

Food Memories: Growing Up in St. Vincent

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The heritage of West Indians is very traditional and routine. It is customary on Sunday to have the biggest lunch of the week, such as rice and pigeon peas (they were frozen from around March to last until November) with baked chicken, ground provision which consists of steamed plantain, sweet potato, and/or dasheen. The meal is completed with a vegetable or potato salad. The baked chicken sometimes is substituted by stewed pork, stewed beef or curry mutton. The incentive to clean your plate was rewarded with some of Mummy's homemade custard or coconut ice cream. Oh, how I can recall that wooden ice cream tub with the outside hand crank to churn or turn the rock salt and ice between the canister and tub. The salt was used to prevent the ice from melting before the liquids became ice cream. I can remember my mother on a Saturday evening seasoning up the meat by marinating it. Chives from Ms. Catherine's backyard and peppers along with other garden herbs were all rubbed down on that meat, and if that was not enough, the bowl was covered and shaken to make sure not a patch was missing.

On Saturdays more eating options appeared; they were referred to as Creole food. First breakfast is either corn meal, arrowroot, or flour porridge, none of which I enjoyed. Then there is lunch which is the traditional *boljou*—breadfruit roasted on an open fire in the yard on sticks supported by two to four big stones if no coal pot was available; and this is accompanied by stewed salt fish with vegetables. This dish today remains a tradition, but thankfully it has evolved to an everyday/anyway dish. Freshly squeezed lemonade, *mauby* or the juice from the fruits in season was the beverage for Saturday's lunch. Other options for Creole lunch were *callallo* soup with crab, coconut dumplings, sweet potato, and slices of young breadfruit. A Saturday would not be complete without "pig trotters," "cattle head," or "cattle tongue souse," served with roast breadfruit. Breadfruit is a food that is cooked in various methods suitable for the occasion. It can be steamed, roasted, used in salads, made into chips and fried when stale.

As I saw my mother's Saturday chores, I often thought I didn't want to be a housewife. In the village a young lady was not considered a model figure if she didn't carry out the traditions or customs in the proper way. For instance, every Saturday Mummy would be kneading up dough to bake bread. This is followed by the outside oven being lit. This was a red drum with a cut out door in the front. Two shelves were placed inside, and at the bottom a lit coal pot with a fire going

inside. On the outside at the top of the oven would be another fire made from coconut fiber, coconut shell or sticks, anything to spark a fire and keep it going until the bread was baked. The scent traveled throughout the neighborhood along with the scent from other homes doing their usual weekend baking. Breakfast Sunday morning was mummy's homemade bread with eggs from local yard fowl, or fried black pudding.

In the village of Belair, on weekends, everyone looked forward to Ms. Mida passing through, skillfully balancing her tray of coconut slices or tarts; and in her hand was a baking sheet with potato pudding or ground nut sugar cakes. We also paid a visit to Ms. Little's yard for black pudding and cooked breadnut. I looked forward to this as an outing. We couldn't get mummy to break the habit of insisting that we drink fruit juice or *mauby* that was made at home; the other children got to have their weekend treats with Ju-C (soda), and that was tempting to watch.

As I reminisce about my childhood days, I think of similar incidents with Annie-Haucks Lawson. Growing up with both parents meant adjusting to different eating habits, foods, and atmosphere. My dad raised rabbits and sheep. However, his eating habits were not limited as all sorts of wild meats including iguana, manacou and yard fowl were on the dinner table. The rabbit and mutton were for special occasions like Christmas, a birthday or anniversary. The wild meats were cooked when my dad's friends came by to socialize (or "hang a lime"). The lime always started in our yard during a moonlight night over a game of draughts or dominoes. I loved the scent of manacou swung over an open fire singeing the hair. That was the only time my brothers and sisters were allowed to mingle among the crowd. The men stayed in the yard eating and drinking lots of alcohol, good old local sunset rum, while the food was brought to us in the house. Children were not to get involved in adult gatherings or conversation, especially when alcohol was involved, but we could hear their conversations and smell the alcohol from a distance.

Attending Sunday school wasn't optional. Each child was guaranteed 25 cents or more for the collection plate at church. It was not until long after that most parents found out that the offering was going to Ms. Yearwood's tray. Ms. Yearwood sold all kinds of treats and was not lacking in color—bright colors were one of her trademarks. The tray had colored popcorn or disco corn, and the brightest blue and green popsicles. There were also coconut fudge, sugar cakes, tamarind balls, lemon balls, and doughnuts. Of course my sisters were not spared the rod. I was the only one not to get a beating because I was the youngest.

At a young age I was separated from my dad. My mom moved further away into the city. Our eating habits changed a bit. Perhaps God's plan was never for us to be hungry. How better can the love for food get as we lived close to the harbor where the young men went fishing and our neighbor, Ms. Cyrus, worked at the fish market. Fish was on the menu when we lived with dad, but not on a regular basis. Being in town now, we had fish of all colors, shapes, and sizes. Ms. Cyrus was punctual in her delivery of fish, along with limes and a hand of green banana. Mummy was left with no other choice than to go to the market to get some *eddoes*

and okra to make a boil-in— fish along with other foods cooked up in one pot with white sauce. But our traditions were slowly fading away after we adjusted to town life. The homemade bread on Sundays was replaced by bread in a bag bought from the supermarket or one of the mobile bakeries. We had more red meats packed in trays and the chickens were big, but not as juicy as the fowl from Dad. Nevertheless, on Christmas and special occasions, the rabbit meat, mutton, and sometimes beef were brought by my father.

My mom and older sisters begin to experiment with different dishes. The fish was used for fish pies, fish cakes, baked, grilled, and fried and sometimes stuffed with farine—grated cassava squeezed to remove the water—then baked in a copper pan over an open fire and constantly turned until crisp. Eventually I became interested enough to experiment myself. I first made green banana chips, coconut fudge and sugar cake, and then I graduated to the famous *pelau* – brown rice cooked up with chicken and peas in one pot.

As everyone grew up with urban exposure and the era of cookbooks, cable, and travel integrated into our lives, traditional culture gradually became history. When I worked for a French company where the chef prepared some irresistible pasta dishes with cheese sauces, I developed a passion for pastas. I do not have a favorite dish per se, but I have a passion for sea food and savory desserts. When I long for some home cooking I often cook stewed smoked herring with steamed sweet potatoes, plantain, coconut dumpling, and banana.

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