

# Food & Nutrition

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# One Story at a Time

AFRICAN HERITAGE  
COOKING CLASSES  
CONNECT PRESENT  
WITH THE PAST

By Marisa Moore

For six evenings in October and November, community members — parents, grandparents and occasionally kids — gathered around a table in Dorchester, Mass., to explore the traditional eating patterns of their African-American ancestors.

“In my class, there was a grandmother named Mary Alice Gray who grew up in Montgomery, Ala., in the 1960s,” says Boston nutrition education director Vivien Morris, MS, MPH, RD, LDN. “When Ms. Gray told us about the time she met Rosa Parks, there was an immediate connection because we were holding our classes in a public school named after Martin Luther King Jr.”

Tapping into the oral history tradition of African-American culture is part of what makes the new A Taste of African Heritage program stand out from typical nutrition classes, according to Morris. She is one of 15 program leaders for the community-based culinary series launched by nonprofit

organization Oldways and piloted across the country last fall.

Following the African Heritage Pyramid — which celebrates the traditional food and flavors of Africa, South America, the Caribbean and the American South — the six-week series covers traditional herbs and spices, greens, whole grains, beans and rice, tubers, stews, fruits, vegetables and healthy lifestyle habits.

“African-American food ways have, for many years, been perceived negatively because less-healthy ‘special occasion’ dishes are now marketed more as everyday foods,” says Morris. “But we are celebrating the *real* traditional African-American culinary heritage, which is wonderfully health-promoting.”

Throughout the course, participants explore the history, culture and flavor of traditional foods while gathered around a dining table. The setting has metaphorical significance: Some of the best cooks are born in the kitchen, usually under a parent’s or grandparent’s instruction.

“From the very beginning of the classes, we asked participants to share the role that food has



Registered dietitian Vivien Morris leads a class at the King K-8 School in Dorchester, Mass., which hosted A Taste of African Heritage through The Links, Incorporated.

Oldways' African Heritage Pyramid is plant-focused because meat is traditionally used for flavoring—making it a part, not the heart, of meals. “If you go back one or two generations, you will find that African Americans ate a lot of fruits and vegetables,” says Morris. “People spent a lot of time in the gardens, and there was pride in presenting foods because often it was produced by the family or friends.”

in their family life and cultural background,” says Morris. “For example, last night we were learning about okra, and one of the class participants said that earlier in the week she had made a recipe of her mother’s — a dish with okra and tomatoes. Her daughter said, ‘You know, this makes me think about Grandma,’ and they had sort of their own silent moment, remembering this important woman who had passed away. It showed how the presence of family history affects [the experience of] food.”

A Taste of African Heritage program manager Sarah Dwyer describes the series as the first programmatic step for systematic change. “Participants share what they learn with family and friends for an exponential outreach experience,” says Dwyer, adding that while the curriculum includes recipes, the focus is centered on methodology. Classes are taught by health professionals, community educators and A Taste of African Heritage graduates. All that’s required is the curriculum, a kitchen and some basic supplies.

“When we connect with people through a right-brain approach — the creative, intuitive level that creates nostalgia, of something familial and

relatable — it tends to make more of an impact and change begins now,” says Tamba Raye Stevenson, MS, CPT, a dietetic intern who led A Taste of African Heritage classes at the Masjid Muhammad Islamic Center in Washington, D.C.

According to Stevenson, sharing stories was as personal for her as it was for the participants — citing her connection to her late father, a retired firefighter, avid cook and family history enthusiast who inspired her own African heritage journey.

“He grew his own herb garden and he was a great cook,” says Stevenson. “[When he died] I was like, ‘How do I continue this mission of creating healthy, cultural, flavorful foods where people don’t have to feel guilty, but feel very blessed to have a taste of love, a taste of their roots?’ When Oldways contacted me, it was just like — nirvana!”

*To get involved or learn more about the A Taste of African Heritage curriculum, which will be available to RDs and community leaders nationwide later this year, visit [oldwayspt.org/taste-african-heritage-cooking-classes](http://oldwayspt.org/taste-african-heritage-cooking-classes).*

## RECIPE

### QUINOA WITH GINGER CARROTS

- 4 cloves of garlic, minced
- 2 large carrots, cubed
- 1 tablespoon ginger root
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cups of quinoa
- 4 cups of water

In a pan, heat oil and add garlic, carrots and ginger. Cook on medium-high heat for 3 minutes.

When onions begin to brown slightly, add quinoa and water and bring to a boil. Cover and simmer on low heat for 15-20 minutes. Fluff with a fork. Serves 8.

#### Nutrition Info

Calories: 180, Fat: 4g, Saturated Fat: 1g, Sodium: 25mg, Cholesterol: 0mg, Carbohydrate: 30g, Fiber: 4g, Sugars: 1g, Protein: 6g

*From A Taste of African Heritage. Used with permission.*

*It's the perfect time to discover African heritage cuisine: February is Black History Month and African Heritage & Health Week begins February 1.*