

Chicago Tribune FOOD & DINING



NICK KINDELSPERGER/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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Craving

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trended mushy, while the mac and cheese tasted both creamy and boldly seasoned.

More inclined to chicken and waffles? You'll have no trouble finding the dish at Chicago's Home of Chicken & Waffles (1047 S. King Drive). Go with Tony's Choice (\$12.50) and you'll get an oval plate larger than a football with a golden brown waffle on one side and a big batch of chicken wings with phenomenally crackly crust on the other. Join the two together with a generous pour of syrup, and you'll be in the balance of sweet and salty.

Eat at these two places, and you can easily ignore one sad fact: The ghosts of shuttered soul food restaurants seem to haunt the South Side. The sign still hangs at Army and LaSalle, the restaurant that opened in 1945, even though it closed in 2011. Others, like Gladys' Luncheonette, have been torn down, leaving nothing but an empty, wood-strewn lot along South Indiana Avenue.

Some have been repurposed. Like Izola's, which used to serve authentic fried chicken but now houses Caribbean Spice, a jerk chicken spot.



John Meyer, chef and owner of B's Market in Calumet Heights. "When I grew up, it was Southern food. My mom was from the South, so it was never defined as soul food in my home."

This is not an issue unique to Chicago. According to Adrian Miller, whose new book "Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time" is out now, these are trying times for soul food restaurants in America.

"Across the country, legendary soul food restaurants are disappearing at an alarming pace," he writes in the book. Miller believes that soul food restaurants are "casualties of change." He points to customers moving to other neighborhoods, the challenging economic reality of running a restaurant and the fact that the younger generation doesn't want the responsibility of keeping these establishments open. "My experience is that almost universally the restaurant owners' kids don't want to be involved," Miller says in a phone interview.



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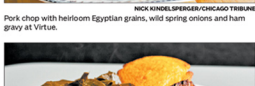
"It's not completely dire. Rico Noyce just opened Soul Shack (3848 E. 53rd St.) earlier this year in Hyde Park, and while the menu looks familiar — fried chicken, collard greens, mac and cheese — its format does not. Instead of a full-service restaurant, the Soul Shack is a quick-service concept. Here you choose your main course and sides, before getting everything packed up in a plastic container. You can eat in, but for each of your visits, it was assumed that most people would get food to go."

My original goal with this article was to set out the challenges Chicago's soul food survives and track any recent additions to the menu. I ate, the more I realized I needed a serious history of soul food, even understand soul food, both what it means to Black people in America and how it differs from what's known across the country as Southern food.



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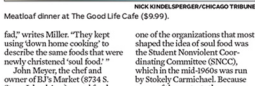
It's impossible to talk about soul food and Black cooking in America without mentioning the long-lasting harm of slavery. The majority of enslaved people came from West Africa, and they brought their recipes and cooking techniques with them. But the cuisine that developed in the southern United States wasn't created in a bubble. As Frederick Douglass Opie writes in "Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America," African American cuisine... developed from a mixing of the cooking traditions of West Africans, Western European and American." In many ways, soul food is a product of the American South.



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Not were the enslaved people always brought straight from Africa. "Quite a lot of enslaved people first went to the Caribbean, and then went to the British colonies," says Miller. "The complexity of the slave trade is often overlooked."

Most surprising (to me at least) is that soul food as a cuisine dates only to the 1960s. Opie writes that soul food "developed out of a larger black power project that called for creating black culture and expressions different from white society." (This was also the time that Black Americans "made the transition from talking about the music — to calling it soul music.") But that doesn't mean the food being consumed suddenly changed at that time. "Black folk fought and thoroughly enjoyed soul food long before restaurant owners and cookbook writers started using the term 'writ Opie."



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Not everyone in the Black community likes upholding the name of the Black community, says paper editorials and columnists chief among them, saw the ubiquitous use of 'soul' as merely a

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— Adrian Miller, author of "Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time"

Food." In the introduction she explains that soul food became tied to the "dishes of the Cotton Belt of Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama that traveled out of the rest of the country during the Great Migration." While Black people used to rely "on the land" for their food, they "lost that connection" when they moved to larger cities. "Our celebration foods — smoked whole hogs, candied yams, cornmeal cake — became what we ate all the time," writes Hall. "We forgot about all the amazing daily meals we created from greens and beans and grains."

Fortunately, not all soul food restaurants in Chicago have gotten. One of the growing trends on the South Side is vegetarian soul food restaurants. At Nipjan Restaurant (7107 S. Exchange Ave.) you can order a plate heaping with beans and rice, along with greens and cornbread (\$14.50), without a shred of meat involved in the process. They're Original Soul Vegetarian (201 E. 75th St.) and can even get Great Southern-fried seitan (a wheat gluten, with a maistie texture).

Other chefs have kept the most but attempted to lighten some of soul food's heaviest dishes. At The Good Life Cafe (3142 S. Halsted St.), halibut is highlighted as a special, instead of fried chicken, and the greens are cooked with smoked turkey, not pork.

That's also how Meyer makes his greens at B's Market. "Soul food has changed for me," says Meyer. "I try to make it healthier. We use smoked turkey for the greens. We don't put pork in there. My mom would use ham hocks. It's different flavor, but I really like it. I also want my customers to be able to come back next week."

Meyer attended Washburne Trade School (now Washburne College's Hospitality Institute), where he learned to cook French-American cuisine. As he tells it, he had no intention of getting into soul food. In the 1990s he opened The Bazaar Restaurant in the Pullman neighborhood.

"I was serving French American food," says Meyer. "People were willing to do more soul food, but I was trying to stay away. I wanted to cook the food that I was taught to cook at school." But on Saturdays, he started serving a soul food buffet, and its popularity overshadowed the rest of the menu. "It worked out to be our busiest day of the week by far," says Meyer. "I fought it, but I eventually opened B's Market in 1997."

Some Black chefs are pushing back against the notion that soul food needs to be changed. "Nothing has been vilified like soul food," says Stephanie Hart, the owner of Brown Sugar Bakery (228 E. 78th St.). "Mac and cheese is definitely soul food. What makes it any different than fettuccine Alfredo?" Hart thinks other cuisines aren't subjected to the same level of scrutiny as soul food. The soul food she ate growing up "featured rice and beans, that kind of vegetables that were cooked by the people preparing the food." Hart says, "My mom mostly grew in season. She jarred and canned vegetables. That's what I consider soul food."

What's wrong with that?" Hart believes that a lot of Black people stopped eating soul food because it was considered unhealthy. "Suddenly anything that Black people put pork in was bad," says Hart. "That meant you stopped cooking together on Sundays because you weren't eating Grandma's food. So it had a piece of salt pork in it? She was going to the grocery to get the greens. It's better than chicken tenders from a store."

While the debate about the healthfulness of soul food continues, some Black chefs are going out of their way to stop using the phrase altogether.

At Virtue, located just a few blocks away from Soul Shack, you can order collard greens, mac and cheese and cornbread, but chef Erick Williams admits that Virtue is not a soul food restaurant. Instead, he favors the phrase "Southern American cooking." "Southern American created soul food by way of survival, and perfected it through years of struggle," says Williams. "But the biggest thing for me is all the other food." He notes that Black people have cooked the meals for a large percentage of the country for most of America's history. "That's true even in the North, and from the White House to the furthest tip of Texas," says Williams. "While the enslaved people of the South only had access to the rest of a pig for themselves, they were cooking with the rest of the hog for white people. If my ancestors were cooking all the food, I want to eat it."

At Virtue, he's focusing on sourcing the best ingredients he can get, figuring out the optimal way to serve them. "I still create a smothered pork chop, but I also love a roasted pork chop," says Williams. "I've served one of the thickest double-cut roasted pork chops (and you know I'm crying)," says Williams. "Now, I'm looking at her, but I don't know what to do. I hope a social worker, so I had to stand there and wait. I thought the pause would never end. Finally, she said, 'I haven't had biscuits like these in my mother's years. I feel like a little bit of my mother came back during this meal.' She's talking about something she's deeply connected with, she came to (Virtue) because she heard it was cool to be here, but then the warmth of her mother's gift of biscuits."

Williams believes Southern cooking is a way to celebrate the stories of Black people in America. "Southern feels a lot more comforting," says Williams, "and it's a better fit for the techniques that I've learned over the years. There used to be a difference that when white people cook Southern food and Black people cook soul food. But no one is going to limit what I cook."

crackly crust that seems to have fused to the fish, plus two sides.

CRAVING South Side

Search turns up debate

'Soul' or 'Southern' food? Chefs bring forth stellar dishes, historical perspective

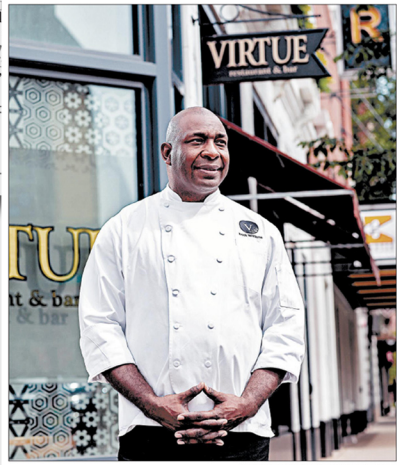
By NICK KINDELSPERGER | Chicago Tribune

While soul food restaurants have played important roles on the North and West sides, the epicenter in Chicago has always been the South Side. That's where you'll find Pearl's Place (3901 S. Michigan Ave.), which has been open for more than 30 years. With its massive dining room and artwork lining the

classics like fried chicken, smoked ham hocks and oxtails. And the food still delivers. Order the fried catfish (\$19.99), and you'll get an enormous fillet with a crackly crust that seems to have fused to the fish. Each meal also includes two sides, which sounds great, but since Pearl's offers 18 options (0), choosing two

is celebrating its, the Bronzeville restaurant and as community ready to be prepared to join "Happy Birthday" version.

Here you can k



Erick Williams, chef and owner of Virtue Restaurant in Chicago. "I didn't really hear the term soul food growing up. It was familiar food."