

The Zest Podcast - S6E17

Transcription

[00:00:00] **Dr. Fred Opie:** When the students are at their meals in the cafeteria, they're looking at their plate and they're talking to their friends and saying, you know where that came from? You know, like that ingredient. It's a fascinating thing once you begin to learn these ingredients in these plants, and where they come from.

[00:00:16] **Dalia Colón:** I'm Dalia Colón, and this is The Zest. Citrus, Seafood, Spanish Flavor, and Southern Charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. Watermelon. Barbecued Beef. Rice and Beans. And to wash it all down, Coca-Cola. Today we are exploring the African roots of these and other southern staples.

[00:00:48] Here at the Zest, we always love digging into food history, so we're excited to welcome back friend of the pod, Dr. Frederick Douglass Opie. He's an author and professor of History and Food Ways at Babson College outside of Boston. Among the courses he teaches is African History and Food Ways, and today he's here to give us the cliff notes version of that course.

[00:01:12] I always learned something from Dr. Opie and he tells the best stories. In our conversation, he'll explain the African roots of some foods we commonly eat here in Florida. He'll also describe how enslaved Africans brought their farming techniques and cooking methods to America, and how reconstruction era politics led to racist food stereotypes that persist today.

[00:01:40] **Dr. Fred Opie:** I've been really fascinated by the African component of what we know here in the Americas, and we often don't make that connection. You know, we talk about African American history, but we tend to focus more on the American than the African. Most of the colleagues that I have that do similar work, they do very little on Africa.

[00:02:01] There's almost like we have been intellectually persuaded, subconsciously, to that's not important. And the same way we even treat it in the media as though that, that whole misconception of the dark continent and there's nothing there, and life began after, you know, 1492 and, and Columbus and everybody in the Portuguese arrived.

[00:02:26] That is such a false narrative that has really made me delve into, uh, Africa, and particularly the period between, say the 1400s to like roughly 1650 when the Portuguese first arrived, because we just get the impression that even the first explorers when they left Europe, that they were all making a beeline for Asia or Marco Polo and stuff like that.

[00:02:54] That's just not true. , I just, I'm just learning this myself, but when you dig into the research, you're like, wow, there's a, there's a lot there in Africa in terms of food history.

[00:03:06] **Dalia Colón:** There's a lot there in Africa, period. And it always bothers me when people equate Africa to a country. They'll say, uh, my band's going on tour and we're going to London, Paris, and Africa.

[00:03:18] Like, Africa's not a city, it's not a country, it's a continent. So what specific areas did you find the most interest?

[00:03:27] **Dr. Fred Opie:** Because the continent is so large, first of all, I've chosen to focus on the areas where most African Americans can trace their roots, and that's Central and West Africa. You have to start focusing on things like staples, what were main staples in certain places.

[00:03:44] So we know in Africa there's a region that a STO was called the Yam Belt because the people that were there, that was such an important staple. Many of us probably read a, read the book, Things Fall Apart, by, uh, Achebe. And that whole book is really a window in to the importance of Yam, not just as a staple, but as a sign of status, as a way of elevating one's, um, life, as a way of meeting the needs of one's family.

[00:04:18] Like everything evolved around the Yam and how it was used. It's used in ceremonies. For example, we know in places like Gata. The Econ people, even to this day, still have this ceremony that's around the Yam harvest and like everything shuts down. It's, it's the, it would be the equivalent of how we treat New Year's Day or Thanksgiving.

[00:04:40] Everything shuts down and everybody goes to one central place and they pay homage to the importance of yams. Now, this is where we talk about connections. You can find the same thing, and I found the same thing among the writings of Zora Neale Hurston when she spent time in Haiti doing research. And she uncovers some of the same things in terms of Yam feast in Haiti.

[00:05:06] And you know, as you know, there are so many Haitian Americans that live in Florida. So it makes you wonder some of the celebrations that we have, that we continue where they come. That's one of 'em. The other one is rice. I mean, rice is so important. Most Americans, I think I would even send most people from the Iberian Peninsula because we, we have so many people in Florida who have Hispanic roots and we know Hispanic roots come from Iberian roots that, you know, and the national dish of of Spain is paella.

[00:05:37] Alright, so that's true. And we talk about Spanish rice, but most people don't realize the rice that they're exposed to going back for centuries is rice that comes from Africa. There's two species of original rices, one from Africa and one from Asia. And the one that's had the greatest influence on the Americas is not the Asian one.

[00:06:00] Historically, it's the African one. So there's another part of West Africa that's known as the rice belt because it was so important to the societies there and, and to the point where this is where you talk about you, you dig and you dig, you start looking at the advertisements in places like Charleston.

[00:06:21] For the sale of slaves. Alright. The advertisements say right in it, this is a slave from the rice belt, right? So Charleston becomes the center of rice production in the America. And it's so valuable that the change, the name of rice becomes Carolina gold. But it's the same thing in Georgia, right? And Florida bumped straight up against Georgia , you know. So you got all these influence, but even the slave traders knew how important it was when it came time to sell human cargo, that if they could connect the cargo from these rice regions, they were selling somebody with an intellectual property, producing rice and selling rice, that was valuable to who was gonna buy them. So like rice is super important and certainly that's the case with knowing people of African descent, you know, Georgia all the way into the, the frontier between Georgia and Florida.

[00:07:15] But the number of Hispanic people who come into, uh, Latin America and settle there, and the importance of rice in every aspect of that. I mean, you, you, I don't, I don't really know of a culture and or society in, uh, African American society or Latin American society that doesn't have a quintessential rice and beans dish.

[00:07:38] They all have them. And that quintessential rice and beans dish, if you look at it, it has African roots.

[00:07:45] **Dalia Colón:** Are there any other dishes that we think have origins other than what they really do? When you talk to your students, what blows their mind?

[00:07:56] **Dr. Fred Opie:** Well, you know, we start the course with the common misconceptions about Africa. One of the common misconceptions, as you mentioned, is that that Africa's a country, you know. And then when they learn they're like 1500, not dialects, languages, in Africa that we know of, then the whole misconception that Africa is a place where there's poverty and bloated children with bloated bellies because we've seen all these fundraising TV commercials about Africa.

[00:08:28] Well, that may be true, but also Africa is a place that has been the bread basket of the world, and we mentioned rice coming outta Africa. Say, here's another one that kind of blows my students mind. Watermelon originates in Africa. You know, like, like most people don't even know that. The watermelon itself originates in Africa.

[00:08:50] And it makes sense, you know, that this product, you know, that this plant becomes so important because it's full of water and it hydrates you and it's just so good for you. But there are a number of different ways that Africans have used it. It's not just, you know, slice it and eat it. There's all kinds of ways you used it.

[00:09:05] The other one that kind of blows your mind is the kola nut. Okay. So the kola nut is an ingredient. It's one, and the thing is there's so there, there's so many influences in Africa through through trade. So there's cross continental trade, which brings Islam into Africa and where Islam is in Africa, Africans make wine.

[00:09:25] They make beer and you know, Islam, that's off limits. But the thing in terms of a stimulant that was allowed in Islam was kola. And the kola nut is a very precious ingredient. A plant that when somebody visits your home, this is one of the things that you would serve them as a way of telling that person you value them.

[00:09:45] It's something that's used at wedding. It's a stimulant. It's a natural stimulant, and it's one of the key ingredients from the very beginning In Coca-Cola, this is one of the key ingredients. The other key ingredient that you'll see the kola nut in is Celestial Tea. You'll see it in Snapple. You know that like there's these things that we don't even think about it.

[00:10:08] Now here, I'll give you another one that I'm sure listeners ago, it makes sense, but nobody thought about it. All right. Palm olive dish detergent. It's made from palm oil. Palm oil comes from Africa. The next time you open up some kind of candy bar, cookie or something like that, look at the ingredients. As my mother would say, I bet you a fat man it's got palm oil in it. And that palm oil originates from a tree in Africa. I mean, these are, these are the kind of things they're, they're essentially ingredients that have become part of our food system. It's a fascinating thing once you begin to learn these ingredients in these plants and where they come from.

[00:10:49] **Dalia Colón:** My brain is still trying to, to catch up with everything you just said and these are all sort of staples on the table in the south, not just in Florida, but I think of, you know, food that's cooked in palm oil. We gotta go back to the watermelon for a second. Because we're two African Americans having this conversation.

[00:11:08] Watermelon is huge here in Florida, like springtime, there are pickup trucks on the side of the road full of watermelon. It's just in abundance and it's the most wonderful time of the year. Right? But I also feel like when I celebrate watermelon, I'm perpetuating some stereotype. So can you talk more about sort of the cultural, uh, what's the right word?

[00:11:32] Baggage.

[00:11:33] **Dr. Fred Opie:** All right. So let me put a plug first in for, uh, my colleague, Psyche Williamson-Forson. She just published a book Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America. She's a professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland. Every ethnic group has a food that has been used to shame them, everyone.

[00:11:57] And there's something that their parents say, don't eat that in public because it's become associated with shaming them. Now, the watermelon, let's talk about that. It originates from Africa. It becomes a part of the south during the Antebellum period. Particularly in places like Florida where so many Africans report here, uh, and enslaved because of the sugar production industry out there.

[00:12:20] That was a labor intensive thing. It's one of the reasons why it's there also because it's so hot, and it's one of those things, as I mentioned earlier, it's a fruit that hydrates your body keeps from getting dehydrated. Now, here's where the baggage comes in. In 1865 is the end of the Civil War. At the beginning of the reconstruction period, reconstruction goes from 1865 to 1877.

[00:12:42] It is the period in American history where there are more African Americans that served in public office in the state of Florida. Both at the local level and then elected to the US House of Representatives in the Senate than any other period in history. There are probably more African Americans who are elected as local officials, as judges, as sheriffs, than any other period in American history, and it is during that period in which this shaming began.

[00:13:12] Were those who were watching this happen and were not happy about the loss of their power as a white minority began to come up with all kinds of way to undermine the authority of those elected officials saying that they're slowful, that they're lazy, that they, they'll do anything to, to satisfy their craving, their sexual cravings.

[00:13:35] And typically these stereotypes get into, you know, the whole idea of the black rapist, but also their, their, you know, their stomach cravings, whole watermelon, fried chicken and other things as though African Americans ate those more than anybody else. No, they didn't. It just became one of the many ways to undermine the credibility of black elected officials during reconstruction.

[00:13:56] That's where that comes from.

[00:13:58] **Dalia Colón:** That is just so crazy how it stuck. Okay. This is fascinating. I don't know if your research gets into this, but you've talked about some of the foods, but what about the cooking methods? Are there particular methods we use here that came from Africa?

[00:14:13] **Dr. Fred Opie:** All right, so I'll, There's a couple.

[00:14:15] It's a great question. There's a couple. First when it comes to my mind is the one pot meals that you'll see people make, and I think the quintessential one in terms of African American culture would be Hop and John, you know, that we eat most, and I'm sure in Florida the same way in New York, people back in the descent will have blackeye peas and rice on New Year's Day.

[00:14:37] That is a one pot meal that evolves out of Africa. And you know, sometimes people think these one pot meals are things that, that people became a part of their, the black culinary experience because of slavery and the lack of access. No, people were doing those warm pot meals in Africa, I think in. Cooking and seasoning your food, where meat is not the main ingredient, it's an ingredient for seasoning.

[00:15:03] So we, you know, we know a lot of African Americans will cook meals like collard greens and kale, and they'll have fat back, you know, which is salted pork in there. And the thing about it, now, I, I say that, but one of the things I know is that, that's not just an African American way of cooking your food, that became part of the southern way of cooking your food.

[00:15:26] We do know, for example, that the large consumption of greens and kale, that is African. Europeans did not come to the Americas with that concept. If they did, they were very poor. Most Europeans had very little vegetables in a diet. It was the African that came and they were used to cooking with a lot of greens.

[00:15:47] That's why you see kinda greens in every meal that you see African Americans cook. Now, I think barbecue. Most scholars will tell you that barbecue is a combination of the intellectual property of Native Americans and African Americans, and what they learn one from another, whether it's the whole pit barbecue.

[00:16:07] A lot of that people, they contribute that part to Native American customs. But the cooking on a rack, some people say Native Americans, but we see examples of African Americans cooking on a pit and turning, you know, kind of a spit on a, on a pit. You see that at Africa. I can show you images of Europeans who observe Africans cooking that way.

[00:16:29] So that whole concept. The other thing too, is keep in mind that Africans, if you came from a region, where the Fulani people came. These were cattle raising people, the urban cattle raising people. So these are people who came from cultures and societies where that was a part, eating beef was a part of their, of that experience.

[00:16:50] The introduction of hogs. That comes much later really, and probably something that's adapted once Africans come to the Americas. More so it's beef that you will see the consumption of in Africa back when, and also even today.

[00:17:06] **Dalia Colón:** Why don't Africans and then later African Americans and even free blacks get credit for these recipes and these cooking methods?

[00:17:17] **Dr. Fred Opie:** Because they don't have access to the courts.

[00:17:20] They don't have access to paying for those patents. Uh, many of the patents on cooking, whether it be cooking tools, whether it be cooking styles,

whether it be recipe. Unfortunately, it's the case of people stealing the intellectual property of people or poor people. And so a lot of the things, what we see even in Southern cooking where people say, This is the first cookbook about by somebody. There's a woman in Atlanta that's often attributed to the First Southern Cookbook, and it's pretty clear that these were the recipes of the domestic servant who cooked for her.

[00:17:58] Because this woman didn't do cooking for herself anyhow. It was all domestic servants doing the cooking. So these things happen and it's unfortunate. And they're, they're, they're one of the things that gets you angry because people act like, you know, they created, you didn't create anything. You, you took the recipes, you wrote 'em down, and you published. You had access to be a literate.

[00:18:18] You had access to publishing presses and you had access to people in the publishing business. That's how it happened.

[00:18:24] **Dalia Colón:** Because prior to that, maybe a lot of the black cooks were passing these recipes and techniques.

[00:18:29] **Dr. Fred Opie:** Oral histories, oral traditions. That's how most recipes were passed on. You know, most of the knowledge from one generation to another in Africa was done by oral histories more so than any other way.

[00:18:41] And I think that that continued the ideal of having a recipe was a very European way of thinking that Africans eventually took on, but that just wasn't how we passed on recipe.

[00:18:53] **Dalia Colón:** A lot of white people and other people are probably listening right now going, Well, I like fried chicken and watermelon and palm oil, and Coca-Cola, and all these things. So how do you make a distinction between soul food and southern food?

[00:19:06] **Dr. Fred Opie:** You know, most people say that when it comes to the seasoning, typically African Americans have a much heavier hand on spices, on hot things, and, and again, that comes from our African back. Research will show you that anytime somebody comes from a hot climate, whether it be in Asia, whether it be in Africa. Anywhere you have these hot climates, even when you're just go over the border into Mexico, or if you come from Cuba, And the reason why we tend to have a heavier hand on the hot sauce and the seasoning is because it produces gastrointestinal sweating.

[00:19:43] It's a way to actually cool your body. That's why we eat so many spicy foods. So you will tend to see that African Americans are heavier on the pepper and the spices. They also tend to use more of the herbs, the spices that come from the garden in addition to to garlic and, and the onions. I just think that because it goes back to our ancestors or where we were or we had access to.

[00:20:08] The other thing too that, uh, I really find fascinating, a lot of people don't realize. If you look at the African slave trade, the very early days, Africans were trading with one another intercontinental African slave, which is very different type of slavery than we're talking about that happened between Africa and the rest of the world.

[00:20:29] But the slavery that happened within Africa, often people were trading people for salt. Salt was a, was a commodity, highly valued to the point where when you gave your, your wife, your daughter away to marriage, the dowery might be.

[00:20:51] **Dalia Colón:** This is why food is so fascinating because there's so much more wrapped up in it.

[00:20:55] I could talk to you all day. Maybe I can sign up to be a TA for your next, uh, semester, cuz that would be...

[00:21:00] **Dr. Fred Opie:** If you'll do my grading, I'll have you.

[00:21:02] **Dalia Colón:** Uh, , I'll put my 10 year old on that. But as we wrap up, is there anything else that you wanna share?

[00:21:11] **Dr. Fred Opie:** No, here's another one. I, we should just close on this one. I don't do traditional papers anymore in my class. I do podcasting. So I teach them how to podcast from the, from the ground up, and they have, most of 'em have no experience, so I have to teach 'em how to write a script, how to get good, sound quality, all that kind of stuff. And one of the episodes I assigned to them, is to do an episode about the role of alcohol in African societies.

[00:21:37] I mean alcohol production from palm wine, from date wine, from what was another one, from the millet grain. Africans are making wine from all that. Then their Africans are making beer. They're making beer from millet that they can beer from sorghum, and probably people in Florida know about syrup made from sorghum.

[00:21:56] Sorghum is an African plant. So watching them get into this information and learn not only how Africans are making wine, but the gender relations. So here's interesting and, and African cultures that we look at from, you know, the people of Sunguy, Oyo, the the Ibu, I mean all these different groups, all these people.

[00:22:19] Typically if it's wine, it's the men who go out and climb the wine trees. Tap the wine trees to collect the liquid. They bring it back to the village and then they hand it over to the woman. It's the woman who is fermenting and making the wine. But then when it come to consumption, it becomes a man's world.

[00:22:41] Interesting how that happens. Same thing with beer. So when you're talking about beer making, Africans making beer from all different types of African plants, the women make the actual beer. And the men drink it. That's what I have seen in most of these sources, and I think it's very similar. People should, should hear this, that in colonial America, people did not deal with their thirst by the consumption of water.

[00:23:08] It was too dangerous to drink water in most of Colonial America. Most people, Colonial America consumed rum or beer or something like that. It was very diluted. So we're not talking about the same kind of alcohol content that maybe we would think about if you went to 7/Eleven. But everybody consumed alcohol cuz it was cheaper, it was safer.

[00:23:30] It's the same thing in Africa. People consumed wine, people consumed beer. Because it was cheaper, less expensive. And probably the last one I wanna mention is the tamarin tree. Because you have so many African, Caribbean and Latin American cultures in Florida, the Tamarin tree, for those who may not be familiar with it, it typically makes a drink that looks almost red in color and then you mix it and it has like a kind of like a lemon taste to it. If you're in Latin America, if you're coming from Cuba, you're gonna see all kinds of drinks made that way. That tree is from Africa. Most people don't know it.

[00:24:11] **Dalia Colón:** Fascinating. And I didn't realize that your students, uh, made podcast episodes instead of writing papers.

[00:24:17] So I will take you up on that deal. What a fun class. What a fun professor. Well, thank you for sharing your research with us. It's just mind blowing. And when I take that bottle of hot sauce outta my purse and bite it to a slice of watermelon, I'll be honoring my ancestors. So I appreciate that.

[00:24:36] **Dr. Fred Opie:** It's cultural.

[00:24:37] **Dalia Colón:** It all makes sense now. Well, thanks for breaking it down. It's always good to talk to you.

[00:24:43] Dr. Frederick Douglass Opie is a professor of History and Food Ways at Babson College in Massachusetts. You can find a link to Dr. Opie's website on our website, thezestpodcast.com. I'm Dalia Colón. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas.

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