



Gullah Geechee Culinary Artist Benjamin Dennis

Talks History, Culture and Charleston's Hot Spots

BY JOHNISHA LEVI

Gullah Geechee people of the Lowcountry and Sea Islands of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida are a special part of the Diaspora community. They have been able to miraculously preserve many of the linguistic patterns and cultural traditions their West African ancestors brought to this country as part of the transatlantic slave trade. If you are looking for a Gullah Geechee culinary ambassador – someone who both lives and studies Gullah Geechee foodways – search no further than chef Benjamin “BJ” Dennis.

Dennis is a personal chef and caterer who grew up in Charleston, S.C., but his grandparents kept him in touch with the old ways of the Sea Islands with their stories and by cooking a traditional seafood-based diet (including shark and deviled crab), as well as other classic Gullah dishes.

Accolades to his name include presenting at the Charleston Food + Wine Festival, serving as a local guide for Anthony Bourdain on CNN’s “Parts Unknown,” re-enacting renowned 19th century African-American caterer Nat Fuller’s historic Civil War feast, and hosting pop-up dinners at acclaimed local establishments such as Butcher & Bee and Husk Restaurant.

I caught up with him recently to talk about how his heritage has played a fundamental role in not only shaping his career as a chef, but how it has connected him personally to the African Diaspora.

CAN YOU UNPACK THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN GULLAH AND GEECHEE CULTURE AND CUISINE? WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON? HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

We [Gullah Geechee] people say we are descendants of the Gullah people. Pure Gullah [language] is basically Africanisms and African dialect. Geechee is the English derivative, what we say is slang. You can hear the Gullah language and Gullah cadence in the way we speak in Geechee. As far as the foodways there’s no difference.

WHAT DOES THE PHRASE LOWCOUNTRY CUISINE MEAN TO YOU? HOW IS IT DISTINCT FROM GULLAH GEECHEE CUISINE?

When you talk about Lowcountry cuisine, it’s [influenced by] Africans, the French, the English, the Spanish, and the Native Americans. I always say that Lowcountry cuisine and Gullah Geechee cuisine are similar except

Gullah people eat way more seafood. We live on the land. The main thing is Gullah food is a lot more slow cooking, one-pot cooking, living on the land, the use of the benne seed, the use of ground nuts. Gullah cuisine is [also] a lot more of the African Diaspora, you see a lot more of the Caribbean flavors.

I READ THAT YOU WANT YOUR FUTURE RESTAURANT PROJECT TO DOUBLE AS A CULTURAL CENTER FOR EDUCATING FOLKS ABOUT GULLAH GEECHEE CULTURE.

My dream would be a cultural center, almost like a museum and a restaurant. My reality is I’d probably open up this old-school Charleston juke joint restaurant that is nice and classy with a speakeasy vibe with a big bar and I’d be doing small plates, but I’d still be doing the food.

HOW DID YOUR COLLABORATION FOR YOUR UPCOMING COOKBOOK COME ABOUT WITH

NICOLE TAYLOR AND STEPHANIE BARNA?

Nicole is my sister from another mister. We just bonded through Instagram. She has her cookbook out and is the one who said I need a cookbook. I wasn’t thinking about that and right now we’re just in the incubator stage. Stephanie Barna has been a big fan of mine. She was the former owner/editor of the Charleston City Paper. She actually got me my first cover story on the City Paper and she wants to be more of a project manager in a sense. It’s going to happen very soon.

IF YOU WANTED SOMEONE TO HAVE THE REAL DEAL CHARLESTON EXPERIENCE, AS OPPOSED TO THE GLOSSY TOURISTY ONE, WHERE AND WHAT WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THEY DO, GO, AND SEE?

I think the local seafood markets still hold a lot of the old ways. My favorite is Ravenel Seafood. You go up there and they’re doing things like conch stew and clam stew. You can get your fish cleaned to order and they’ll fry or steam it. They have the red rice, the okra stew, the crab rice, the fried fish, things like that. Places like Buckshot’s in McClellanville, which is a deep area rooted in Gullah Geechee culture, is pretty much farm-to-table. The family owns the farm and you see the vegetables brought in. They for the most part are keeping the culture alive through their foodways. You have the soul spots that still have Gullah dishes, like Bertha’s Kitchen, where you can get turkey purloo or field peas. We have little nooks and crannies all over the place.

Learn more about Dennis and Gullah Geechee cuisine at www.chefbenjamindennis.com. You can also follow him on Twitter and Instagram (@ChefBJDennis).

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