



Cooking Up Heritage in Harlem

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THROUGHOUT MOST of the twentieth century, Harlem was the most renowned of all African American communities. The rise of black Harlem was largely a consequence of the massive, northward migration by southern blacks at the turn of the twentieth century. They settled in Harlem for a number of reasons, chiefly for the housing vacated by second-generation European immigrants and because of the strong discriminatory practices existing elsewhere in the city. Less known is the diversity of those black migrants and the presence of many nonblacks who simultaneously contributed to Harlem's transformation. Almost completely unheralded is the extent to which all these parties participated in creating Harlem's food world. Contrary to the dominant perception, Harlem is not now, nor was it then, solely a realm of soul food.

Harlem's current urban-renewal strategies might lead us to believe otherwise. Intent on luring tourist dollars to spur the revitalization of Upper Manhattan, these campaigns have coalesced with the tourism industry to form what is called "Heritage Tourism." As this term implies, developers attract visitors and consumers using a combination of Harlem's inherent assets: history and culture. Yet as these assets are commodified, both history and culture are boiled down into an uncomplicated, simple syrup for the would-be consumer. History thus comes to mean the Harlem Renaissance, and culture is reduced to gospel music, African American art and literature, and, of course, soul food. For example, between 1997 and 2001, the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone Development Corporation funded eleven restaurants in and around Harlem. Most of these establishments—Miss Mamie's Spoonbread Too, Wimp's Southern Style Bakery, and Sugar Hill Bistro, to name a few—are

complicit with this soul food, neo-Renaissance image. Most of the tourist companies also have capitalized on this image, some even specializing in tours that feature visits to Harlem's black churches followed by outings to its soul food restaurants. The more the food businesses are factored into this urban renewal, the more soul food will become the ultimate face of Heritage Tourism. For some people, this reduction is not palatable.

This chapter is intended to be neither a history of soul food—although the term begs for some definition—nor a treatise on gentrification. Instead, it is an attempt to question a general narrative about food and heritage in Harlem by examining more closely the roles, responses, proprietors, and patterns of its food businesses. Looking at food businesses in this light, first at the height of the Harlem Renaissance—particularly the pre-Depression decade on which most of the current heritage making is modeled—and then at the turn of the twenty-first century, accomplishes several things. It helps lend greater specificity to a food environment then and now that is generally thought to be more homogeneous than it truly is. In reality, the dubious status of early black Harlemites, their low rates of business ownership, and the numerous ethnoracial presences all indicate that soul food not only was one of many components of Harlem's food world, but came to prominence through some unconventional means. Thus I also address the historical accuracy and present-day implications of the Heritage Tourism strategies glorifying Harlem's southern African American food roots above all other components of and contributors to its food world. Last, as several camps posit the community's future, perhaps this work—which scrutinizes some of the ways in which the past is interpreted in order to engineer heritage—provides an (implicit) indication of how Harlem's current food businesses may respond. My chapter, then, primarily challenges popular perceptions, but it also looks at where this road may lead. This matters because as long as Harlem is in the midst of economic changes, food businesses are increasingly at the fore as recipients of funding, harbingers of community change, or simply focal points of controversy. The reason is that restaurants in Harlem are the principal sites where culture is articulated, sites that always exist at the interface of cultural production and consumption.

Historicizing Harlem: Who Were These Migrants, Their Predecessors, and Their Contemporaries?

Urban renewal creates and promotes tourist destinations by marketing unique cultural institutions and capitalizing on history, so an evaluation of how soul food fits into Heritage Tourism must begin with a historical account. Harlem is a community that has experienced extreme change. Over time, it has seen a number of populations move in, settle, evolve, and depart. Yet, even though it was considered for much of the twentieth century to be the most significant and symbolic enclave for black Americans, its original and ensuing composition is often obscured. Southern black migrants moved into a Harlem that had existed for decades, and they did not take it over in its entirety, as is sometimes assumed. Although Harlem is known today for

abundant soul food eateries where collards and cornbread are consumed mere moments after Sunday church services, its food world had—and still has—many other components.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Harlem already was filled with Irish squatters on the riverbanks, various central and eastern European Jews—first German and later Russian and Polish—above Central Park, and an accumulation of Italians on the East Side. As is often the case among immigrant groups, they tended to cluster together, in part comforted by familiarity and in part excluded by social networks beyond their communities' borders. Often the most vivid impressions that one ethnic group made on another revolved around food: ingredients, cooking methods, eating etiquette, and aesthetics like smells and fragrances. With food playing important roles in these ethnic enclaves, residents supported culture and tradition by establishing a number of food businesses, from butcher shops and bakeries to taverns and teahouses. As Hasia Diner has noted in regard to migrants and the foods from their origins, "They find ways to prepare them, cooperating with each other to make them available on a community basis. Their stores, bakeries, boarding houses, cafes, and restaurants all bear witness to the desire of the newcomers to relive the foodways of places left behind."¹

Another presence in Harlem at the turn of the century was its scattered "Negro population," consisting of migrants from other parts of the city and descendants of slaves who had tended to Upper Manhattan's farmland and built the wagon road linking it to New York City during the previous century. These early black Harlemites were not concentrated in particular areas, as most of the European immigrant communities were, and certainly did not yet resemble the vast contingent they would become during the ensuing decades. They occupied some whole blocks but rarely huge patches of Harlem's landscape. Thus, despite some black housing tenements and a few churches, they did not open a great number of formal food businesses early on. Rather, the roles of northern blacks in the food-service industry were mostly as wage earners, not proprietors. Of the 3,802 black males in New York City's workforce in 1905—the beginning but hardly the apex of substantial migration—365 (11.2%) of them were listed as waiters, and another 144 were employed as bartenders, cooks, and "dining car" cooks. The bulk of these positions, either evolving out of domestic-service opportunities or existing within the matrix of white-owned businesses, were not usually connected to any specifically African American notions of cuisine.²

In the second and third decades of the century, Harlem's population underwent more significant changes. Blacks from lower Manhattan had initially trickled uptown only when a few astute investors and realtors persuaded absentee owners—that is, owners who were less committed to segregation because they themselves did not inhabit the buildings—to accept black tenants. These absentee owners also were initially persuaded to overlook discrimination by charging blacks higher rents. Soon blacks moved en masse to Harlem, where apartments were bigger and, more important, open to them in large numbers for the first time. Harlem's former European immigrant population, now largely in its second generation, was moving to more spacious, previously unaffordable neighborhoods in other boroughs. Coinciding with both these shifts, southern migrants moved to New York City in droves. In his study

of Harlem, Gilbert Osofsky wrote that between “1910 and 1920 the Negro population of the city increased 66 per cent (91,709 to 152,467); from 1920 to 1930, it expanded 115 per cent (152,467 to 327,706). In the latter year, less than 25 per cent of New York City’s Negro population (79,264) was born in New York State.” Arriving in Harlem at startling rates, these southern migrants upset the balance and thus were not always welcomed to their new surroundings.³

There were other tensions besides those between black and white Harlemites. As in other northern cities where southern migrants encountered native black populations, some of the new arrivals’ most caustic relations were within the race. Northern blacks had created a social hierarchy and a rapport with whites, both of which were upset by the influx of Southerners not yet acquainted with New York’s social customs. Longtime black Harlemites who had achieved harmony—or at least tolerance—with white Harlemites found discrimination returning with new vigor as increasing numbers of blacks moved into their communities. Because these new and revisited exclusionary practices lumped new and native blacks together, the natives looked for ways to separate themselves from the migrants. In this tense environment, the food habits that the migrants brought with them from the South were sometimes the most visible points of contention between the natives and the migrants. Whether this contention was in the guise of a bourgeoisie and a proletariat, natives and newcomers, or the intellectual and the unlearned, there was always a group that disdained those “who didn’t dress properly, whose finger nails were dirty, and who didn’t eat properly, and whose English was not good.” Ironically, this was not altogether different from how new European immigrants disgusted their more established, second-generation brethren with the odors emanating from their “stinking fried fish joints” and “vile tenements.”⁴

The native blacks already had their established channels of social and economic access, and the migrants certainly brought their own understanding and aspirations northward with them. One indication of the migrants’ speed in affecting Harlem’s food world was the rate at which they entered the grocery, restaurant, and food retail businesses. Two studies of merchants and consumers—one by the National Negro Business League in 1928 and the other by economist Paul Kenneth Edwards in 1932—emphasized the frequency with which blacks went into these food businesses in southern cities. Edwards reported that “more Negroes are engaged in the retailing of groceries in the urban South than in the retailing of any other type of consumer merchandise. The belief that a retail grocery establishment can be set up with less capital . . . and that its operation requires no specialized training and little or no previous experience has entered into the calculations of many of these merchants.” In Virginia, which supplied New York City with more migrants than did any other southern state, black-owned food businesses were common. Huge numbers of “fish dealers” and “produce dealers,” along with peddlers of dry goods, lined the streets of Richmond, most of them mobile merchants.⁵

Native black New Yorkers did not always exhibit the same willingness or desire to go into retail food businesses as proprietors, so some migrants took advantage of this entrepreneurial dearth. Perhaps the most famous example is Lillian Harris, more commonly known as “Pig Foot Mary,” who migrated first from the Mississippi

Delta to Manhattan's West Side and later to Harlem. She peddled southern food, probably to other migrants, and amassed enough of a fortune to invest in property and become one of the wealthier black landlords in Harlem. Here is an interesting historical moment and, perhaps, a moment of coalescence for soul food. For if Lillian Harris migrated from Mississippi—a state that supplied New York City with a negligible number of black migrants, as few as one for every forty from Virginia or South Carolina—there must have been something transcendent about her food and its appeal to Harlem eaters for her to have amassed a fortune. Defining this transcendence, however, is more difficult. Was it that her food—the ingredients, the preparation, the prices—was familiar to Virginia-born, and perhaps even Jamaican-born, blacks? Is it possible that she prepared a less regionally specific version or that the regional differences were not as great as they may seem in hindsight, given the prevalence of hogs and hominy across much of the South? Or was it simply that she did not have many competitors in Manhattan? It may not be possible to know exactly who dined daily on Harris's pigs' feet and boiled corn, but it raises interesting questions about the compatibility of regionally diverse food cultures in a climate rife with xenophobia—a climate in which the consumers were familiar with one or another regional cuisine and surely grappled with notions of authenticity.⁶

Although Harris's financial success may have been unusual, her entrepreneurial effort was not. Many migrants, their backgrounds providing the impetus, similarly pursued the ownership of food businesses. In New York City in 1909, "of 330 proprietors [of black-owned businesses] whose birth-places were ascertained, 220, or 66.66 per cent, were born in Southern states and the District of Columbia." Yet even as many followed "Pig Foot Mary" with varying degrees of success, relatively few southern migrants translated their aspirations and acumen into formally recognized food businesses. In fact, by 1930, blacks still owned less than one-fifth of all Harlem businesses. Thus my question: When and how did southern African American cuisine—widely, even if unofficially, called soul food today—establish its dominance in Harlem, especially among competing influences and low rates of business ownership? The uncritical answer may be that as these southern migrants moved in and other groups moved out, the new inhabitants took over residences and transformed businesses. While there is little doubt that the Southerners' migration and successful food businesses were related, a closer look reveals something more subtle: a food world in Harlem built by a number of parties, including some of those who most staunchly resisted the cuisine that would come to be known as soul food, a food world, in other words, in which an odd mix of contributors had their hands in the cultural production process.⁷

There are a number of reasons why migrants were not immediately able to parlay their numbers into a formidable legion of food businesses. One reason is that they had significantly less purchasing power in Harlem than they had had in southern cities. Astronomically high rents, higher on average than those in the rest of Manhattan, plagued black Harlemites in the early decades of the twentieth century. High rents were one of the main causes of the overcrowded tenements: the more wage earners who shared a living space, the easier the costs of living were to bear. The struggle to pay high rents also meant that blacks often had far less expendable income to

spend on food. In 1929 in the cities of Atlanta, Birmingham, Richmond, Nashville, Montgomery, Mobile, Chattanooga, Durham, and Columbia, South Carolina, the combined average “Negro” expenditure for food was 27.2 percent of their total purchasing power. But in New York City, where “rents, traditionally high in Harlem, reached astounding proportions in the 1920’s,” the migrants likely had neither the capital to open businesses nor the steady buying power in their communities to sustain them. This change in buying power may have been the most disconcerting to migrants accustomed to getting food on credit in the South, as either sharecroppers purchasing from landowners or shoppers buying from local stores.⁸

Another reason that the migrants’ cuisine did not always translate into formal food businesses is that their communities in New York were less homogeneous than they had been in the South. This again belies the dominant narrative, because although black Harlemites often encountered discrimination as if they were one undifferentiated mass, they in fact constituted a world divided along socioeconomic, ideological, regional, and even national (and linguistic) lines. Moreover, these divisions were emblematic of their nuanced population. By 1930, New York City’s “Negro” population was exponentially larger than it had been at the turn of the century, but foreign-born blacks constituted a full quarter of that population. They hailed mostly from the Caribbean, although also from West Africa (often by way of Europe), and there was no shortage of differences—or, at least, *perceived* differences, which surfaced in the form of palpable xenophobia—between these black immigrants and their African American contemporaries.⁹

Two of the main perceived differences between native and immigrant blacks were culture—of which cuisine is surely a part—and entrepreneurial drive. Some of the dissimilarity in neighboring peoples’ cuisines is arguably an expected, perhaps even universal, experience. No doubt, the immigrants’ food stood out. “Certain dishes,” writes Ras Makonnen, “such as pig-snout, salted fish and pigs’ tails were available wherever there was a West Indian community established, just as the West Africans who have gone to Britain to settle have maintained their various dishes of yam and rice.”¹⁰ But it was not only on the basis of consumption that West Indians were distinctive. From the turn of the century through 1930, they consistently secured jobs and opened businesses at rates that exceeded their percentage of the population. Thus it was not uncommon to hear food-centered epithets or remarks about what some native blacks considered job and economic infringement: “When a West Indian ‘got ten cents above a beggar,’ a common local saying ran, ‘he opened a business.’”¹¹

The importance of this rift is manifold and emphasizes tension and heterogeneity in Harlem. Quite simply, if there were many distinct peoples, there also were many distinct cuisines. Yet since they lived with one another—and even within the two major groups of blacks, there were many subcategories (for example, Southerners could be divided further into Virginians, Floridians, and beyond, while immigrants were Jamaican, Haitian, and Barbadian)—Harlem’s neighborhoods may not have provided the same cultural solidarity as had the southern communities. To migrants, this could have seemed an unfavorable environment for opening a food business, particularly where animosities were known to exist. Southern migrants, in particular, may have been discouraged from trying to sell their goods on a block featuring stores with

“bins on bins of plantains, cow-peas, dasheen, cassava root, all sorts of peppers for chile, and stalks of sugar cane for chewing on as candy.”¹² The presence of industrious immigrants like the Jamaican-born W. A. Domingo (pepper sauces, chutneys, and condiments) and the Ugandan-born U. Kaba Rega (cocoa and kola nuts), both of whom imported various foodstuffs to satisfy their tastes and appeal to their communities, signified a variegated food world. Furthermore, the foreign-born blacks not only were culturally distinct, but opened their own businesses more quickly than did the southern migrants. They therefore may have been influencing Harlem’s food world in another way, by pushing native African Americans as a group to celebrate, emphasize, and take pride in their own food culture as a foil against the outsiders’ economic success and cultural inroads.¹³

Beyond the differences and contentions that characterized black Harlemites, an emerging Puerto Rican presence was flanking and even circumscribing the Italian section of East Harlem. About the community’s growth, Winston James writes that “from a mere 1,513 in 1910, the Puerto Rican population in the United States increased more than thirty-four fold, to almost 53,000, within two decades. The overwhelming majority settled in New York City, but no one knows what proportion of this population was black.”¹⁴ This population was compared with the Italian sector for both its proximity and its cohesiveness. With the language difference creating an additional barrier, Spanish Harlem not only was culturally distinct from black Harlem, but, as a community, remained largely separate and self-sufficient. As Jamaican-born author Claude McKay wrote, “The Spanish quarter in Harlem is as definitely Spanish as the Italian quarter is Italian. . . . The Spanish group contains a bulging belly of middlemen-traders. There are 300 grocery stores, 200 restaurants, 50 dry goods stores. . . . The casual observer may imagine that there are far too many.”¹⁵ Even though this description may not be based on a systematic tallying of food businesses, it does capture both the wonderment and the scorn of one group of Harlemites when looking, from outside, at another group. Furthermore, these figures are evidence of a substantial and unique food presence—which is particularly germane because Spanish Harlem still exists, somewhat separately, today—that coexisted with black Harlem.

A third important reason for the southern migrants’ slow transition into Harlem’s food world as proprietors was the lingering presence of second-generation European immigrant business owners. Even though most German Jews and Irish and some Italians left Harlem (or moved to its periphery, in effect expanding its boundaries) as blacks and Puerto Ricans moved in, many held on to their businesses as absentee owners. Some European immigrants retained residences on the fringes of Harlem: to the extreme west, to the south adjacent to Central Park, or clinging to the East River. Others commuted from new homes in other boroughs to operate their businesses. But when their original customers moved out of Harlem, these proprietors generally had to make concessions in order to survive amid the rapidly evolving milieu. Perhaps Jane Jacobs, speaking generally about this phenomenon, captured it best: “For small manufacturers . . . they must serve a narrow market at the point where this market exists, and they must be sensitive to quick changes within this market. Without cities,

they would not exist.”¹⁶ Sensing that their own existence was in jeopardy, these European immigrant business owners—the ones who remained in Harlem—did make such adjustments.

One of the places where these changes in immigrants’ businesses are most visible is in their advertising during the period. Surveying the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *New York Age*, two of Harlem’s main newspapers in the 1920s, it becomes evident that many food businesses began to target a new market—migrants from the South. Many of these businesses were the very same groceries and restaurants that once served the scores of European immigrants. For the grocers, it was sometimes as simple as offering a different range of products, goods more familiar to the new population, and remaining competitive with the market price. This does not mean that each grocer had to stop selling long-standing goods to accommodate new customers. If the original European immigrant customers still patronized the grocery, the new ethnic products could be placed alongside the old ones.

Two such products, appearing multiple times in print advertisements between 1925 and 1930, are Alaga Syrup and Murdock’s Pepper Sauce. Alaga, a cane syrup, was specifically and aggressively marketed to southern migrants. Its ads, which appeared in many different forms, and even in many cities where southern migrants lived, use unambiguous language that leaves no question of their target: “Every drop of ALAGA carries a rich store of delicious Georgia Cane flavor—a flavor not equaled by any other syrup, and which has made ALAGA the South’s favorite syrup for over 22 years”—and this from a company operating out of Alabama.¹⁷ And while this language reveals some things about the syrup’s consumers, other information in the ads identifies its vendors. Regularly urging readers to buy the syrup from their local grocers, one ad lists all the purveyors within reach of the newspaper’s readership. Not coincidentally, there were as many groceries carrying the cane syrup in Harlem as there were in the rest of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Flushing, Jamaica, Freeport, and Mount Vernon combined.¹⁸ In the late 1920s, because only one-fifth of the businesses in Harlem were owned by blacks, let alone southern migrants, many European immigrant-owned stores carried Alaga Syrup and other such products indispensable to African American consumers.

Murdock’s Pepper Sauce also appears to have been marketed to non-European consumers, albeit using more subtle language than Alaga Syrup did. Even though the Murdock’s advertisements read rather blandly, “Appetizing and Pure for Fish and Meats,” they apparently were directed to black immigrant readers and certainly signal that Murdock’s was available in Harlem.¹⁹ One indication that Murdock’s was linked to the West Indian presence in Harlem is the aforementioned food importer W. A. Domingo, who processed, marketed, and sold his own pepper condiments during this period. About Domingo’s lucrative business, Makonnen has noted that it “consisted of importing from the West Indies the ingredients for pepper sauce, and in his own little factory in Harlem he would chop them and produce the various chutneys and sauces. You can see something of his ability by the fact that Woolworth’s took his products.”²⁰ This by no means precluded European grocers from continuing to sell their own ethnic products and produce, but it meant that they could

easily—and, in fact, had to—incorporate new products into their inventories in order to survive.

The situation was more complicated for restaurants and establishments serving prepared food. For example, rather than simply stocking cane syrup next to maple syrup or pepper sauce next to pickles, restaurateurs often had to serve entirely new foods, a change that may even have necessitated the hiring of cooks and servers more knowledgeable about them. At the same time, menu changes were not always permanent. Even if too few of the original customers of restaurants owned by European immigrants still lived near enough to patronize the businesses regularly, these customers might still return on trips into the city on weekends or holidays. Here, the language of advertisements is again informative. It is interesting that during the 1920s, restaurant advertisements evolved from vague, nonspecific language to a stronger, aggressive sort. Thus we find a noticeable transition from generic wording like “tasty meals” and “homelike surroundings,” which commonly appears in the early and mid-1920s, to more specific advertisements like “Chicken and Waffles.”²¹ Surely, restaurant ownership is not always immediately discernable in advertisements. But sometimes, when restaurants advertised repeatedly over time, it becomes evident that the same establishments that served European immigrants—or at least European fare—were increasingly turning to what would later be called soul food. Accordingly, the Marguerite Tea Room, which sometimes offered chicken and waffles also advertised “Consomme d’ Marguerite” and “Potage a la Rine” for Thanksgiving.²²

In those places where southern migrants were discouraged from opening businesses—because of low investment capital and lower purchasing power among their ranks, heterogeneous communities featuring widespread competition, or limited openings left by still thriving European immigrant businesses—they brought their versions of African American cuisine to the forefront of Harlem through different means, sometimes even with the aid of others. These migrants catered and peddled foods in their community; they featured southern dishes at rent parties and social gatherings; some entered the workforce as cooks and servers; and together they pressured the market, forcing existing stores to carry their favorite food products. In these ways, this cuisine was a major influence on Harlem’s food world. Although it never reigned without peer during the Renaissance years, it eventually became ubiquitous in Harlem with the eventual exodus of many of the remaining European immigrants and the most upwardly mobile of the black West Indian immigrants. What is now called soul food continues to bear the imprint of other influences:

In Harlem . . . [the immigrant] has introduced to the food culture of the Negro community native vegetables and fruits, yams, West Indian pumpkins, Guatemalan black beans, pigeon peas, mangos, pawpaws, ginger root from which ginger beer is made, choyos which look like large green peppers, plaintains, papaya, guava, eddo, alligator pears, breadfruit, cassava, black pudding, red fish and tannias.²³

No matter how much they are downplayed, these diverse influences remain a part of Harlem’s food legacy. Again, as we turn to twenty-first-century Harlem when Heri-

tage Tourism initiatives direct a new legion of businesses, soul food's rise to the foreground is not solely the work of the cuisine's progenitors and couriers themselves.

Understanding and Evaluating Heritage Tourism

An eastward stroll along 116th Street in today's Harlem reveals a smattering of soul food joints evolving into a wave of West African restaurants and markets before ultimately giving way to bodegas, *dulcerias*, and Latino bakeries. Each cluster is a reflection of its community, its customers. Each carries more than a modicum of cultural information, history, and significance, although each plays a distinct role in Harlem. One, with its hand squarely in the pot of development funding, is the endearing face of the community; another fights for an equal part in this era of urban renewal and commodified culture; and still another finds itself all but ignored, sometimes not even considered a bona fide facet of Harlem's food world. These are by no means the only groups or types of food businesses to be found in contemporary Harlem, nor is any one of them so hermetically sealed from the others. But their experiences typify an environment whose heterogeneity is increasingly obscured.

Certainly, since its earlier days, Harlem has undergone a substantial transformation. With only scant new construction after the European immigrants' departure, disinvestment started to take a serious toll on housing and businesses, beginning in the Depression. Until recent decades, decaying buildings and abandoned properties lingered, and many still linger, often regarded as blemishes on the community's former beauty. The community's reputation has shifted from that of a renowned black enclave to "Harlem the ghetto, one of the largest concentrations of black working-class and poor inhabitants in the U.S."²⁴ At different times in the ensuing years, efforts at revitalization have proved fleeting, whether those of philanthropic foundations or community-development corporations. Only recently has economic policy begun seriously addressing Harlem's plight, and today many observers are astounded by the changes.

During the 1990s, a series of federal tax policies were designed to revitalize economically depressed communities across the country. The area including Washington Heights and West, Central, and East Harlem was designated as the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone (UMEZ) during this initial round of policy making. The plan was to provide tax incentives to new and existing businesses, encouraging them either to move into depressed zones like Upper Manhattan or, for businesses already in such zones, to broaden their scope and economic viability. These new, relocated, and refurbished businesses, it was reasoned, would create jobs and stimulate the markets of these "distressed areas." Although federally legislated, the tax policies were to be implemented mainly at the state and local levels. In other words, tax incentives and grant programs would be administered differently in each empowerment zone, the logic being that specific economic needs varied regionally. In the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone this would mean, first, that the task of allocating funds would rest largely on the shoulders of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone Development Corporation—a mix of commercially motivated and nonprofit community

representatives and outside investors—and, second, that market stimulation might be best achieved with a strategy that displayed the area’s heritage. This strategy became evident early on with the UMEZ’s creation of the Cultural Industry Investment Fund (CIIF). If the mission of the development corporation was the “economic revitalization” of Upper Manhattan, then establishing the CIIF would be central to its objectives.²⁵

Remarking on the duplicity of the term “heritage,” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains heritage making as being much more deeply committed to present-day economic aspirations than to an especially accurate portrayal of the past:

While it looks old, heritage is actually something new. Heritage is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past. Heritage thus defined depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves. A place such as Salem, Massachusetts, may be even more profitable as an exhibition of a mercantile center than it was as a mercantile center.²⁶

Although this description initially may seem to erode, by way of caricature, any benevolence inherent in the Heritage Tourism initiatives, a glance at the UMEZ’s own language—both generally and specifically in regard to what it calls “cultural funding”—shows that its intention coincides directly with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s account: “Through the CIIF, UMEZ celebrates Upper Manhattan’s rich past while creating new legacies. The work of the CIIF is two-fold: community building through a cultural and economic lens; and, a marketing of place that repositions Upper Manhattan as one of New York City’s primary cultural districts.” Expanding its objectives, the UMEZ listed four areas of cultural funding: “Reinventing/re-envisioning cultural historic sites; Strengthening and advancing primary institutions; Developing and building the next generation of mid-size organizations; Nurturing and growing cultural resources through service organizations.”²⁷

Enter Harlem, widely considered to have the richest heritage and greatest potential for attracting tourists of all the communities in Upper Manhattan. It is equipped with a unique historical backdrop—the Harlem Renaissance, with its storied *mélange* of arts, literature, and nightlife—and a viable network of cultural institutions. Many have always looked back longingly to the Renaissance as the experimental, flourishing stage of a nascent black Harlem. Juxtaposed to the poor, troubled Harlem of the 1970s and 1980s, the Renaissance looked even more glorious to 1990s policy makers and financiers. To draw tourists, they had to change the perception of Harlem as a downtrodden ghetto—what better way, some thought, than to foster a neo-Renaissance based on the days of old. Of this heritage making, Arlene Dávila writes that intent on “transforming Upper Manhattan communities into tourist destinations with cultural, entertainment, dining, and recreational attractions, this initiative has been an impetus for current discussions about how and in what ways the area should be marketed and redefined for these ends.”²⁸ Participating in these discussions are a number of stakeholders—from Congressman Charles Rangel, who was an original supporter and writer of the tax policies and remains a member of the empowerment zone board of directors; through the variously allied UMEZ staff and the many tour-

ist companies that shuttle consumers to and from the area; to, not to be forgotten, Harlem's residents, entrepreneurs, and cultural institutions—all with different links to, and interests in, Upper Manhattan.

If, as Dávila says, the “marketing of culture through cultural industries, be they museums, restaurants, or even parades, is increasingly central to the operations of tourism,” then the debate over which cultural institutions are the most likely to attract tourists—and, thus, the most worthy of funding—is a spirited one.²⁹ Among Harlem's cultural institutions are some famed establishments that have survived as relics of an earlier era. The Apollo Theater and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture are examples, two pillars of Central Harlem's cultural realm. But soul food businesses also are hugely important to this economic initiative. It is evident in the expanding media coverage of a new, sometimes upscale, food scene in Harlem.³⁰ It is discernable in the marketing literature from both development corporations and tourist companies. And it is part of studies that seemingly scrutinize every component of the New York tourism industry. For example, a study of tourism in Manhattan conducted in 2003 reveals a great deal about the role of food businesses as cultural institutions and, thus, the viability of food venues in the implementation of Heritage Tourism strategies. The study was based on “a one-page questionnaire . . . administered to individuals at several visitor-oriented locations in Lower and Upper Manhattan.”³¹ In Upper Manhattan, where Heritage Tourism is being actively carried out, the market researchers intercepted nearly one-quarter of their respondents at restaurants where patrons were seeking an authentic Harlem dining experience. Conversely, in Lower Manhattan, no questionnaires were distributed at restaurants: food was an accessory to other attractions, not the main draw.

The Upper Manhattan restaurants that served as points of distribution and collection for the survey—Sylvia's, the Lenox Lounge, and Jimmy's Uptown (now closed)—are a legendary soul food eatery, a Renaissance nightlife throwback, and a neo-Renaissance upstart, respectively. That they together attracted nearly 25 percent of Upper Manhattan's first-time or repeat tourists is a testament to the integral role of food in the Harlem tourism experience. Yet these establishments hardly stand alone in the new vanguard of soul food producers. To encourage the spread of the kind of success enjoyed by Sylvia's, a restaurant that existed long before the economic initiatives, the UMEZ lent money and business expertise to an entire wave of enterprises under the auspices of Heritage Tourism. The UMEZ aided the development of many of those in need of funding, such as Wimp's Southern Style Bakery, Sugar Hill Bistro, Manna's Soul Food Restaurant, and Miss Mamie's Spoonbread Too.³² Besides having to demonstrate their economic viability and capacity to create jobs for residents—both strict prerequisites for funding that favor large, established businesses—a more implicit requirement for these establishments to receive funding appears to have been their overt espousal of Harlem's heritage and, also important, agreement with the UMEZ's definition of that heritage.

There is, nonetheless, some incongruence between the image of Harlem that the UMEZ conveys—an image that is predominantly, if not completely, African American, a legacy belonging solely and uncomplicatedly to southern migrants—and the reality, a Harlem that exists as the confluence of cuisines and cultures. First, soul food

is not the only occupant of Harlem's gustatory space. The most obvious evidence of this is the sizable Latino community—not burgeoning but indeed well established, with its share of venerable food locations—that composes as much as 50 percent of the population of Upper Manhattan and nearly all of it in East Harlem. Yet as Dávila argues, these are not the Harlemites who emblemize Harlem's heritage or benefit from Heritage Tourism: “It is East Harlem's bordering neighborhoods of West and Central Harlem that carry a national and international reputation among prospective tourists.” Taking this a step further, I would emphasize that it is an older, largely mythologized version of West and Central Harlem that carries this reputation. And of the \$25 million that the UMEZ Development Corporation funneled into Harlem through its Cultural Industry Investment Fund, it is estimated that only \$1.5 million was for East Harlem's development. In addition to being completely inequitable, this sends the divisive message that the cultural institutions of East Harlem are not as valuable as those of Central and West Harlem. Furthermore, it is not just tourists but also residents and business owners who are receiving this message.³³

Second, even where the number and placement of restaurants give soul food the appearance of being culturally hegemonic, it continues to bear the mark of myriad



Worded in this way, signs like the one over this 125th Street eatery connote a distinction between dishes. But if “Jerk Chicken” is the signature item, “American Dishes” may be peripheral to West Indian ones. (Photograph courtesy of Damian Mosley)



With this signage, the difference between “Jamaican” and “Southern Style” foods is clear, even though it is not clear why both cuisines are offered in one restaurant. (Photograph courtesy of Damian Mosley)

influences. Some of those influences belie a narrative that makes African Americans the sole progenitors of soul food and the protectors of its legacy. One example is the abundance of restaurants with curiously hybrid offerings: “Jamaican and Southern Cuisine,” “Caribbean, Soul, Barbecue,” “West Indian and American Food.” These textual oppositions always feature soul food as the second or last element; they always feature it in opposition, or at least as a complement, to the lead cuisine. And undoubtedly, the first item is constituted, defined, and distinguished in part by the second term. In Spanish Harlem, too, signs display such compromises as “Spanish and American Food.” In this case, “American” is not necessarily the equivalent of “soul,” but it still reveals this interdependence of cultural production and its reliance on opposition. There is more than a hint of inclusiveness here, something more methodically and organically spawned than a cursory fusion concept. Not surprisingly, these are not the restaurants that Heritage Tourism touts as the backbone, face, or even extremities of Harlem’s soul food culture.

There are many ways to read the menus that list southern or soul food dishes separately from West Indian dishes. One interpretation is that although southern black migrants and Caribbean black immigrants never quite reconciled their cultural differences, realizing the unlikelihood of either group’s economic survival if they failed to patronize each other’s businesses, they agreed to offer different foods under one roof. This might imply that Jamaicans and their descendants stick to their own foods—oxtail, jerk chicken, plantains, rice and peas, pepper sauce—and that Afri-



In yet another iteration of the Caribbean versus American concept, “Tree,” whose *T* is depicted by a palm, and “Patties” evoke this restaurant’s West Indian aesthetic better than does its non-descript American one. (Photograph courtesy of Damian Mosley)

can Americans remain with their own foods. Another reading is that the two groups, southern migrants and black immigrants, despite initially grappling for a place in a new, sometimes hostile, environment—a contest that would have included disputes over the right to many things like labor, worship, and cultural expression—found themselves adjusting to a world in which they were dislodged. In this case, they may have had to adjust to new ingredients and new prices, sometimes importing foodstuffs and entering into business themselves, ultimately creating their own brand of soul food. This Harlem soul food may not, then, be synonymous with southern cuisine or African American cuisine, or with versions of soul food in other metropolises not subject to the same influences.

Yet another reading, particularly when taking into account that a soul food restaurant might have menu items that extend beyond the scope of any of its most heralded influences, is that soul food in Harlem might be just as cosmopolitan as it is traditional. There is sure irony when one enters, for example, Manna’s Soul Food Restaurant—funded in part by the UMEZ Development Corporation³⁴—and finds not only chitterlings and peach cobbler alongside jerk and curried chicken, but also sushi and vegetable fried rice. The irony is perhaps twofold. On the one hand, as much as Heritage Tourism tries to circumscribe it, soul food continues to resist definitions that are either rigid or ahistorical. On the other hand, because Heritage Tourism markets in

line with a narrative that does not completely coincide with the actual dining landscape, tourists arrive in Harlem with a thirst for the authentic—a thirst not likely to be satisfied as well at Manna's as at a restaurant whose menu is more in line with consecrated images.

Conclusion

Soul food resists definition not only by developers and cultural industry investors, but also in conversation, popular and scholarly, and it has resisted definition here as well. I have dodged definition because it was never my intention to examine and characterize soul food broadly across time and terrain, but certainly also because it is not easily definable. Many people have their notions of soul food, positive or negative, concrete and dubious. As I have used the term loosely in this chapter, soul food refers to a cuisine that has roots in slave culture, even though it may not have been referred to by the term “soul food” until some hundred years after Emancipation,³⁵ and that, in its present form in northern cities, is widely and perhaps uncritically considered a vestige solely of southern migrants. If at one time it was regional—or, more accurately, if it arose out of a number of regionally specific cuisines centered on corn or rice, sugarcane or sorghum, pork or shellfish—soul food as we now know it has little attachment to place. Its current regional affiliation is often simply “the South,” even though this oversimplified geography surely belies strong and lasting influences from elsewhere. Yet soul food derives its distinction from other foods and cuisines of the American South in the way that it—particularly the word “soul”—connotes race. Perhaps, then, it is an ethnic or, maybe more precisely, an ethnoracial cuisine. At the same time, though, we could argue that soul food is at least partly a national cuisine, often specific to an African American rather than a diasporic blackness.

Ironically, then, soul food as the designated iconic cuisine obscures the number and range of cultural producers in the Harlem of today, just as it did in the Harlem of yesteryear. In both instances, the primacy of soul food culture was achieved by businesses with varied backgrounds, proprietors, and intentions. Whereas one period featured competitive cultures, the next is characterized by competitive grants and economic initiatives. To be fair, the economic changes spurred by the empowerment zone legislation are plentiful and varied. Many other food businesses—full-service wine stores, coffee shops, large-scale groceries, caviar bars, and organic markets—might not exist in today's Harlem without the direct and indirect impact of the empowerment zone. But Heritage Tourism, with its focus on a narrowly conceived African American food culture, seems to propagate a reductive image of Harlem to the greater world.

The mere idea that initiatives drive the commodification of culture means that development corporations must attribute value to the cultural institutions they feel are most marketable. Some questions that I did not begin this chapter asking—and, thus, in some cases only flirt with the answers—go beyond a determination of whether heritage in Harlem is derived correctly from history: How has knowledge of the Har-

lem Renaissance been produced and reproduced, thus making Heritage Tourism susceptible to faulty readings that overprivilege the role of soul food? How exactly has soul food been subjected to redefinition—from regional, to ethnic, to national, and now, to cosmopolitan cuisine? If heritage making requires an almost singular focus on the past, are not some of Harlem’s cultural producers situated anachronistically, rendered out of place in this cosmopolitan space? At the same time that they are out of place, might they also be kept *in* their places, performing their roles?

NOTES

1. For a further description of the European immigrant communities already inhabiting Harlem, see Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem, the Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890–1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 81–84; for a general discussion of migrants creating businesses to supply their communities with familiar foods, see Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), 9.

2. On the wagon road and native black Manhattanites, see Osofsky, *Harlem*, 83; regarding northern blacks in food professions, see George Edmund Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), 74–76. Black women, who vastly outnumbered men as cooks, are not included, possibly indicating that these professions were sometimes extensions of domestic service.

3. For a discussion of the increased movement uptown, see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 26–28; for specific numbers for the changes in Negro population by decade, see Osofsky, *Harlem*, 128.

4. For a discussion of the tension between native and migrant blacks in another major city, see Tracy N. Poe, “The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915–1947,” *American Studies International* 37 (1999): 4–33. She says that “natives [of Chicago] . . . felt besieged. In the twenty-five years prior to the Great Migration, the native black community had developed its own churches, institutions, political base, and class structure. . . . In fact, one of the things on which natives prided themselves was the high level of integration in Chicago restaurants, which they attributed to their unassailable manners and refined tastes. Natives resented it bitterly when migrants’ unseemly behavior caused the city’s finer establishments to restrict all Negroes” (8). Osofsky discusses the same phenomenon in Manhattan: “With the increased migration of Negroes from the South, the brighter side of race relations in the city—the softening of institutionalized prejudices—came to an end” (*Harlem*, 40). Lewis quotes Arthur Huff Fauset about one group of blacks looking down on another in *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 193. The “stinking fried fish joints” are mentioned in Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: Dutton, 1940), 29; the “vile tenements,” in Osofsky, *Harlem*, 82.

5. Paul Kenneth Edwards, *The Southern Urban Negro as a Consumer* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 124–25, 122.

6. For information on “Pig Foot Mary,” see Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby, *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History, 1626–1940* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Osofsky, *Harlem*, 33; and Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 109–10. All depend heavily for their information on the WPA biographical sketch of Harris written by Odette Harper.

7. For information about black proprietors of food businesses, see Haynes, *Negro at Work*, 100.
8. On purchasing power, see the table “Rough Approximation of Negro Purchasing Power in 1929 in Nine Important Southern Cities, and Its Distribution for Principal Groups of Items of Cost of Living,” in Edwards, *Southern Urban Negro*, 123; for a discussion of the differences between rents for black and white New Yorkers, including the “traditionally high” ones uptown, see Osofsky, *Harlem*, 136.
9. Osofsky, *Harlem*, 134.
10. Ras Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from Within* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1973), 89–90.
11. Osofsky continues, “As a group, West Indians became noted for their ambition, thrift and business acumen. . . . Contemporary surveys of Negro business in Harlem and Columbus Hill demonstrate that a disproportionate number of small stores—the traditional ‘Race Enterprise’—were owned by Negro immigrants” (*Harlem*, 133). Other discussions of West Indians being employed and opening businesses at higher rates than American-born blacks can be found in Haynes, *Negro at Work*, 100; Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1968), 82; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 41; and Ira Reid, *The Negro Immigrant: His Background, Characteristics, and Social Adjustment, 1899–1937* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 118–19. Although all these authors account in some way for this difference between natives and immigrants, their explanations of West Indians’ entrepreneurial aggressiveness range from those emphasizing the importance of education to West Indians before immigrating to those centered on the generally radical Caribbean social milieu, which produced not just business owners but also polemicists and soapbox orators.
12. Kate Simon, *New York Places and Pleasures: An Uncommon Guidebook* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 106.
13. For brief discussions of these black immigrant food importers, see James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 89; and Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism*, 86–94.
14. James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 197.
15. McKay, *Harlem*, 137.
16. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 145. According to Lewis, absentee business owners did not completely adjust to the new residents of Harlem: “Harlem remained a colony where absentee landlords and commercial barons hid behind Afro-American managers, where the largest department store, Blumstein’s, even refused to hire black elevator operators until forced to, and where H. C. F. Koch’s, another large department store, eventually chose liquidation over integration” (*When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 109).
17. *Amsterdam News*, February 5, 1929, 2; for Alaga ads in Chicago newspapers, see Poe, “Origins of Soul Food,” 22.
18. *Amsterdam News*, October 27, 1926, 7.
19. *Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1928, 5.
20. Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism*, 89. Also speaking of the prevalence of pepper sauce concoctions among black immigrants, Reid states, more generally, that “to the Harlem cuisine the immigrant has added the use of condiments” (*Negro Immigrant*, 129).
21. *Amsterdam News*, November 2, 1927, 13.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Reid, *Negro Immigrant*, 129.