in a bar in Crown Heights, Brooklyn a while back… so she could tell me this story.

Osayi Endolyn: Usually if you inquire about a spirit, a bartender in a place like that is going to break it down for you a little bit.

Dan Pashman:

They're excited to talk about it.

Osayi Endolyn:

Yeah, they're going to give you maybe some notes on how it's made or if maybe they don't have that information, they might tell you at least what it tastes like, and she wasn't busy. I was maybe one of the two people at the bar, it was late in the evening. My read at the moment was that telling me speaking to a black customer like, "I have to tell you that this brand of this rum that you're asking about is called plantation." It just created a sense of awkwardness for her as a young white man.

That brand name, Plantation, also bothered Osayi.

Osayi Endolyn:

I don't know that I want to celebrate and partake in a spirit that seems to be, in some way that I'm not clear about calling forth a history where people who looked like me and people who made this rum were enslaved and subjected to mental and emotional and physical and sexual abuse over generations and generations. That for me is the immediate connection and I just couldn't fathom why anybody would want their rum to be associated with that.

So Osayi is sitting at this bar in Nashville by herself, and the idea of this plantation rum is stirring up all these feelings for her. She's becoming more and more curious – Not only about how it got its name, but about how it tastes. So she decides to try it. She orders the pineapple rum drink, the bartender mixes it all up, and brings it over.

Osayi Endolyn:

I thought it was awesome. I was like, "Oh no this is really good. Fuck." you know? Yeah.

This is The Sporkful, it's not for foodies it's for eaters, I'm Dan Pashman. Each week on our show, we obsess about food to learn more about people.

In the food world, the word plantation pops up a lot. Recipes…. Restaurant names… Cookbooks… It's the name of a line of teas that might be in your cupboard right now. Bigelow Plantation Mint. TV chef Andrew Zimmern has a plantation rice recipe. Rachael Ray has a Plantation Dinner recipe.

To be totally honest, most of my life, I never gave it much thought. Until folks like Osayi and others started talking to me about it.

So this episode is about the word plantation in food. And how white people in America use it.

Now, back to Me and Osayi in Crown Heights over a couple glasses of Plantation rum.

Dan Pashman:

All right. So I have my plantation rum daiquiri here. What are you drinking Osayi?

Osayi Endolyn:

This is a painkiller and it has rum and coconut cream, and I think there's some aloe in here. It's basically like a piña colada.

Dan Pashman:

With some hand lotion mixed in.

Osayi Endolyn:

Yeah.

Dan Pashman:

Cheers.

Osayi Endolyn:

Cheers.

Dan Pashman:

Oh man, this daiquiri is firing on all cylinders, let me tell you.

Ok, back to the story. After Osayi discovers plantation rum in that bar in Nashville, she decides to write a piece about it. After all, she's a food writer. So first off, she wants to know HOW it got its name. She emails the company that makes it – it's a cognac house in France called Maison Ferrand. And the owner, Alexandre Gabriel, who's white, agrees to talk with her.

Osayi Endolyn:

He explained to me that for him, plantation as a French man is plantation, which la plantation translates to basically a farm, so you take people at their word. I don't know that that absolves anything, but it was helpful to have a conversation. I appreciated having the conversation.

Dan Pashman:

So in a larger sense, when you see the word plantation not just on this rum, but on a chicken dish in a restaurant or anywhere... plantation rice, whatever it is. Assuming that it was, the person who put it on that menu is not black, what do you think that the person who did that was trying to convey?

Dan Pashman:

Because as we know, it's not a culinary term, so you're not saying anything about the way that chicken or rice was cooked or the seasoning or anything. What do you think they think they're doing when they put that word there?

Osayi Endolyn:

The most generous idea that I have around that is something pastoral, this sense of an open agrarian idea but I'm really reaching. I mean I'm really reaching. I don't know. I really don't

understand what people are going for particularly because it's not so common that it's everywhere, but it's consistent enough that someone obviously is tapping into something that they feel is useful to their audience. That's the thing that I think people don't really want to be responsible for when they get questioned about this, because they don't want to identify what that thing is.

Osayi's piece about plantation rum was published by the Southern Foodways Alliance. And it got some attention. A white writer named Eric Ginsburg wrote a piece for Vice saying people should stop using the word plantation to sell food. He interviewed Osayi, along with many other top black scholars and writers in the world of food – Michael Twitty, Nicole Taylor, Adrian Miller, and more.

Osayi was glad the conversation was happening, but one big thing about that Vice piece frustrated her:

White people need to be talking to more about white people about this. Because it's not black people who build their resorts named after Plantation, putting a fence in front of it.

Dan Pashman:

Osayi, I'm going to try to set out to find some white people to talk to, to be as blunt as possible, that's where I'm going.

Osayi Endolyn:

You're going on an expedition.

Dan Pashman:

I'm going on an expedition, yes.

what are you curious about?

Osayi Endolyn:

Well, I would be curious ... I'm not as interested in the conversation of stop using the word, as I am interested in the investigation of why the word keeps appearing. That is a real, it is a touchy subject, but I would love to hear that conversation from a place of real inquiry and not just like, "Let me get through this because it's an awkward thing, but I'll just go back to business as usual."

Osayi Endolyn:

I think it's going to be challenging for you to find somebody who wants to have a conversation with you that's real. We'll see. I would love to be wrong. That would be a vote of confidence.

Dan Pashman:

Well, I'm not making any promises Osayi. All right well, cheers.

Osayi Endolyn:

Cheers.

Dan Pashman:

Good drinking with you.

Osayi Endolyn:

This is great. I totally lapped you on this cocktail.

Dan Pashman:

You did.

From there, we here at Team Sporkful started tracking down examples of plantation branding in food.

We found restaurants all over the country using the word in their name – From San Diego to upstate New York, from Wisconsin to North Carolina, to the Jersey shore. Places like Southern Plantation Restaurant, and Plantation Supper Club.

And there were examples on food blogs, menus, and in cookbooks – Dishes like Plantation Crunch, and Old Virginia Plantation Spoon Bread.

As I said, there are big chefs and brands using it too. We reached out multiple times to Bigelow Tea, who make that Plantation Mint flavor, but they declined to comment. TV chefs Andrew Zimmern and Rachael Ray also turned us down.

One food blogger told us she listens to The Sporkful and would be honored to be on the show -- but she didn't want to talk about a topic that might "flame the fires that still burn in this country." She added: "I, myself, have friends who are still tender on the subject. I best tread lightly."

Overall, 22 people and companies declined to talk with us.

But that wasn’t everyone. We got 8 people who are using or have used the word plantation in food – all of them white – to talk with us. Restaurateurs, cookbook authors, bloggers. I wanted to ask them Osayi’s question – What are you trying to communicate with the word plantation?

The day of the first conversation, I went in the studio a bit early, before making any calls. My producers asked me to try to describe how I was feeling about our mission.

Dan Pashman:

You know in sci-fi movies whether it's like even Spaceballs or Star Wars, when they're in the giant battleship and the alarm goes off, and this automated system always exists on the space ship to have all these walls go up to block all the hallways, it's like sshhhm shhmmm shhmmm. That's what talking about race used to feel like for me.

Dan Pashman:

Just immediately like, "Ah, this is uncomfortable, ah, I'm going to screw this up, and I really, really think I'm probably using the wrong words for this, so I really think we should just change the subject because I'm pretty sure I'm going to offend someone, and then they're going to think that I'm racist."

Dan Pashman:

I mean, I grew up in a white town. My high school graduating class was 145 people, I don't think there was a single black person in our graduating class. There was a handful of other people of color. I was one of the very few Jewish kids, I mean it was overwhelmingly white Christian town.

Dan Pashman:

I was very uncomfortable talking about race, and in early episodes of The Sporkful when I attempted to talk about it, I would be a stuttering blubbering mess, because that was so uncomfortable.

You know, I think that sometimes on this show when we spend more time digging into something in great detail, I like it when it changes the way that people look at that thing forever, and changes the way that I look at that thing forever. I think that the hope is that this will reveal something about whiteness.

Ringing

Blair:

Hello?

Dan Pashman:

Hi, Blair?

Blair:

Yes.

Dan Pashman:

Hey, it's Dan Pashman from The Sporkful. How are you?

Blair:

Hi, Dan. I'm good. How are you?

Dan Pashman:

Good, good. Thanks so much for making time for us today.

Blair:

Yeah. Good to talk to you.

This is Blair Lonergan, she runs a food blog called The Seasoned Mom. She has a recipe there for Old Virginia Plantation Spoon Bread. Blair is from Virginia, but the name is more connected to her grandmother, who grew up in Chicago with Polish immigrant parents:

Blair:

My grandmother at the holidays she loved to go to Colonial Williamsburg to have a meal at one of the historic taverns, and then just to kind of walk around and see the holiday decorations and do some shopping.

Dan Pashman:

What do you think your grandmother especially loved about Colonial Williamsburg?

Blair:

She had this kind of fascination with southern culture, and historical colonial Virginia. Just maybe some nostalgia or American culture that she was fascinated by, that was different than where she grew up

Dan Pashman:

Tell me about the name of the dish, because you said that you created this, so you gave it its name on your website.

Blair:

Right.

Dan Pashman:

Old Virginia Plantation Spoon Bread, where did you come up with the name?

Blair:

I want people to see a recipe on my site and instantly have a strong reaction. If I had just named this post spoon bread, to me it doesn't have nearly the appeal as if I attach 'Old Virginia Plantation Spoon Bread' to the post, because that automatically conjures an image in the reader's mind as to what I would think might be a comforting, cozy dish that goes back generations, that might remind someone of the meals that they ate at their grandmother's table. So it was really just my attempt at making something as simple and basic as spoon bread sound more appealing to the potential reader.

I asked similar questions to everyone I spoke with. I'll tell you who they all are, but first I just want you to get a feel for the conversations.

Tom:

Plentiful food. Lots of food is what I envision when I hear plantation.

Dan Pashman:

And where do you think that image, that idea of plenty whole food at a plantation comes from?

Tom:

I don't know.

Blair:

I don't, I think it just comes from our culture. From such a young age, pictures we see in storybooks.

MaryAnn

Just media over the years and reading books and imagining it in your head

Blaire: The cozy scenes that you see in cookbooks

Tom:

Yeah, I think of Gone with the Wind plantations and stuff like that. That's my impression. Scarlet and all that kind of stuff.

Those clips began and ended with Tom Gumhold, he owned the Plantation Supper Club in Wisconsin until it closed recently. In there you also heard Mary Ann Dwyer, who runs the Beach House Kitchen blog, she has a recipe there for Plantation Crunch. And you heard Blair Lonergan again. Tom Gumhold mentioned Gone with the Wind and Scarlet O'Hara. He wasn't the only one to connect his image of plantations to that film.

Vinnie:

They just saw this big pillared white mansion horse and buggy and people all dressed up. Probably Gone with the Wind from that perspective.

This is Vinne Carbone, chef and owner of Carbone's Ristorante, in Hartford, Connecticut. His grandfather and uncle opened the place in 1938 and called it Southern Plantation Restaurant. They avoided an Italian name because they were worried about anti-Italian prejudice. They changed the name to Carbone's in 1961, when Italian restaurants were becoming more mainstream.

Dan Pashman:

Am I right at the time that your grandfather and his brother named their restaurant Southern Plantation, they had never, had they even ever been to the south let alone lived a plantation experience at all?

Vinnie:

No

So where exactly did that image come from?

DAN: So here's really the first question professor. Up until a year or two ago if I heard the word plantation in food someone offered me a dish of plantation chicken or a nice glass of plantation mint tea, that word plantation would immediately conjure for me an image of this old South home with the big white pillars the columns in front and the big wraparound porch. Maybe there's a pitcher of sweet tea on the veranda. And you know granddaddy and a rocking chair

and then there's kids frolicking in the front yard and eventually there's a big picnic table with a red and white tablecloth and all this a huge bountiful array of food arrives fried chicken and collard greens and it's very beautiful.

It's idyllic, it's leisurely, and it's delicious, and it's very comforting. That's a very warm and fuzzy image for me. I have never seen that with my own eyes. I've never experienced that in my life. I'm a 42 year old white guy from New Jersey. So my first question to you is how did that image get in my head?

KAREN: Hm.

KAREN: Well that's interesting because I was listening to your description of that and I didn't hear you once say and you were being served by an African-American.

This is Professor Karen Cox.

Karen: That image has been around for a long time and it has so much to do with popular culture.

Coming up, we take a deeper look at what that plantation image is really communicating – and we ask how so many of these folks I'm talking with – and I – got that blissful picture in our heads. Plus, the conversations continue, and things get more tense.

Anne: I really don't enjoy this conversation.

Blair: There are two very different ways of looking at a simple word.

Vinnie: I don't want my kids feeling guilty cause they're white, I don't want any of that nonsense, I think that's nonsense!

ADS

Welcome back to The Sporkful, I'm Dan Pashman. In last week's show I talk with Claire Saffitz, star of the hit YouTube series, Gourmet Makes. In each episode Claire tries to make an artisanal version of a classic junk food, using an approach very different from other food shows. But as she tells me, she wasn't sold on the concept at first:

CLAIRE: I hated it. I hated it for the first three or four episodes, at least.

DAN: Why?

CLAIRE: Taking you know three or four days out of a week to shoot this video where at the end I had five homemade gushers. You know? After four days of work. And I just thought it was so pointless.

135 MILLION views later, Claire is on board. In last week's show, she talks about what changed her mind, rejects the idea that baking is stiff and stuffy, and reveals her little-known background in French culinary history. That episode is up now, check it out.

BEAT

OK, back to the show, and let's pick up with my conversation with Professor Karen Cox, who you started to hear before the break. She's a history professor at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. She's white, and she's the author of Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture.

Even before the Civil War, Professor Cox says white writers published plenty of books that made life in the south look pretty great, even for enslaved people. Then, in the late 1800s this messaging started to spread, as advertising and mass marketing emerged. That's when Aunt Jemima was created.

But it was in the 1920s and 30s that the branding of the south and plantation life really took off.

Karen:

There were 75 films in the 1930s that were set on the plantation or in the plantation south. Even before Gone with the Wind was even an idea in Margaret Mitchell's head, you have an image of the south that is leisurely, that is wealthy, and in which blacks play the role of servant. Although they call them servants, they're not saying they're slaves, but that's exactly what they were. If you watch Gone with the Wind that's what you see. These are faithful people that don't leave their white families.

And Professor Cox says it wasn't just movies. Lots of food brands emerged around this time that portrayed black Americans in the role of servants, from Longwood Plantation brand syrup to Uncle Ben's.

So what's happening at this time that's making Americans gravitate to this image of life on the plantation? Two things. First, the industrial revolution.

Karen:

Industry was just grinding people down, and they longed for a place that was American where things were easier.

The other factor – the Great Migration. Black Americans are moving north in large numbers for the first time, in search of work, and better lives. And Professor Cox says that's making white folks in the north very anxious.

So marketers in New York create products and movies and books that remind white people in the north of a time when life was easy and affluent, when they were in their rightful place above black people. The basic message: You may not have a black servant, but if you buy this pancake mix, it's the next best thing.

KAREN: What Aunt Jemima and all these other caricatures of the south were about was about Northern capitalism, and wanting to, they knew they could make a buck off of it.

DAN: Yes, the Northern capitalists saw that they could make a buck by latching onto this white-washed image and selling it. The other side of that coin is some marketing pitches work better than others, some marketing pitches last longer than others. This one was especially effective and has bored itself deep into the public consciousness. And so for that to happen, the people receiving the marketing have to really like it.

DAN: It has to really strike a chord, so it's just a commentary on the people creating the advertising, it's also on the commentary on the people who are swayed by the advertising.

KAREN: I agree with that. I think it is a combination of the two, because you don't sell anything that people don't already have in their mind. It's also the reason that plantation tourism takes off in the 1930s. Because people want to see it and feel it for themselves.

PSYCHE: I see the plantation as a place of horror.

This is Professor Psyche Williams Forson from the University of Maryland in College Park. She's black, her research in American studies focuses on cultural history, food, and race.

PSYCHE: All I can think about and all I can see is at some point or either side of me women, men, children as young as maybe three or four were out there possibly under the lash and under the threat of being beaten, killed, having your family members sold away.

Despite that association, Professor Williams Forson can see why plantation branding has been so effective.

Psyche: It's no secret that the South is a culinary bastion right. This is where the taste and the flavors come alive and in you know mix and mingle. So the notion of the plantation as a brand evokes it must be sweet. It must be flavorful. This is for a segment of the population

To be clear, the lines aren't completely black and white. Professor Williams-Forson says, it's like not all black Americans know all this history. And as another historian we spoke with pointed out, there are black Americans who don't care about Plantation imagery. Some even enjoy it. But, the history of that imagery is one of white marketers trying to appeal to white consumers.

PSYCHE: It evokes a past that has long gone for a lot of people that many wish was still there. There are too many people coming into the country, we need to close the borders, we need to

do this, we need to do that. That idyllic past gets put on these objects to soothe the nervousness and the discomfort and the frustration. Now, in your mind you may not go back to slavery or anything like that. You may not drink plantation tea and think slavery or think, but what it does is there's an unconscious comfort.

DAN: So professor, as I said, up until recently, the word plantation would have evoked that happy idyllic image for me. How is it possible that I would have gone 40-ish years living in America without having any… without having that image challenge or questioned?

PSYCHE: Now that's a very interesting question. Who's going to challenge it? What spaces were in you that that question, that image would have been a challenge? Did you grow up in African American communities? Did you grow up in African American communities of people who know these historical trends? Where would you have met that challenge? Would it have been in your primary or secondary school system where our textbooks tell us that slavery was really about workers?

PSYCHE: Your question is exactly why we have people going to plantation saying, "I want to hear about the plantation and not about slavery," as if the two can be separated. Who's challenging them? No one.

That plantation branding that both professors talked about, you still see plenty of it today. Bigelow is one of the biggest tea companies in the country. You can find their tea at Walmart, Target, Amazon. Like I said, they sell a Plantation Mint Tea. And they have a black tea that they advertise as coming from their Charleston Tea Plantation. The back of the box reads:

Over 100 years ago, tea planters brought their finest ancestral tea bushes from China and India to Wadmalaw Island near the historic old city of Charleston, South Carolina. Now the direct descendants of these very plants have been lovingly restored to their former grandeur here at Charleston Tea Plantation, a lush subtropical tea farm.

The label continues:

It is in this context of great natural beauty and colonial pride that we bring you American Classic Tea. Please come see us for a unique, enjoyable tour of a working tea farm.

And then Bigelow's website says the tour is, quote, "a tea-riffic way to experience historic Southern culture and a living piece of American history!"

Again, Bigelow declined multiple requests to comment for this episode. But as you heard, eight white folks using plantation branding in food did talk with us. Now let's get back to those conversations.

Dan Pashman:

Let's move a little bit beyond specifically the word plantation and think of it more as an issue of plantation imagery an image of the old south that has been ingrained in all of us, including in me.

This is Britton Thrice. He publishes the Junior League of New Orleans Plantation Cookbook, which first came out in 1972.

Dan Pashman:

I wonder if you were in all that today in 2019 that the book is in someway contributing to the furthering of this idyllic very incomplete image.

Britton:

Boy who knows. I would almost you know, I'd want to hear from a contention of Afro Americans and to see if they have any, what their feelings were.

Dan Pashman:

I don't think that you meant it this way, but I'm curious just to unpack a little bit. In saying that that was your goal in using the word plantation that readers would have such a warm fuzzy feeling, what you may inadvertently be saying is this recipe is and this blog are for white people.

Blair:

No!

Dan Pashman:

I know you don't intend it that way, but I guess what I'm saying.. look I make this mistake too. Sometimes in our podcast. I'll say something a certain way and realize it, "Oh the way that I said that was like as in my head I was only talking to white people." I think that it's an understandable thing to do, but inadvertently can you understand how it could come across that way?

Blair:

I can now that you've, yes, now that we've had this conversation. And that is obviously, I shouldn't say obviously. That is definitely not what I intended.

That again was Blair Lonergan, she was the very first caller we heard. Now, this next group includes MaryAnn Dwyer and Vinne Carbone, both of whom you heard earlier. You'll also hear Ruthie Frierson, who helped write that Plantation Cookbook. And first we'll hear Annie Butler, owner of the Butler Greenwood Plantation B&B. It's on land that's been in Annie's family since it was a working plantation, when her family owned enslaved people.

Annie:

I don't like the implication that plantation means something negative. By the same token I don't like Scarlett O'Hara movie version of the romance of it either. I mean it was a fact of life. It was a big farm.

MaryAnn:

I mean I don't think anyone should forget and I'm not trying to forget and I don't think any of us should ever try to forget what happened and what it was like for people who worked on plantations. I think what I try to focus on when I cook is I want to focus on the hard work that the people did on those plantations and the food and the recipes that came out of it, and that's what I tend to focus on.

Vinnie:

We recognize and respect that, but it still was part of our history and can't be swept under the rug. Look at human history, people were in bondage longer and harder, and that's not saying what happened was right, but let's just move on. My God, let's just move on.

Annie:

History is history, and you don't erase it and you don't take down all of the monuments to it. Political correctness is fine, but it's just gone to the opposite extreme and somewhere in the middle there needs to be a balance of how much of our history we're willing to erase and rewrite because I don't think that that is going to solve any problems.

Dan Pashman:

What does it say about living in America that you and I can go through our lives without having to think about what the word plantation means to black Americans?

Blair:

Right. I don't know. I don't know what that says about our culture, that we don't want to acknowledge or we don't want to focus on or we don't want to admit this aspect of our country's history.

Ruthie:

I don't think that's really fair, because I've thought of that since I was a little girl, I mean tiny little girl. When I was in fifth grade and I rode a street car and they didn't allow blacks to sit in the front, they had this. I'd sit in the back with the blacks. I mean I thought it was just graceful when these things were done and I protested. I mean I always had that in my heart and in my feelings and in my faith.

Dan Pashman:

How could I get actually 40 something years old in America and it never would have occurred to me until a black person pointed it out to me that the word plantation has a negative connotation? I have the luxury of going 40 something years without ever having to even think about it.

Vinnie:

Right. No, I get that, but ....

Dan Pashman:

That is a different experience.

Vinnie:

But Dan… do you feel guilty about it?

Dan Pashman:

Sometimes.

Vinnie:

Because that's not right. I don't want to feel guilty. I want to know how you feel I want to know what you've been through so we don't repeat things in the future. And it's just healthy to have a perspective. And maybe there are people that are smarter people than me that can make real curriculum to teach the entirety of the times. But just to eradicate and erase things. That's stupidity.

Dan Pashman:

Do you agree that you and I benefit from being white?

Tom:

Right now, no. Right now I think being black is the way to go.

Annie:

I really don't enjoy this conversation much and I did not come into it thinking that this was going to be turning me into an apologist for slavery.

Skype ringing …

Osayi Endolyn:

Hello, hello.

Dan Pashman:

Hey Osayi, how are you?

Osayi Endolyn:

Oh snap it's been so long.

Dan Pashman:

I know. You're in Paris now?

Osayi Endolyn:

I'm in Paris. I'm at this hotel, they have a rum bar here of course.

Dan Pashman:

Are they serving plantation rum here?

Osayi Endolyn:

I haven't been to the rum bar yet, I just checked in, but they claim this particular bar has vintages of rum that aren't available any place else in the world, so I'm going to investigate this.

Dan Pashman:

Okay. This is a good beat that you've stumbled into here Osayi.

Osayi Endolyn:

I try to find it wherever I can.

Dan:

I appreciate that. So you heard some of the discussion we had with the various folks that I spoke with.

Osayi:

Yeah, I did.

Dan:

You heard the same thing our listeners heard. And so, what are your thoughts?

Osayi:

I came away from listening to the clip like... to varying degrees different people were starting to interrogate themselves and the narrative that they haven't actually had to think very much about. And when that question is posited, when that seed is planted, it's very unsettling because it literally goes to the core of who you believe you are.

Dan Pashman:

When we met up at the bar you said you were really interested in trying to understand what are people who use the word plantation trying to communicate. What do they think they're communicating when they use the word.

Osayi Endolyn:

Yeah.

Dan Pashman:

Then you also said, but you're less interested in getting people to stop using the word.

Osayi Endolyn:

Yeah.

Dan Pashman:

I think that to some, so I can imagine that some white listeners at least, I'm not going to speak for all listeners would just be surprised. They would think that seems like the logical place to go.

Osayi Endolyn:

I think it is a logical place to go, but I don't want to push you there out of the shame. I want you to get there on your own two feet, and this is probably my biggest issue with all that we're talking about. So many white people feel like they need a black person to give them the gift of deliverance into the American psyche so they can understand better who they are and where they come from.

Osayi Endolyn:

I have to read shit, I have to research, I have to think, I have to unpack, I have to talk to relatives. I have to read between the lines, I have to watch movies that make me really uncomfortable. Bec I want to know the context in which they were created and disseminated and popularized. I'm doing, that's what doing the work means.

Osayi Endolyn:

I did not come out of my mother's womb just with this, like a PopTart, with this information. I minored in Afro American studies at UCLA, and when I say racism, when I say racist I'm talking about systemic things. That's where people I think often times really don't want to look, because you have to be super accountable for the things that you're complicit in and the information that you have avoided receiving for a very long time.

Dan:

It’s interesting because after going through this process of talking to all these people it's like I found myself with each conversation dreading the conversations more and more. It was demoralizing. It was frustrating. And so that certainly gave me a different perspective of being in the position to constantly have to explain.

Osayi:

I appreciate you sharing that with me. I mean and it's not surprising to me at all. But you get to sort of like turn the mic off, hang up the phone and then go back to a life where none of that really is going to affect you or your family in a negative way. But for African-American people for black people, that never goes away,and it is life threatening on every level.

Dan Pashman:

Osayi you talked about this idea that white people want a black person to hold their hand and bring them to deliverance. I'll be honest we weren't sure whether I should call you back at the end of this, because we didn't want you to be in that exact position, you know. How do we put together this episode? How do we end this episode so that you aren't in that position?

Osayi Endolyn:

Oh, well I think it's too late for that. I mean I wrote the piece that got us here.

One of the questions I was left with after all this was, If we were to really try to tell a more complete history of plantations, what would that look like? And how would most white Americans react?

So next week, in part two of this series, I'm going to a plantation to find out. And not just any plantation -- Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. You could make a strong argument that the kitchen at Monticello was the most influential in American history. I'll tour that kitchen with a descendent of the enslaved chefs who cooked there, as well as culinary historian Michael Twitty. That's next week.

If you connected with this episode and think other people might appreciate it, I hope you'll share it on social media and tag The Sporkful. Thank you.

My thanks to food writer Osayi Endolyn. Her essay that inspired this episode is called Distilled Identity, it was published by the Southern Foodways Alliance. She also has an essay in Charlotte Druckman's forthcoming anthology, WOMEN ON FOOD, and she's lately been a guest editor on Eater.com's Young Guns section, which features newer industry talent. We'll link to all of Osayi's work at Sporkful dot com.

Thanks also to Shannon Mustipher and everyone at Glady's in Brooklyn, where Osayi and I had our cocktails, that reminded me how good a classic daiquiri can be – rum, sugar, lime juice. That is all you need. And the one at Glady's was on point.

This show is produced by me, along with Senior Producer Anne Saini and Associate Producer Ngofeen Mputubwele Our editor is Peter Clowney. Additional editing and production on this episode by Osayi Endolyn, Claire Rowlinson, Oluwakemi Aladesuyi, Nick Jones, Harry Huggins, and Bri Moore. Our engineer is JARED O'CONNELL, Music help from Black Label Music. The Sporkful is a production of Stitcher, our executive producers are Chris Bannon and Daisy Rosario. Until next time I'm Dan Pashman.

ARI: And I'm Ari Strauss from Washington, D.C. Reminding you to eat more, eat better, and eat more better.