

Guts Get Some Overdue Glory

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By Jacqueline Trescott

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Some considered swine innards trash. Others took the intestines of the pig and boiled them into a staple, and, eventually, into a notorious delicacy.

And yesterday chitlins, a dish given to African American slaves, and over time perfected into a holiday tradition, were authenticated as a treasure by the Smithsonian Institution. The Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture accepted the papers of the Chitlin Market, a local business, as part of its emerging collection of materials about African American celebrations and foods.

The donation, said Steven Cameron Newsome, the museum's director, gives momentum to the effort to "document African American life, particularly African American celebratory traditions. Foodways are a way of celebrating." The museum is preparing two shows in which chitlins might be a centerpiece. One planned for February explores family and community celebrations, and the second, scheduled for February 2005, examines traditional foods and food service occupations.

Shauna Anderson, who opened her chitlin cleaning business in Hyattsville in 1995, said she couldn't believe she was hearing the word "museum" used in the same sentence with the name of her enterprise. Surrounded by close friends and holding a picture of her grandmother, Virginia Battle, who taught her how to clean pig intestines, Anderson told her story and wiped away the tears.

Anderson said she was representing 400 years of slavery and oppression. "I was born to parents who were musicians, who had to come in the back door and leave by the back door where they were playing. But my late grandmother, Virginia Battle, told me I could do things."

Anderson was looking for a way to supplement her accounting firm's income during the slow season and thought back to the special times when she and her grandmother would clean chitlins together. When she told Angela Holmes, a close friend who later became her business partner, about her dream of opening her own business, Holmes recalled saying, "Who's going to clean chitlins?" Anderson discovered the Maryland Health Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture didn't have regulations for the cleaning process, so she developed her own guidelines.

When Anderson advertised for chitlin cleaners in the newspaper, she got 100 responses. She had hit a chord. She has had two retail stores, she said, but now she is strictly an Internet business, with a mailing list of 4,000

customers (www.chitlinmarket.com). Her cleaned chitlins are shipped frozen; she has sold 200 tons since September 2000.

"It brings the elite, rich and famous together, with the poor and hungry. It has one common bond. Food that was once trashed and buried was dug up, cleaned and cooked for nourishment to the African American slaves. It was survival food," said Anderson.

Chitlins, formally chitterlings, are the intestines of a pig that are boiled until they are slightly softer than a rubber band; at their best, chitlins are as chewy as calamari. Preparing them is hard work because the slippery strands have to be soaked, cleaned by hand and rinsed several times. Both blacks and whites from the South acknowledge them as a tasty tradition. Yet some African Americans have turned up their noses at the dish because of its association with slavery. That attitude is fading, said Anderson, who discovered that many of her online customers are under 30.

After officially promising her gift to the Anacostia museum, Anderson served lunch in the conference room of the Hyattsville Municipal Building. Besides simmering chitlins, she asked the caterer, Delightful Appetites of Laurel, to serve black-eyed peas, fried chicken, collard greens, potato salad and corn bread.

Newsome said the sounds of approval heard round the room as people savored chitlins was "testimony." The museum staff is looking for material about other family traditions, such as hats, dressmaking, photographs and traditional recipes.

Shauna Anderson has promised the papers of her business, the Chitlin Market, to the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum. Another batch of chitlins is cleaned at the Chitlin Market, a Hyattsville business that has sold 200 tons of the pork intestines since September 2000.

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