In the “Side Room”

Eating with the Maynards and the Burgesses

We have our own way with food. We’ve called our way for centuries and incorporated our wondrous way with food and eating into our daily lives. We have rocked generations of babies to sleep crooning “Shortenin’ Bread,” laughed to the comedy of “Pigmeat” Markham and “Butterbeans” and Susie, and danced the cakewalk, tapped our feet to the rhythms of “Jelly Roll” Morton, shimmied with wild abandon to gutbucket music in juke joints or sat down with friends and “chewed the fat.” We’ve had the blues over the “Kitchen Man,” longed to be loved like “Lilac Wine,” and celebrated with “A Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer.”

Harris 1995:17

We know from John Maynard’s 1876 probate inventory that the family took their meals in the “side room.” This was the room adjacent to the parlor, but unlike the parlor it was not accessed by the front door of the house, though it did contain a door leading to the backyard. In this “side room” the furnishings continued to be quite elegant with a “Mahogany Bookcase,” “Marble Top Stand,” and a “Mahogany Table with Leaf.” However, there was also a “Common” Settee and six chairs valued together at just $2.00, “1 small table” valued at just $.25, and the “stove with coal hood” was valued at $3.00, as compared to the $5.00 stove listed in the parlor. Indeed, when adding up the value of the objects in each of the rooms, the Maynards invested at least $61.50 in their “front room” or parlor furnishings and just $11.75 in those for this “side room” (Anne Arundel County Inventories 1876:553–54).

Given the side room’s connectivity to the backyard, but not Duke of Gloucester Street, and its simpler furnishings, the “side room” of the Maynards house was definitely a more private space. If their parlor embodied genteel aspirations, it was here in the side room that they retreated...
to family and food. In the side room the Maynards felt free to lay out their mismatched dishes and fill their plates with foods that they raised or caught themselves, or received through family or friends, or with foods, such as pork, that we shall see had deep roots within the black experience. Eating these meals not only satisfied family members’ hunger but satisfied their need to belong—if not to a rejecting white-dominated American society—then certainly to broader traditions within the African American community. As Donna Gabaccia notes, “Humans cling tenaciously to familiar foods because they become associated with nearly every dimension of human social and cultural life . . . Food thus entwines intimately with much that makes a culture unique, binding taste and satiety to group loyalties” (Gabaccia 1998:8).

**Food and Community**

Food Communicates Culture (Camp 1989:23).

When the Maynard and Burgess families sat around the table and filled their plates with cuts of pork, pan-fried fish, or an occasional roasted chicken, they were eating foods enjoyed by many blacks both in Annapolis and across the Chesapeake. From an anthropological perspective, these food choices can be understood as part of reinforcing group identity. As Mary Douglas noted, “Ethnic food is a cultural category, not a material thing. It can persist over fundamental material changes so long as the feeling of ethnic distinctness is valued. Food is a field of action. It is a medium in which other levels of categorization become manifest. . . . Food choices support political alignments and social opportunities” (Douglas 1984:30). In participating in this regional African American foodway that centered on pork consumption and informal exchange networks, the Maynards and Burgesses were simultaneously asserting distinctive traditions and experiences as well as attempting to navigate a racist society that persistently sought to deny them the most basic of rights.

However, let us note that African Americans living in the second half of the nineteenth century may well have had difficulty articulating why they chose to eat the foods that they did. They would not have been talking about how their food choices were communicating culture or group identities or collective histories. Indeed, eating is such a taken-for-granted act that it often slips into the realm of the unconscious. Asking a person
why they eat what they eat is a pernicious question. While answers will commonly revolve around “it tastes good” or “it’s good for you” or “it’s cheap,” they rarely reveal the long-standing traditions, subtle symbolisms, or social implications of what a person consumes. Yet everyday meals are illustrative of broader social patterns, both reflecting and reinforcing the value and belief systems of particular groups. As Mary Douglas argues, food is an extremely effective transmitter of social symbolism (1982b:117), with family meals unconsciously structured to reflect both the ordering within the household as well as society as a whole (1982a).

This taken for granted-ness of food choices also can make the broader cultural meanings difficult to reconstruct. The problem is compounded when looking at oppressed groups that were largely silenced within the official historical record. Given this problem, I have had to rely on just a handful of clues within the oral, written, and material record of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to tease out what certain foods might have meant for families like the Maynards and Burgesses. My search for food-related commentary or imagery produced by African Americans during this period led me to survey old cookbooks, listen to the blues, ask my wife about quilting, and read through quite a number of oral interviews conducted from the 1930s onward. In the end, it is the persistence of references to certain foods across such a wide range of cultural forms that is striking and significant for understanding what the meals the Maynards and Burgesses ate in the “side room” might have meant, both to them, and to other African Americans living in the Chesapeake.

In the Post-Emancipation Kitchen

Maria Maynard knew firsthand what it was like to receive a ration of food. Owned by a local white women, her earliest food memories would have been defined in large part by her servitude. While Chesapeake slave diets varied by circumstance, both the archaeological and documentary record point to pork and fish as a frequent part of what slaves were eating (Covey and Eisnach 2009). With Emancipation, Maria and thousands of other blacks across the region could more fully define their own foodways. We know from the earliest archaeological remains at the Duke of Gloucester house that nearly three decades after she was freed, Maria continued to eat both fish and pork. We also know from surveying other archaeological works that pork, in particular, was generally consumed by African
Americans across the region. Indeed, pork found its way into a myriad of recipes that were orally transmitted between black family members and friends. Some of these can be found in the WPA’s Slave Narratives that were collected in the 1930s, and others can be found in a handful of cookbooks produced by African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century (Longone 2001).

While we cannot know for sure all of the ways the Maynards and Burgeses were preparing their pork, the range of recipes within the cookbooks and oral traditions tell us that pork was sometimes used as a flavoring for beans or stews, other times spiced up for barbecue, and sometimes cooked up in a pan and smothered with gravy. The faunal remains identified numerous cuts such as pork chops, hams, ham hocks, as well as pig’s feet. In short, African Americans co-opted an animal that once provided slaves their daily rations, into a vibrant regional foodway.

“Hambone Blues”: Singing about the Pig

While trying out new ways to prepare a favorite food is an obvious way to attach significance to it, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African Americans were referencing pigs and pork in other forms of self-expression. Early folk songs, poems, and blues lyrics, for instance, highlight the symbolic weight of pork among many African Americans. These songs and poems were initially collected by Thomas Washington Talley in the 1920s. Talley was a chemistry professor at Fisk University and an avid singer and musician. Born in 1868 in Tennessee to former slaves, Talley taught and served as an administrator at several historically black colleges in Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama before arriving at Fisk University. At the end of World War I, Talley began to collect traditional songs from the Tennessee countryside and beyond. The resulting volume, Negro Folk Rhymes (Wise and Otherwise), contains 349 secular folksongs and an essay by Talley on some of their African influences (Brewer 1953).

Another source for early blues lyrics is Michael Taft’s more recent anthology of over two thousand commercially recorded songs sung by over 350 African American singers between 1920 and 1942 (Taft 2005). It is an extensive collection that includes a variety of blues genres, written by African American men and women who lived in many parts of the United States. I also referred to The Blues Line (2004) by Eric Sackheim, which transcribes another three hundred songs from 78-rpm recordings.
I n using these collections of folk poems and song lyrics, I have kept in mind the words of bluesman Rubin Lacy, who noted that “the blues is not sung for the tune. It’s sung for the words mostly. A real blues singer sings a blues for the words” (Taft 2005:xi). In looking at these “words” in both the poems and the lyrics, it is clear that pork and the pig were a common theme. A simple survey of titles reveals songs such as “Pig Meat Blues,” “Pig Meat Mama,” (Taft 1983:77, 98), “Devilish Pigs,” “Die in the Pig-Pen Fighting,” “Pig Tail,” “My Little Pig,” “What Will We Do for Bacon?” (Talley 1922:25, 39, 153, 157, 185) “Pigmeat,” and “Hambone Blues” (Sackheim 2004:113, 294). A survey of meat references in blues lyrics and folk rhymes, meanwhile, finds pork mentioned much more frequently than any other type of meat (table 7.1). Beyond word counts, the pig and its various parts also serve in many of these poems and lyrics as metaphors. A “blind pig,” for instance, was used to refer to a speakeasy, while “hogmeat” referred to an older woman (Calt 2009:24, 125). In “Hambone Blues,” meanwhile, the singer surely is equating his penis with a “hambone”:

Jellyroll jellyroll: jellyroll is so hard to find
Ain’t a baker in town: can bake a sweet jellyroll like mine

I got to go to Cincinnati: just to have my hambone boiled
Womens in Alabama: going to let my hambone spoil

Well she’s mine and she’s yours: and she’s somebody else’s too
Don’t you mention about rolling: because she’ll play her trick on you

That’s the way that’s the way: these barefooted soul’ll do
They will get your money: and they’ll have a man on you.

**Ed Bell ca. 1927 in Sackheim 2004:294**

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**Table 7.1. Meat references in blues lyrics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meat Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pork</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fowl</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild game</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seafood/fish</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous (tongue, lard, hot dog, tripe, liver, sausage, neckbone)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unid. meat</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Taft 1983.*
Indeed, singers not only sang about their “hambones,” but several took stage names that self-identified with the pig. There was Barbecue Bob (1902–1931), Smokey Hogg (1914–1960), Hambone Willie Newbern (1899–1947), and the vaudeville entertainer, Dewey “Pigmeat” Markham (1904–1981), to name just a few.

There is at least one song that portrays pork in an unmistakably religious light. “I Heard the Voice of a Porkchop,” was recorded by both Jim Jackson and Bogus Ben Covington in 1928. It is unclear whether the singers learned it from one another or if it was some sort of religious parody drawn from the minstrel stage, but once again pork is linked to African American experiences and belief systems that went well beyond the table.

I walked and I walked and I walked and I walked
I stopped to rest my feet
I sat down under an old oak tree and there went fast asleep
I dreamt about sitting in a swim cafe hungry as a bear
My stomach sent a telegram to my throat:
There’s a wreck on the road somewhere
I heard the voice of a porkchop say: Come on to me and rest
Well you talk about your stewing me: I ain’t know what the best
You talk about your chicken, ham, and eggs and turkey stuffed in
dress
But I heard the voice of a pork chop say come on to me and rest.
(Uncensored History of the Blues 2007)

“The Independent Hog”: African American Quilts

Quilts are an important form of African American expression that have survived from the mid- to late nineteenth century and, unexpectedly, point to how closely black individuals might have associated themselves with the pig. In turning to quilts, there is widespread disagreement between fabric historians and other scholars as to the number of early quilts that can be firmly attributable to the sewing efforts of African American women. Even the most generous attributions point to less than two-dozen surviving quilts. Moreover, there is an ongoing debate as to what these quilts might have meant to the women who made them and what they reveal (if anything) of cultural retentions that pre-date slavery and point to African influences (Vlach 1990:43–67). Two surviving nineteenth-century