

ESSAY

The Profound Significance of ‘High on the Hog’

A new limited series on Netflix is a nuanced celebration of African Americans and their food. It is also sorely overdue.

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The nature of being Black American is to always be reintroducing yourself to your history. I suppose that’s true of many cultures, if you’re willing to stipulate that the past isn’t static, that what we unearth over time reveals new truths about ourselves. But this constant looking backward to inform and expand how we see ourselves in the present feels particularly African American.

This is because, as in many historical tales, the full truth has never been the dominant narrative, and has at times been ruthlessly obscured. Such biases and blind spots are especially apparent in food-travelogue television, where only in recent years, and mostly because of the expanded offerings on streaming platforms, has the format begun to embrace the notion that you don’t have to be white and male to host a food show.

The new Netflix limited series “High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America,” which starts streaming on May 26, is an incredible reframing of history that reintroduces the United States to viewers through the lens of Black people’s food — which is to say, American food. The canon of recipes and foodways emerging from Southern culture, shaped by centuries of agricultural and culinary labor by African people and their descendants, is the foundation of American cooking.

Read Kim Severson for more on how the Netflix series “High on the Hog” was made.

The four-episode show was made by an intentionally Black creative team — itself a rarity in television. Fabienne Toback and Karis Jagger are executive producers. Roger Ross Williams is the primary director of the series, with Yoruba Richen and Jonathan Clasberry. It’s based on the 2011 book by the historian and prolific cookbook author Jessica B. Harris, “High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America,” and hosted by Stephen Satterfield, a food writer, former sommelier and trained chef who is also the founder of Whetstone Media.

At the center of the series is the holistic experience of Black foodways, told for us, by us: our unique and complex migration, diverse customs, creativity and expertise on full display. Blending a cross section of stories that address land and ownership, preservation and innovation, from fine dining to the outdoor pit, “High on the Hog” is an energetic, emotional and deeply nuanced celebration of Black people and their food. It is also sorely overdue.



Mr. Satterfield visiting Ganvié, a village on stilts on Lake Nokoue in southern Benin. Netflix

To understand Black food in the United States, you first must look to where Black people in the Americas descended from: West and Central Africa. Appropriately, the series begins in Benin.

“It was strange to come home to a place I’d never been,” Mr. Satterfield says in the first episode, “Our Roots.” His sentiment echoes the experiences of many Black Americans who have traversed the Atlantic in search of connection and insight on the African continent, putting back ancestral pieces that were displaced centuries ago.

Mr. Satterfield’s role is twofold: He is the viewer’s guide, responsible for asking questions we don’t yet know we have. He is also an urgent seeker, with something at stake in the journey — a level of palpable, emotional vibration that most network executives overlook in an industrywide tendency to get in the way of Black people telling their own stories.

His exploration becomes ours, too — stopping in places like Charleston, S.C., Charlottesville, Va., New York and Houston, meeting the chefs, writers, historians and farmers who hold these food traditions today. But this is also his story, and one he felt great responsibility to share.

“The cameras were there, it’s a Netflix production, but it was not possible for me to forget the awareness of what I was tasked with,” he said. “There were moments where the scenes were so intense and so visceral.”

An Atlanta native shaped by Black Southern culture, Mr. Satterfield is not the “safe” famous casting choice (though I suspect that between his natural appeal on camera and tangible expertise, his life will soon change). But he is absolutely the correct person for this job of conveying the broad story of Black American food to audiences of all backgrounds. He conveys warmth, a gentle sensibility and empathetic curiosity that invites viewers to experience that visceral energy with him.

Yet even he was humbled by the richness and diversity of Black identity that had not been made visible to him before, as when he encounters the Northeastern Trailriders, a group of East Texans carrying forth the long tradition of America’s first cowboys. Yes, many of the earliest cowboys in the United States were Black.

Enslaved Black men were among the first cowboys in the United States, whose expertise herding cattle helped form the basis of the modern cattle ranching industry and rodeo culture. Here, Black cowboys prepare to race at a state fair in Bonham, Texas, circa 1913. Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

“Admittedly my Afro American experience has been heavily filtered through the Southeast lens, and what the experience of being descended from plantation laborers and a plantation-based economy can mean,” Mr. Satterfield said. “But the cowboys — that was the moment when I realized, we really touched everything. There’s not one part of what we consider to be the culture, custom or identity of the U.S. that was made possible without Black people.”

Of course, this is what Dr. Harris, who appears in the first episode, has been saying in her three-decade career and more than a dozen books as a scholar of African American foodways. “We are living in general, as African Americans, at a point in time when the historic narratives are in question and in change,” she said. “People are looking at our narratives, vis-à-vis Asian-Americans, Native Americans. We’re all finding it ain’t necessarily the way it’s been told.”

Food can be a revelatory space to explore these narratives. The show reveals how the ubiquity of okra in Benin and neighboring countries connects to so many Creole dishes that are found throughout and beyond the American South — where okra goes, so go Black people. The rice culture and expertise of the Africans who cultivated the grain on their home shores gave Charleston its economic backbone, at the levels we associate with oil wealth today.

The enslaved chefs Hercules Posey and James Hemings, who fed our founding statesmen George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, respectively, are owed great acknowledgment for the legacy of fine dining they helped establish, as are the Black service professionals who birthed catering. Elegant, elevated dining in America, long posited as the domain of white Europeans, has been following the path blazed by Black people.

“High on the Hog” comes at a pivotal moment in African American history. We are losing the last generation of Black folks, now in or around their 90s, who can remember the voices of grandparents who may have been enslaved as children. The proximity of this history is stunning.

The enormous impact of this transition on the food world was illustrated by the deaths of the pre-eminent chefs Leah Chase and Martha Lou Gadsden in recent years. As the chef-owner of the New Orleans restaurant Dooky Chase’s, Mrs. Chase was not only a steward of classic dishes like gumbo, central to Black culture in the region, but also a civil rights pioneer. For nearly four decades, Mrs. Gadsden prepared traditional Gullah Geechee dishes at Martha Lou’s Kitchen, her restaurant in Charleston, setting the bar for Lowcountry cooking. Their passing suggests an energy shift in the story of Black America.

Martha Lou Gadsden, who died in April, opened her restaurant, Martha Lou's Kitchen, in Charleston, S.C., in 1983. Hunter McRae for The New York Times

We're burying many of our griots. The ones whose expertise developed from watching and observing, rather than from reading cookbook recipes or watching YouTube videos. The ones whose regional patois still so closely mimics language and dialect rhythms from the communities that emerged throughout slavery.

This moment of transition feels like a profound passing of the torch. For in these elders' place arise the new stewards of these stories — folks who are featured in the series, like the historians Michael W. Twitty and Adrian Miller, the baker and cookbook photographer Jerrelle Guy (a contributor to New York Times Cooking), the chef Omar Tate and the preservationist Gabrielle E.W. Carter. Their various approaches urgently document, capture and set in context a history we're still uncovering and inserting into the present, even while its older bearers are falling away.

"History, in many ways, it's fluid," Dr. Harris said. She described watching her scholarship evolve into a vibrant, fast-moving Netflix show as "daunting, amazing," but that it was necessary to keep these stories alive and help them evolve.

She has seen an incredible shift in the attention, respect, care and, of course, monetization of Black food culture. A recipient of the James Beard Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2020, she was also inducted into the organization's Cookbook Hall of Fame in 2019. In her acceptance speech for the hall of fame honor, she noted that over the 30 years of her career, this was the organization's first acknowledgment of her work.

Personally, I am grateful for the opportunity and milestone that is the release of "High on the Hog," the series. It hits the eye, mind and soul differently than any other food television program, because it simply does what so few have been willing to do: give Black people space to explore and express our own joy.

Black joy has always been politicized in the United States, because Blackness was codified to justify social oppression and extreme, race-based wealth. Our rest, happiness and desire for leisure are interrogated and policed across all aspects of American culture. As the imprint of our overwhelming past remains in every aspect of our society today — as with the uprisings we’ve observed in response to the killings of Black people by police — claiming joy at every step is not just our right. It is our salvation.

I’m moved by a show that features a dark-skinned Black man speaking to his community the way he does in his real life. I’m moved by a show that honors the legacy of those who celebrated the wide range of regional practices and specialties that comprise Black food culture, and did so before it was trendy to be interested in Black folks’ food. I’m thankful that the structural white gaze in the entertainment industry didn’t disrupt the vision of this project, which is soulfully linked to Black people, but is expansive enough to invite all viewers to take part.

But “High on the Hog” is ultimately a show about unbridled joy.

“I want people to perceive it as celebratory,” Mr. Satterfield said. “Oftentimes when our shows get made, when our stories get told, when our food gets talked about, it’s the ‘hardship’ story. I don’t even mean celebrating resilience. I mean look at all these beautiful Black people moving uninhibited, unencumbered, in a centuries-long tradition of how we convene, shape culture, celebrate, make a living. This has always been part of our tradition as a diasporic people descending from the continent of Africa.”

Dr. Harris agrees: “Our joy is enduring. It is bedrock. It is part and parcel of what has allowed us to in many ways, to survive the unspeakable. That ability, that fortitude, that kernel of a thing deep down inside is — not to be simplistic about it — but it is a real part of who we are. It has kept folks keeping on. It is that thing that most defines us.”

Osayi Endolyn is a James Beard award-winning writer whose work reflects on food, identity and culture. She is currently writing a book about the foundation of systemic racism in American restaurant and dining culture.

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