

"The Comfort in Food" (Excerpt)

By: Arnecia McGlory

6:47 a.m. CST, the sun blinks open its eyes to the sound of cranking lawn mowers, the smell of smoking meats, and the cacophonous melody of car engines and horn honking on the traffic filled freeways of commuters heading into downtown Houston. Not even a full five hours later and the heat is enough to fry an egg on the front door. In the middle of an August day, a trek from a recently parked car to the inside of a building leaves a person soaking in sticky sweat, clothes clinging to their body like the skin of an eel. But inside that structure, a thin jacket or light sweater is needed to battle the cold blasts of semi-artic gusts from the necessitated air conditioning.

The cool temperature almost erases the burning reality of the severity of a Houston summer. August in fact is the hottest month, boasting record temperatures with a high of 109°F and a heat index, which combines air temperature and relative humidity, making it feel like 130°F. Outdoor activity is limited for fear of overheating and requires a lot of hydration.

Forty-five minutes from the Gulf of Mexico places Houston in a location for plenty of rain and an abundance of humidity. But the prime port real estate lends itself to a diverse palette of seafood. From shrimp, crawfish, catfish, and fresh water prawns from the many bayous, the opportunities for culinary

delights are relatively endless. But the ever-growing buffet of satiable options does not stop there.

Inside household kitchens, meals are being prepared; memories are created and reinforced.

It started as a sizzle in the pan, the white creamy substance, melting and sliding around the cast iron skillet, becoming a translucent liquid. It was no more than half of the skillet high. Willie Mae, my grandmother, stood at the front of the gas stove, working her magic over the food, singing a hymn, as if channeling the Holy Spirit into her creations. The large soup pot on the rear, right burner contained cabbage, a chopped, green bell pepper, a small chopped onion, and a ham hock. Her experience gushed into her actions as she lifted the lid with a towel and eased a wooden spoon inside, stirring the simmering leaves.

From my place at the table, mixing cornbread batter, I breathed in the escaping aroma. "Make sho ain't no lumps in that batter gul," her voice commanded with her back turned to me. I stirred faster and replied, "Yes ma'am." I stared at her, watched her in her element, like a master chef preparing a meal whose recipe had been etched on the canvas of her heart since before she was born.

The shortening, now completely clear, bubbled, signaling the grease was ready for the raw chicken to be transformed into

fried goodness. My job first had been to spice and flavor the meat, sprinkling McCormick Season All on the uncooked poultry. Then she had me dip the chicken into an egg wash, then put it inside of a large brown paper bag filled with flour. After about five or six pieces went in the bag, we folded the top closed and shook it back and forth, up and down, making sure to coat every piece and every side of the contents in the bag. Once all of the chicken had been seasoned and floured, I was moved to cornbread duty.

The whole time she continued singing, more like humming, as the hymns did not always contain words. There would be one line, like, "I know the Lord; he heard my cries," followed by a series of open mouthed moans and closed mouthed "mmms" that followed the same cadence.

Granny placed another cast iron skillet on the stove, added a few tablespoons of shortening and then eased it into the already lit oven. She walked over to me, standing over the table, before telling me to, "Gimme dat bowl and lemme show you how it's done."

Her purple-rimmed glasses slid to the bridge of her full nose. She peered over the top of them and we made eye contact. I handed the yellow and white glass bowl to her. She gripped it in the bend of her elbow, wrapping her arm fully around it until the bowl met her chest, as if placing the bowl in a headlock.

With her right hand, she whipped the batter rapidly, the timeless precursor to the electric mixer.

"Look here. You see? See how da lumps just fall out? Hmph? You see dat?" She mixed, her dark brown eyes shifting back and forth from bowl to mine, emphasizing her point. I nodded my head and continued to watch her technique. She began to hum again and smiled widely at me, allowing her pearly white dentures to show. She towered over me, her once cola shaped frame expanded and thickened from good eating.

The kitchen in my childhood home, perhaps a kitchen in general, is my favorite room in a house. They echo whispers of generations, stories aplenty over which relative made a pie this way or bought a pie from the lady down the street, and they provide a true sense of community. The black, gas range stove, the Formica countertops, and the double sink of my childhood home, this small section of the kitchen was the classroom for my culinary culture lessons with Granny.

She was 74 years old when I was born, equipped with a lifetime of recipes which she never wrote down and never had precise measurements. Handfuls, pinches, about that much, about this much, "a little mo'", or "thas too much", were her words for amounts. It made my mother take notes and write quantities as she saw Granny preparing things.

