

The Zest Podcast - S7E5 Transcript

[00:00:00] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** Many times in the South we eat okra and tomatoes. Put some onion in. But the, uh, Africans also use the, uh, seeds of the okra plant. They would use that, uh, brown those and use it as a coffee substitute.

[00:00:16] **Dalia Colón:** I'm Dalia Colon and this is The Zest. Citrus, Seafood, Spanish Flavor, and Southern Charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State.

[00:00:26] Here on the pod, we love to explore the foodways of Floridians past and present, including the people who weren't always treated like people. Today we're learning about the food ways of the enslaved.

[00:00:45] This week we're diving deep into the food customs of enslaved workers who labored in the American South, including yes, Florida's plantations where they grew cotton, tobacco, sugar, and other cash crops. Many of their culinary traditions are alive and well today, although they rarely get the credit. I recently chatted about this with Martha Bireda.

[00:01:08] She's the executive director of Blanchard House Museum of African American History and Culture in Punta Gorda. The museum unfortunately suffered damage from Hurricane Ian and was closed for repairs at the time of our recording for updates visit blanchardhousemuseum.org. Dr. Bireda chatted about so many interesting things, including what enslaved Africans ate during the month's long voyage to the new world, known as the middle passage.

[00:01:36] She also explains how enslaved people supplemented their meager rations of cornmeal, molasses, fat back and salt pork. She dives into the origins of Hop and John, barbecue, gumbo, and other foods commonly eaten in the South, and she talks about the paradoxes of being a chef enslaved to presidents like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

[00:02:03] Dr. Bireda begins our conversation by giving some background on the Blanchard House Museum.

[00:02:12] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** We have a permanent exhibit, uh, which looks at the very first stages of African-Americans, uh, coming to Punta Goda. In fact, of the first 15 men, 7 were African-American, and I'm proud to say one of those men was my great uncle, Dan Smith, who was very important, uh, in

the development of Punta Goda. We moved from there to an exhibit that looks at our community, the values that we held.

[00:02:41] Our work life, something called "down the street," which was our business district. And this year we've had the Okoya exhibit up, and we always have a changing exhibit. So for the last couple of years, our exhibit has been on the African influence on American healthcare. So this time we are starting with Florida History 101.

[00:03:04] And one of the things that's very important for people to know is that African American history in Florida did not start with slavery. It started with conquistadors.

[00:03:14] **Dalia Colón:** I know that a lot of your research has centered around food. It's hard to talk about history and culture without talking about food, and, and there are some topics, uh, that we settled on today, but I know there's much more people can learn about at the museum.

[00:03:29] For people who don't know what the Middle Passage is, can you explain the Middle Passage and some of the foods that made their way to Florida via the Middle Passage?

[00:03:40] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** The Middle Passage was that three to six month voyage that the enslaved Africans took. Uh, there there are three parts of it. Uh, first of all, from the Europeans.

[00:03:53] They would take certain, um, materials to Africa. Then the, uh, enslaved people would be captured, brought to the new world. And then from there, um, materials and whatnot from the new world will be taken back to. . One of the things that the caps discovered was that more of the, um, enslaved people would survive if they did have food that they were accustomed to.

[00:04:19] So on the voges, uh, they would bring rice, uh, the cassava root, they would make, take that, make flour from it. The manioc flour. All kinds of cereal cow peas, which are black eye peas, pigeon peeds, yams, which are different than sweet potatoes, plantings, and greens and beans. So what they would do would take, uh, you know, just a whole bunch of that, add some palm oil to it, and twice a day.

[00:04:50] These were the meals that, those that were enslaved ate.

[00:04:54] **Dalia Colón:** We've covered a little bit of this with a previous guest, Dr. Frederick Douglas Opie, and it's interesting to hear you reiterate that, especially because rice dishes are so prevalent in the American South and especially in Florida, and that wouldn't be possible without the expertise of the enslaved people who knew how to cultivate them.

[00:05:15] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** One of the things, since you mentioned the rice, that rice was cultivated 1500 BC in Africa, and 43% of the people that were enslaved are brought to South Carolina, who knew how to produce rice came from that area, uh, Sierra Leone. So rice has been produced, uh, in Africa for centuries.

[00:05:40] **Dalia Colón:** Oh, wow. Let's talk about some of the foods that the enslaved people ate when they arrived in the Americas.

[00:05:48] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** First of all, we have to understand based upon your family size, based upon the type of work you did, you received rations. Now these rations are very slim. A peck of corn meal, some molasses, some fat back, some salt pork, uh, the unwanted parts of the pig, like the intestines of the jaw mall or the feet. So that's basically, that's what they started out with.

[00:06:19] Some masters did allow them to hunt and fish, which meant that they could of course, uh, supplement that the healers in the communities had to always encourage the enslaved families to have gardens. That was the only way that they were able to get any kind of nutrition. So they would, they planted their gardens, uh, many times with greens and other vegetables so that they can have an almost complete diet.

[00:06:50] But basically those four things that I mentioned, corn meal, molasses, fat back, and salt fork, that was what the enslaved were given to. Now corn meal, how many different ways do you think you can make corn meal and it can be creative? Well, I, I absolutely have to give it to the ancestors because those women knew how to take corn meal.

[00:07:18] They may, and I think a lot of us have heard of this, uh, whole cakes or ash cakes, where you put your corn meal and some hot water and then you put it on the hole or put it on the, uh, something near the fireplace and you could make ash cakes. That was something they ate. Also, uh, you could make dumplings out of that corn wheel.

[00:07:37] Sometimes you put those in water and put them in your greens, or if you're going to fry them, you could make Hush Puppies. Crackling bread, which I enjoyed as a child in Virginia. You would put pork crackling, you know, the crispy pieces of, of, of, uh, fat of the pork, and you make crackling bread. And then there was something called cush that was a sweet fried corn meal cake.

[00:08:03] So this corn meal, while it was just given to these women, they were able to do all kinds of great things with simply corn. Grits, of course, uh, that they came from the Indian corn, the harmony they ate that they made a ginger cake. And I think all of us have heard about the hopping John, the black eyed peas and, and rice, which is of course, uh, West African dish.

[00:08:28] Now, the primary meat that the enslaved ate in the, in their cabins was. Uh, rarely eaten, however, in, uh, many parts of Africa because of the Muslim influence. So what they would do, uh, they, you know, they just had the pork ends. You know what the master didn't want, they would smoke it or salt it and they would use it to season their beans and greens and through generations, that is what African-Americans have done.

[00:09:01] We've used, uh, many times we would have. Basically a meatless meal, but it would be seasoned with some type of pork neck bones, or if you had a hammock or whatever. So the most famous pork recipes that we hear about are the ham hawks, the smoked ham hawks. The women came up with pickled pigs feet.

[00:09:25] Barbecued ribs that came from the cabin, and of course intestines. Chitterlings or chitlins, whatever you call them, that came also.

[00:09:36] **Dalia Colón:** And say more about barbecue.

[00:09:38] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** Well, the way that the enslaved cooked, you know, from Africa, when they did roast meat, they would put it on an open spit, and then they would add sauce to it.

[00:09:48] And so that's what they did. Uh, here, they, that's where our barbecue came from, that roasting of meat and having a sauce that went along with it. Now, one of the things we may not have heard about is something called Juba. Okay? The cooks in the, the big house, what they would do would be to collect all of the leftovers.

[00:10:11] And so the cooks would put it all together and on a Saturday or Sunday, um, they could have that or they could take it out to the fields for the

farm hands, you know, the workers to eat. But Juba is that food that was leftover from the master.

[00:10:26] **Dalia Colón:** So, is Juba a specific dish like a, a stew, or is it just the concept of gathering all the leftovers?

[00:10:32] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** Just gathering all the leftovers.

[00:10:34] **Dalia Colón:** Juba, I, I eat Juba all the time and didn't know it.

[00:10:41] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** That's what it is. Gathering the leftovers.

[00:10:43] **Dalia Colón:** Wow. Okay. So the big house would be where? Master, quote unquote, lived. Is there anything else, uh, interesting about cooking in the big house?

[00:10:53] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** Yes. First of all, you know, that's how the African crops were introduced and the ways of cooking in Africa were introduced in the big house, like the, as I said before, the deep fat frying.

[00:11:05] That's what was introduced. Barb Chew. And it was really, uh, an honor, uh, that was a, a special, oh, it was a very d hard job, but to be able to, to cook in the big house, which meant, you know, you got little bit to taste some other food, that kind of thing. But some of the traditional foods, um, that were served, that were brought from Africa, and with having the African cooks, and it's the African word for it, is gumbo, okra.

[00:11:33] Okra was introduced. Now, when we think about gumbo, We think about putting some shrimp or chicken in with it, with the okra, uh, many times in the south we eat okra and tomatoes, put some onion in. But the, uh, Africans also use with the, uh, seeds of the okra plant, they would use that, uh, brown those and use it as a coffee sub.

[00:11:59] The staple diet for Africans were bush greens. Okay. So when those were brought here and then planted here, um, they would simmer them with some oil. Um, hot peppers were always used callaloo, which we find from the tarot plant in the West Indies. The greens were part of our diet. That was a, a very healthy part of the African.

[00:12:24] Now we did adapt to sweet potatoes and we even called them yams. However, sweet potatoes and yams are different. You know, yams can be white or yellow or different sizes. And in many of the, uh, African religions, uh, they

have some religious, uh, significance. But we did adapt to those. That was very much like what we'd eaten, you know, on the c.

[00:12:49] Black eyed Peas, which were first called cow peas. That was part of what we brought to the big house, all kinds of, uh, beans and peas. Since 9 0 1 AK Africans were cultivating these. Another very interesting one, or the Benny seeds are sesame seeds. And sesame seeds, you know, would be put in sauces and pudding.

[00:13:12] And Thomas Jefferson liked them so much that he would use them for his salad dressing rather than the olive oil. Something called Guinea squash. Uh, this is eggplant that was brought over and brought to the big. I think all of us have had a Kohler drink. Kohler nuts of course, came from, uh, the continent and they were used several ways.

[00:13:37] One of the things that they did on that three to six month voyage was sometimes they were used to suppress hunger and thirst. Also, the water would become very stagnated on those trips, and so they would add a little bit of this colon nut, you know, which has the caffeine. I think we usually don't hear this used often, but goober, have you heard the term goober nut?

[00:14:02] **Dalia Colón:** No. Is there a candy called goober or did I make that up?

[00:14:06] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** There might be, but a goober is our peanut. Those were that, those were goober nuts. Our Groundnuts, Washington and, uh, Thomas Jefferson called them Pinders. But we know you can do a lot with those peanuts. You can, if you're southern. You probably will enjoy some nice boiled peanuts with some hot pepper in them, or you can make peanut pie or peanut soup, and of course watermelon came from Africa. It started to be stigmatized, but it, uh, was one of the fruits, tamarin, and dates and figs. We ate all of those things there. All of those plants grew there. And again, as I said, the rice was something that the enslaved knew how to cultivate. The Europeans did not know how to do that.

[00:14:52] That's why it, it's very interesting when we think of the people who came, and some people consider them just to be laborers. They weren't just laborers. They were individuals who knew how to cultivate specific types of plants. So they should be getting credit for that. And especially in South Carolina with the rice.

[00:15:14] I mean, that was the economic boom for South Carolina, that Carolina Gold, that was very important. It, you know, that's where the wealth came from. And without those strategies, techniques for growing that, uh, that would not have happened. So when we think of. You think of the field hands, they're not just field hands.

[00:15:38] They are people who had knowledge, real knowledge of how to grow specific types of plants.

[00:16:07] **Dalia Colón:** You mentioned Thomas Jefferson. Can you talk more about the people who cooked for him? Because you know, if you've seen maybe the documentary High on the Hog or some of these other resources where, they tell how these people were educated in France. To perfect some of their techniques. So we talked about cooking in the big house, but I think the biggest house is the White House.

[00:16:30] What do we know about the chefs to the president?

[00:16:33] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** We know that the enslaved were who carried on the, the president of the White House kitchen, we know that if you were looking to buy an person, an enslaved person, that they were appraised at a higher value, but also there's not a lot that we talk about.

[00:16:54] It's kind of an untold untaught history. But we at the Blanchard House decided we'd pull it up. But let's start with George Washington. Um, there was, um, an older woman, her name was Old Go, and her daughter Lucy, worked with her and she trained the very spectacular cook Hercules. Hercules was the main. For the Philadelphia White House of George Washington.

[00:17:22] He lived as much as you can as an enslaved person. He lived a pretty privileged life. It is understood that he had this spectacular wardrobe, that he had a coat with a velvet collar, and he wore, you know, really fancy knee breeches, had silver buckles on his shoes, and he made a little money on the side because he would make about \$200 a year for selling what was called slop.

[00:17:51] Which was, uh, food from the kitchen that was left over. Now, George Washington, he was the one who established the Fugitive Slave Act in 1793. Now Hercules was in Philadelphia. Philadelphia was the place to be that it had many, many free Africans there and people had a real free life there. So you had Hercules.

[00:18:17] He was with these people, socializing and you know, he was a really special. But George Washington was very clever because the, uh, what the law said was that if an enslaved person stayed there for six months, if they were there for six months, then they would become free. So what George Washington would do would be to rotate his enslaved so that they would not become free.

[00:18:46] Of course, then he rotated Hercules. But Hercules had been with all these free blacks and he had to plan his time. So eventually on George Washington's birthday, February 22nd, 1797, Hercules did escape. He escaped, spent some time in Philadelphia. Then he went on as what we know. He went on to. So George Washington really did want to, you know, keep him and, and have these little tricks to be able to keep the enslaved.

[00:19:18] Now, Thomas Jefferson, who loved all things African all things, all things African. We've heard of James Hemmings and he was the sister of the very, you know, well-known Sally Hemming.

[00:19:38] **Dalia Colón:** So James Hemmings was the brother of Sally Hemmings, who had a, an intimate relationship with Thomas Jefferson.

[00:19:45] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** Yes.

[00:19:46] **Dalia Colón:** Okay.

[00:19:46] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** Yes. James Hemmings was her brother. And he was taken to Paris.

[00:19:53] Uh, he very well known chef. He, he was trained by the best French chefs. He learned, uh, French language. He learned with cooking. He excelled in the language, and he was just really, uh, an excellent cook. and, and many of the kinds of recipes that he brought back, like we make the pasta, the, the macaroni and cheese kind of thing, you know, but he was the one who started using the cream with the pastas, that kind of thing.

[00:20:24] Now his is kind of a sad story though. Um, these men who live this life, I mean, you got this certain part of freedom, but you're still enslave.

[00:20:37] Right. So

[00:20:37] **Dalia Colón:** while they were in France learning these techniques, they were free. Yes. But they had to come back to America to make the mac and cheese where they were not free.

[00:20:47] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** Right. And so they were caught between these two worlds and name Hemmings story. Uh, I have to say Hercules did Okay. He, he was able to get out and. Went to Europe and, and did fine. But poor James Hemmings, he did want to be free. So he negotiated with Jefferson that he would train his brother Peter, you know, to be the chef.

[00:21:11] And he, you know, went back to, he was in Philadelphia too, that that was the place to be. But, um, as a, as a free man, he, he had trouble finding work. He had to come back and work for Jefferson and then he left again. So as a enslaved chef, he did well, but something didn't work out when he wanted to be a free chef.

[00:21:36] So his story was that as we come closer, Lyndon Johnson also had a female chef Zeph Wright from uh, 1942 to 1969. And one of the things that Johnson noticed, I guess, when they were travel, Is that she couldn't sleep. They'd had sleep in the car. They couldn't go into the hotels. So that did have some impact on, on Lyndon Johnson.

[00:22:03] And when he was signing all of the bills that he signed...

[00:22:06] **Dalia Colón:** Oh yeah, the Civil Rights Act 1964. Voting Rights Act, 1965.

[00:22:11] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** He thought of Ms. Zephyr Wright was able to take a look at those because he understood what she had gone through. She was his chef and she did have some impact on. The thing that I, I guess we have to think about is we have all these nice Southern cookbooks, but as I said before, the recipes were passed orally.

[00:22:32] You know, you could stand there and observe or you, they were passed orally and, and a lot of it, If you talk to a Gullah person has to do with the love that was put into it. You know, it wasn't precise seasoning here and there it was the tasting and the love that was put into it. So you find a lot of southern cookbooks, but the recipes that you find, there were probably the foods that were made by the enslaved in their homes.

[00:23:00] So, uh, they don't get the credit. But, uh, you look at those recipe. , they are probably the recipes of the enslaved.

[00:23:08] **Dalia Colón:** Mm-hmm. I could talk to you all day. You've taken us through hundreds of years of history, but as we start to wrap up, I wanna know

where we can learn more. I know you put on a program called "Her Story Living History."

[00:23:22] Tell me a little bit about that.

[00:23:24] **Martha Bireda, PhD:** I guess I, because of my, my grandmother was a very powerful woman. I'm interested in self-empowered African and African-American women, and I do program how her story in, in which I do a, a living history, performance and, uh, I, one is a powerful doctrine. Women, when I am Pearl the Midwife, and when I do that program, it's really fascinating for women because I talk.

[00:23:52] Three types of herbs that the enslaved, uh, midwives and granny doctors used. Some were for, to prevent illness. That's violence. Women had gardens. Some were to cure illnesses and some were to prevent childbirth. They did not want to breed. As after 1808, the Masters wanted these women to produce and reproduce.

[00:24:19] So that's rather one I really enjoy doing, uh, is it's good for libraries or museums or cultural organizations. So that's one that I do. I do another one that I have fascinated by a numbers racket and especially women who were profound in the numbers racket because the numbers racket. I know it was illegal.

[00:24:44] But what those people did for our communities was outstanding in that a numbers man or numbers woman, and the, what I do is about a, a numbers woman, miss Josephine is her name. Uh, they gave to a community. If somebody had a, a, a person who died, this numbers person could help them put the move for the funeral.

[00:25:06] The businesses remember, the banks did not lend. To African and African descended people. So the numbers, man, they provided amazing. And in my, my own hometown on the 1920s, uh, a man named Mr. Uh Samuel came and everybody was talking about my mother even was a little girl, talked about it. He came to Punta Gorda with \$80,000.

[00:25:33] But guess what? He didn't use it just for himself. He built housing, grocery store. The developed our community. And then I do one called Reflections of a Colored Girl. And I am the colored girl that has those reflections. And um, what I do is talk about the experiences I had as a colored girl, but more important, I talk about the lessons I learned as a colored girl.

[00:26:03] During that time of Jim Crow. Yes, those are very hard types, but we, Africans were many times at our very best because we were left alone to build our communities. I do talk about the lessons I learned. So those are three programs that I do present when I do living history.

[00:26:25] **Dalia Colón:** Well, this colored girl learned a lot from you today, but thank you so much for your time.

[00:26:29] I really appreciate all your expertise. Martha Bireda PhD is executive director of the Blanchard House Museum of African American History and Culture in Punta Gorda. She's also the headliner for the 2023 Tampa Bay Collard Green Festival in St. Petersburg On Friday, February 17th, she'll take part in the Collards After Dark conversation moderated.

[00:26:54] Yours truly. You can also catch Dr. Bireda at the Festival's Main Event on Saturday, February 18th. Get all the information about the Tampa Bay Collard Green festival at tbcgf.org, and if you're in the mood to cook up some collared greens, check out dietician and nutritionist Wendy Wesley's recipe for Pancake Collards on our website, thezestpodcast.com.

[00:27:21] I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Chandler Balkcom. The Zest is a production of WUSF Public Media. Copyright 2023, part of the NPR Network.