



HUNGER & FIRE

*How the Foods of the Oppressed
Became the Meals of the Powerful*

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*To the ones who innovate every day
to transform the little they have
into full bellies and happy hearths.*

*And to my best travel companion
and Michelin star,*

Anahí.

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INTRODUCTION

The Invisible Fist

EVERY ECONOMIST KNOWS Adam Smith's invisible hand—the idea that individual self-interest, operating through free markets, produces collective prosperity as if guided by a benevolent force no one can see. It is the founding metaphor of modern economics, and like most founding metaphors, it is approximately half true.

This book is about the other half. It is about the invisible fist.

The invisible fist is the force that determines who eats what. It is the set of structures—colonialism, slavery, trade policy, intellectual property law, cultural hierarchy, and plain old power—that shape global food systems in ways the market metaphor cannot explain. The invisible hand says that supply meets demand and everyone benefits. The invisible fist says: *yes, but who set the prices? Who owns the supply chain? Whose recipe is it, and who profits from it?*

I am a development economist. I have spent my professional life studying poverty, inequality, and the systems that produce both. I have conducted research in dozens of countries and backpacked through over a hundred more—on budgets low enough that the only restaurants I could afford were the ones where the locals actually eat. This turned out to be the best methodological decision of my career. You do not learn how a food system works by eating at the hotel restaurant. You learn it at the street stall, the market counter, the family kitchen where someone hands you a plate and watches your

face to see if you understand what they have made. In every one of those places, I ate and I asked: who grew this grain, who cooked this meal, who profits from this dish, and who does not. The questions led me, over years and across continents, to a pattern so consistent that it demanded a book.

The pattern is this: the most extraordinary foods on earth were created by the most oppressed people on earth. Not as a coincidence. As a consequence. Constraint produces ingenuity. Scarcity produces creativity. The people who received the scraps—the bones, the offal, the cheapest grains, the discarded parts—transformed those scraps into cuisines of astonishing depth and beauty. And then, with the predictability of a law of physics, the powerful took those cuisines. They took them through colonialism, through cultural appropriation, through corporate commodification, through the simple mechanism of eating the food while erasing the people who made it.

I call this dynamic the Invisible Fist, and it operates through five mechanisms that recur in every chapter of this book:

Value creation without capture. The people who create the food—the enslaved cooks, the immigrant vendors, the indigenous farmers—generate enormous culinary, cultural, and economic value. They capture a fraction of it. The rest flows to plantation owners, to corporations, to restaurant investors, to the food media ecosystem, to anyone with the capital and the infrastructure to scale what the creators made.

Cultural erasure. The origins of the food are obscured, simplified, or overwritten. Ramen becomes “Japanese” (it was Chinese). Hummus becomes “Israeli” (it was regional). Curry becomes a yellow powder (it was a thousand distinct traditions). The creators’ names are lost. The national narrative absorbs their contribution without acknowledgment.

Market exclusion. The people who created the food are priced out of it. Oxtails that once cost pennies¹ now cost twenty dollars a

pound. Quinoa that once fed Bolivian families is now too expensive for them to buy.² The food rises in value, and the creators are left behind.

Symbolic commodification. The food is stripped of its history and sold as a lifestyle product—a “superfood,” a “wellness trend,” an “authentic experience.” The politics are removed. The suffering is removed. What remains is a commodity: shelf-stable, Instagrammable, and thoroughly disconnected from the people who made it possible.

Shame as weapon. The most durable form of the Invisible Fist is internal: teaching the colonized, the enslaved, the marginalized to despise their own food. When a Bolivian child is ashamed of chuño, when an African-American family hesitates to serve chitlins, when an indigenous Mexican farmer apologizes for growing heirloom corn—the fist is operating from inside. The extraction does not require force. It requires only that the creators believe their creation is worthless.

* * *

This book follows ten dishes across ten chapters, each rooted in a specific place, a specific history, and a specific community whose culinary genius the world has consumed without adequate payment or credit. The journey begins in the American South with soul food and oxtails, moves to Japan for ramen, to Brazil for feijoada, to the Levant for hummus, to West Africa for jollof rice, to India for curry, to Vietnam for phở, to Mexico for tacos and tortillas, to Ethiopia for injera and teff, and ends in Bolivia—my home—with chuño, the freeze-dried potato that fed the silver mines of Potosí and the empire they built.

Each chapter braids three strands: the political economy (the structures of power that shaped the food), the history (the specific events and policies that produced the current situation), and the per-

sonal (my own experience eating, cooking, and—during the COVID-19 pandemic—making these dishes in my kitchen with my daughter Anahí, who served as sous chef, taste tester, and the most honest food critic I have ever encountered).

The personal strand matters because food is personal. It is the most intimate form of culture—the thing that enters your body, that becomes you, that connects you to the people who made it. I cannot write about the political economy of food without writing about the experience of eating it. And I cannot write about these specific foods without acknowledging my own position: a mestizo Bolivian man, raised in a society that valued European food and despised indigenous food, who spent decades traveling the world before understanding that his grandmother's kitchen contained more wisdom than his university's economics department.

This book is not comprehensive. It could not be. The foods of the oppressed are legion, and a thousand books could not catalog them all. The ten dishes I have chosen are not the only ones that matter. They are the ones whose stories I know best, whose kitchens I have visited, whose political economies I can trace with the tools of my profession. Other writers will tell other stories. I hope they do.

What I offer is a framework—the Invisible Fist—and the evidence that it works. Not as conspiracy but as structure. Not as intention but as outcome. Not as the act of villains but as the consequence of systems that produce predictable results: the people who create the world's best food receive the world's worst deal.

The pot is on the stove. The fire is lit. Let us begin.

CHAPTER 1

SOUL FOOD AND THE PRICE OF OXTAIL

Slavery, Scraps, and the American Table

I been eating oxtails since before they had a name for it
on a menu.

— Overheard in a barbershop in Atlanta, 2019

THE BUTCHER ON NOSTRAND AVENUE in Brooklyn didn't look up when I walked in. He was working a cleaver through a rack of goat with the mechanical precision of a man who had done this ten thousand times, the blade meeting bone with a sound like a muffled gunshot. The shop smelled of blood and sawdust and the faint sweetness of refrigerated fat. Hand-lettered signs in the window advertised specials in English, Creole, and Spanish. A woman ahead of me in line was arguing, politely but firmly, about the price of oxtail.

"Twelve dollars a pound," she said, not quite a question. "You remember when this was two dollars?"

The butcher shrugged, still not looking up. "Everything go up."

"Not like this," she said. "Not oxtail. Oxtail was ours."

I stood there holding a number ticket, a Bolivian economist in a Caribbean butcher shop on a Tuesday afternoon, and I understood exactly what she meant. Not the economics of it—though I understood those too, and they were damning—but the feeling. The sense that

something intimate had been taken. That a food which had belonged to a community precisely *because* nobody else wanted it had been discovered, desired, and priced beyond reach. Oxtail had crossed a line that every dish in this book eventually crosses: from the food of the desperate to the food of the fashionable. And in that crossing, something was lost that no Michelin star could replace.

I bought two pounds anyway. It cost me twenty-four dollars. I carried it home on the subway, thinking about the woman's voice, the way she'd said *ours*. That possessive. That grief dressed up as a complaint about grocery prices.

That evening I braised the oxtails low and slow in my apartment—red wine, tomatoes, thyme, a few Scotch bonnets because a Jamaican friend had taught me that oxtail without heat is just a suggestion. The wine hit the hot pan and the kitchen filled with a cloud of steam that smelled like a promise. My daughter sat on the kitchen counter, seven years old, swinging her legs and asking why the meat was shaped like that. I told her it was the tail. She made a face. I told her that for hundreds of years, the people who were forced to do the hardest work in America were given the parts of the animal that the people in the big house didn't want. The tails. The feet. The intestines. The neck bones. And they turned those scraps into some of the most extraordinary food on earth.

"But why didn't the big house people want it?" she asked.

"Because they didn't have to," I said. "They had the good cuts. They had choices. When you have choices, you don't eat tails."

She thought about this. "So the people with no choices made the best food?"

I turned the oxtails in the pot. The sauce was thickening, the collagen melting off the vertebrae into something silky and obscenely rich. The apartment smelled like Sunday in someone else's grandmother's house. "Yeah," I said. "That's kind of the whole book."

* * *

Soul food is not a recipe. It is an archive. Every dish in the tradition—oxtails braised until the meat slides from the bone, collard greens simmered for hours with smoked turkey necks or ham hocks, chitlins cleaned and slow-cooked until they lose their funk and find their soul, black-eyed peas stewed with fatback, cornbread baked in cast iron, sweet potato pie with a crust made from lard—carries within it a history of enslavement, survival, migration, and reinvention. To eat soul food is to eat the evidence of what happens when a people are given nothing and make everything from it. It is also, increasingly, to eat the evidence of what happens when that everything gets taken back.

The term itself—“soul food”—didn’t enter common usage until the 1960s³, when the Black Power movement embraced the cuisine as an expression of African American identity and pride. The naming was deliberate. “Soul” was the word of the moment—soul music, soul brother, soul power—and attaching it to the food was an act of reclamation. It said: this cuisine is not the embarrassing remnant of slavery. It is the evidence of what we built from the wreckage. The food and the music share more than a name. Both emerged from the same conditions—oppression, restriction, the narrow space between what was permitted and what was possible—and both transformed those conditions into art that the world now consumes, usually without knowing or asking where it came from.

But the food is centuries older than the name. Its origins lie in the collision between West African culinary traditions and the brutal economics of American chattel slavery,⁴ a system in which human beings were classified as agricultural equipment and fed accordingly.

The Scraps of the Big House

To understand soul food, you must first understand the plantation kitchen as an economic system. The antebellum South ran on a logic of extraction so total that it governed not only labor but calories. Enslaved people on cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar plantations produced enormous wealth for their enslavers. Cotton alone accounted for more than half of all American exports by 1860. The people who planted, tended, harvested, and processed that cotton saw none of that wealth. What they saw was a weekly ration.

The standard ration on most plantations was grimly consistent across the South: a peck of cornmeal (about eight quarts)⁵ and three to four pounds of salt pork or bacon per adult per week. Some plantations added molasses, occasionally dried peas or sweet potatoes. This was not generosity. It was fuel management. The planter class understood, in the same way a factory manager understands machinery, that a certain caloric input was necessary to maintain a certain labor output. Frederick Douglass wrote of receiving his monthly allowance of food “with the regularity of a machine.” The ration system was industrial logistics applied to human bodies.

But rations were only part of the picture. Enslaved people supplemented their diets through kitchen gardens (where permitted), foraging, fishing, trapping, and—critically—through access to the parts of slaughtered animals that the planter’s household rejected. When a pig was butchered on a plantation, the hierarchy of cuts followed the hierarchy of power with perfect fidelity. The loin, the tenderloin, the chops, the ham—these went to the big house. What remained flowed downhill: the feet, the ears, the tail, the snout, the intestines (chitlins), the neck bones, the jowls, the skin. The organs. The bits that, in the slaveowner’s estimation, were not food at all, but waste.

What happened next is the part that no economic model fully captures, though many have tried. The enslaved cooks—

overwhelmingly women, carrying culinary knowledge that stretched back through generations to West and Central Africa—took these despised ingredients and applied techniques of extraordinary sophistication. Long, slow braising to break down the tough connective tissue in tails and feet. Vinegar and salt soaks to clean chitlins. Smoking and curing to preserve and flavor. Heavy seasoning with whatever was available—onion, garlic, peppers, bay leaf, thyme. One-pot cooking that extracted every calorie from every scrap. These were not primitive techniques. They were the same methods used across West Africa for centuries: the slow stews of Nigeria, the braised and pounded dishes of Ghana, the fermented and smoked flavors of Senegal. The Middle Passage had not erased this knowledge. It traveled in the bodies and memories of the women who were forced across the Atlantic, and it survived because it was needed.

The Middle Passage Did Not Erase the Kitchen

It is a common error—sometimes an innocent one, sometimes a convenient one—to describe enslaved Africans as if they arrived in the Americas as blank slates. They did not. They arrived carrying millennia of culinary knowledge developed across a vast and diverse continent. The women who would create soul food in the kitchens of Virginia and the Carolinas and Mississippi carried within them the techniques of the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Mande, the Wolof, the Akan, and dozens of other West and Central African peoples. They knew how to ferment. They knew how to smoke. They knew how to build complex flavors from layered spicing. They knew the deep, slow braise—the stew pot that sits on the fire all day, each hour adding depth—which would become the foundational technique of soul food.

Consider what crossed the Atlantic in the memories and hands of enslaved people, even as everything else was stripped from them. Okra came from West Africa and became a cornerstone of Southern

cooking—gumbo takes its name from the Angolan word for okra, *ki ngombo*. Black-eyed peas, a staple across the Sahel, became the base of Hoppin’ John in the Carolina Low Country. Watermelon, native to Africa, was cultivated by enslaved people in their kitchen gardens. Rice cultivation—an expertise concentrated among the Mende and Temne peoples of what is now Sierra Leone—was so valued by Carolina planters that they specifically sought enslaved people from rice-growing regions, paying premium prices for their knowledge. The historian Judith Carney has documented this in devastating detail: enslaved Africans did not merely provide the labor for the Carolina rice economy. They provided the technology. Their knowledge was the competitive advantage. They were compensated with rations.

The plantation kitchen existed in a strange duality. The “big house” kitchen was often run by an enslaved cook—usually a woman of considerable skill—who cooked for the planter’s family using the best ingredients: the prime cuts, the butter, the white flour, the sugar. Thomas Jefferson’s famous cuisine at Monticello was prepared by James Hemings, an enslaved man whom Jefferson had sent to Paris to train in French cooking—an act of breathtaking cognitive dissonance that tells you everything about the relationship between American power and culinary labor. Hemings learned French technique. Jefferson took the credit. The pattern was set early.

Meanwhile, in the slave quarters, a different and parallel cuisine was developing. Here the ingredients were whatever was available: the rations of cornmeal and salt pork, supplemented by garden vegetables, foraged plants, hunted game, caught fish, and the offal and scraps from plantation butchering. This was not a lesser cuisine. It was a different one, shaped by constraint but animated by a culinary intelligence that the planter class did not recognize and could not have replicated.

The duality matters. The planter class *knew* enslaved people could cook brilliantly—they relied on it daily. But they categorized

this knowledge as a service owed to them rather than a skill belonging to the person who possessed it. The slave quarters kitchen demonstrates that the same culinary intelligence, applied to inferior raw materials, could produce food of equal or greater cultural power. Both cuisines emerged from the same household. Only one was acknowledged.

The Economics of the Ration: A Development Economist's Reading

I have spent twenty years studying poverty, and I still find the plantation ration system chilling in its efficiency.⁶ It was, in contemporary development economics terms, a “minimum cost diet” problem solved with perfect rationality and zero morality. What is the cheapest combination of foods that will keep an enslaved worker productive in the field? The answer—cornmeal and salt pork—provided roughly 3,000 to 4,000 calories per day for a field laborer, heavy on carbohydrates and saturated fat, adequate for sustaining brutal physical work but nutritionally incomplete. Micronutrient deficiencies—pellagra from niacin deficiency, scurvy from lack of vitamin C—were common and largely ignored as long as labor output was maintained.

This is, in essence, the same calculation that development agencies make today when designing emergency food rations for refugee camps—except that the plantation system was not an emergency. It was a permanent, profitable institution that treated the caloric needs of human beings as an overhead cost to be minimized. The language is different. The spreadsheet logic is the same.

What the ration system did not account for—could not account for—was the cultural dimension of food. The enslaved community did not eat merely to fuel their bodies. They ate to maintain their humanity. The kitchen garden, the communal Saturday evening meal, the Sunday feast after worship, the passing of recipes from mother

to daughter—these were acts of cultural preservation as vital as any. The ration was designed for productivity. The cooking was an insistence on something more.

The Great Migration and the Portability of Identity

Soul food might have remained a regional Southern tradition—invisible to the broader American culture—if not for the Great Migration. Between roughly 1910 and 1970, an estimated six million Black Americans left the rural South for cities in the North, Midwest, and West. They left for many reasons: the terrorism of Jim Crow, the boll weevil's destruction of the cotton economy, the pull of industrial jobs in Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, New York. They carried with them what all migrants carry: language, music, faith, and food.

The Great Migration turned soul food from a Southern survival tradition into a national African American institution. In the kitchens of Harlem tenements, on the South Side of Chicago, in West Philadelphia and East Oakland, the dishes of the plantation quarters reappeared—adapted to urban life, to apartment stoves instead of open hearths, but fundamentally the same. Oxtails braised in Dutch ovens. Collard greens on the stove all Saturday morning. Chitlin suppers for special occasions. Church dinners where every woman brought her best dish and reputations were built or broken over the depth of a pot liquor.

Soul food restaurants became anchor institutions in Black neighborhoods. They were not merely places to eat. They were community centers, informal banks, meeting halls, safe spaces. Sylvia's in Harlem, founded in 1962. Dooky Chase's in New Orleans, where Leah Chase fed civil rights leaders who were unwelcome in white restaurants. Chase ran Dooky Chase's for over seventy years. During the civil rights era, Black activists were barred from eating at white-

owned restaurants throughout the South. Dooky Chase's became a meeting place precisely because it was one of the few establishments where Black professionals, activists, and organizers could sit down to a meal in dignity. The NAACP held strategy meetings over her fried chicken. Martin Luther King Jr. planned campaigns over her gumbo z'herbes. The food was the infrastructure. The restaurant was the institution.

The Black Panthers' Free Breakfast for Children Program, launched in 1969 in Oakland, made the connection between food and political power explicit. The Panthers served free breakfasts—grits, eggs, bacon, toast, orange juice—to children in impoverished Black communities before school. At its peak, the program fed tens of thousands of children daily across dozens of cities. J. Edgar Hoover called it “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.” The most powerful law enforcement official in the United States considered free grits and eggs a national security threat. He understood what the Panthers understood: feeding people is power. The act of nourishing a community that the state has failed to nourish is an act of sovereignty. It was soul food as revolution by breakfast.

The Body Keeps the Score: Soul Food and the Health Debate

There has always been a tension within the community about soul food, and it would be dishonest to ignore it. As early as the 1960s, some Black intellectuals and health advocates raised concerns about a cuisine built on pork fat, sodium, and sugar. Elijah Muhammad rejected soul food as a dietary legacy of slavery. Dick Gregory became a vocal advocate for vegetarianism, framing the rejection of soul food as an act of bodily liberation.

The health statistics are real and they are grim. Black Americans suffer disproportionately from hypertension, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity⁷. A cuisine heavy in sodium, saturated fat, and

refined carbohydrates is a contributing factor. This is not in dispute.

What *is* in dispute is causation and responsibility. And here the Invisible Fist turns inward, because the public health framing that blames soul food for Black health disparities is itself a form of the same mechanism this book describes: shaming people for eating the food that was imposed on them by the system that now criticizes them for eating it. The plantation ration system created the dietary patterns. The post-emancipation food economy—sharecropping poverty, Great Migration urban poverty, food deserts in Black neighborhoods where the nearest supermarket with fresh vegetables is a forty-minute bus ride away—perpetuated them. And then the dominant culture looks at the health outcomes and says: why do you eat that way?

This is mechanism five—shame as weapon—operating not across continents but within a single national food system. The enslaved were given scraps. They made the scraps extraordinary. Now they are told the scraps are killing them. The responsibility is placed on the fork rather than the system that put those specific foods on that specific fork for four hundred years.

This does not mean the health conversation is invalid. Black chefs and food writers are doing extraordinary work reimagining soul food for contemporary needs. Bryant Terry, the chef and food justice activist, has argued that the pre-slavery African diet was in fact highly nutritious—rich in vegetables, grains, legumes, and fish—and that the unhealthy elements of soul food are themselves products of deprivation, not of African tradition. He’s right. The “unhealthy” elements of soul food are the residue of slavery still lodged in the body.

The body keeps the score. So does the kitchen.

The Invisible Fist at the Table

The political economy of soul food follows a pattern so clean it could be a textbook case, if textbooks cared about chitlins.

Value Creation Versus Value Capture

Enslaved Black women created the cuisine. Over generations, they developed techniques, flavor profiles, and a complete culinary tradition from raw materials that had no market value. They created value from nothing—or rather, from the nothing that power had left behind.

Who captured that value? For centuries, the answer was: partly the enslaved communities themselves (the food nourished bodies and sustained culture) and partly the plantation system (adequately fed enslaved people were more productive). After emancipation, soul food restaurants and home cooking remained largely within Black communities. The value creation and value capture were, for a time, roughly aligned.

That alignment began to fracture in the late twentieth century and shattered in the twenty-first. As soul food gained recognition—through media coverage, celebrity chefs, food tourism, and the broader American appetite for “authentic” cuisine—a new set of actors entered the value chain. Food media companies, cookbook publishers, restaurant investors, and entrepreneurial chefs (many of them white) recognized that soul food had enormous commercial potential. The cuisine that had been ignored was now interesting. The food that signified poverty was now marketable as “heritage.” And the value capture shifted dramatically away from the communities that had created the tradition.

The Oxtail Index

If you want a single, concrete, traceable indicator of how the gentrification of soul food works in economic terms, look at the price of oxtail.

In the 1990s, oxtail was one of the cheapest cuts available in American butcher shops, sold primarily in Black, Caribbean, and Latin American neighborhoods to customers who knew what to do with it. Prices hovered around one to two dollars per pound. It was poor people's meat: rich in collagen and flavor but requiring hours of slow cooking—time, skill, and patience rather than money.

Then the farm-to-table movement of the 2000s rediscovered “whole animal” butchery. Food writers began celebrating “nose-to-tail” eating. Celebrity chefs put oxtail on tasting menus. The word “unctuous” appeared in approximately four thousand restaurant reviews. Oxtail crossed over.

By 2020, oxtail commonly cost ten to twelve dollars per pound. In some cities, it now costs more per pound than chuck roast. The Caribbean and soul food communities that had been the primary consumers found themselves priced out. A dish that had been a weeknight staple became a special occasion expense or a nostalgic impossibility.

This is market exclusion in action. Not through legal prohibition but through the price mechanism. When demand from wealthier consumers enters a market previously dominated by poorer consumers, and supply is relatively fixed (there are only so many tails on a cow), prices rise. Those who can pay the new price stay in the market. Those who cannot are excluded. The market is “working”—in the narrow sense that prices reflect supply and demand—but the outcome is that the people who created the culinary tradition can no longer afford to participate in it.

Talk to any Black grandmother in Atlanta, any Jamaican auntie in

Flatbush, any home cook in Houston's Third Ward who used to make oxtails every Sunday and now makes them twice a year. They will tell you exactly what happened. They will tell you the price. They will remember what it used to cost. The oxtail index is a lived experience, felt in the budget and in the gut.

The Gentrification of the Plate

I need to be specific here, because generalities are a coward's game.

In Washington, D.C., the U Street corridor—once known as “Black Broadway”⁸, the cultural heart of Black Washington—has undergone a transformation so complete that longtime residents describe it as erasure. Ben's Chili Bowl remains, a survivor, but the soul food spots around it are mostly gone. In their place: ramen shops, wine bars, fast-casual chains. The gentrification of the neighborhood and the gentrification of the cuisine are not separate processes. They are the same process, operating simultaneously on real estate and on the plate.

In Nashville, hot chicken illustrates the pattern with painful clarity. Hot chicken—a fiery preparation of fried chicken specific to Nashville's Black community, associated with Prince's Hot Chicken⁹ Shack¹⁰—exploded into mainstream popularity in the 2010s. National chains launched hot chicken products. A KFC “Nashville Hot” sandwich appeared on menus nationwide. Prince's, the originator, remained a small family operation. The value created by a Black family in Nashville was captured by corporate food systems that had no connection to the tradition, no debt to the community, and no intention of sharing the revenue.

When a well-known white chef “elevates” soul food—adds a foam, a reduction, a sous vide technique, a forty-dollar price point—the media narrative positions this as innovation or homage. Think

about that word, *elevated*. To elevate is to raise something from a lower position to a higher one. The premise, baked into the language itself, is that the dish in its original form occupies a lower station. That a Black grandmother's oxtails, perfected over a lifetime, braised in a pot that her mother used and her mother before that, are in need of improvement—and that improvement arrives in the form of a culinary school graduate, a sous vide machine, and a thirty-eight-dollar price point.

You don't "elevate" French cuisine. You don't "elevate" Japanese omakase. You "elevate" the food of people whose culture you unconsciously regard as beneath your own. The word is a tell.

The food writer and historian Michael Twitty has written about this dynamic with a precision that cuts.¹¹ Twitty has spent years tracing the African roots of Southern cooking, documenting the specific culinary knowledge that enslaved Africans brought to America and that white Southern food culture absorbed without credit. His point is not that white people should stop cooking collard greens. His point is that the history should travel with the food. That you cannot honestly serve soul food without reckoning with slavery. Most elevated soul food restaurants do not reckon with slavery. They reckon with lighting design.

The Sunday Plate as Political Economy

There is a version of this chapter that could end with outrage. The anger is justified. But anger alone misses something essential.

In Black households across America, the Sunday meal has occupied a role that transcends nutrition. After church, after the singing, after the sermon, the table is set. The good china comes out, or the good paper plates, depending on the household. The food is abun-

dant even when the budget is not. Collard greens that have been on the stove since early morning. Macaroni and cheese baked with three kinds of cheese and a crust on top that shatters when you break through it. Fried chicken, cornbread, candied yams, black-eyed peas. And if it's a good week, oxtails.

The Sunday plate is an act of defiance that doesn't announce itself as one. It says: we are here, we have survived, we will eat well today regardless of what Monday brings. No price increase, no celebrity chef, no food trend can take what happens in this room when the plates are passed and the older cousins argue about whose mac and cheese is better and the kids sneak extra cornbread when they think no one is looking.

I have been invited to tables like this exactly twice in my life—once in Atlanta, once in Houston—and both times I was acutely aware of being a guest in someone else's sacred space. The food was extraordinary. But more than the food, I remember the economy of the table: how dishes were shared, how seconds were insisted upon, how leftovers were packed into containers and pressed into your hands as you left. This is an economy of abundance created from scarcity. It is the opposite of the market economy that is gentrifying the cuisine. And it persists.

A Note on Chitlins, or: The Last Line of Defense

There is one soul food dish that has not been gentrified, and I think this is revealing.

Chitlins—chitterlings, the small intestines of a pig, cleaned and slow-cooked for hours—remain almost entirely within the Black American culinary tradition. You will not find them on a tasting menu in Williamsburg. No celebrity chef has “elevated” them with a truffle foam. No food magazine has published a glossy feature on

“the chitlin renaissance.”

The reason is smell. Cleaning and cooking chitlins is an aromatic event. The odor—earthy, funky, unmistakably intestinal—fills a house and sometimes a block. It divides humanity into two camps: those who grew up with it and associate it with family, and those who encounter it cold and recoil.

The fact that chitlins have not been gentrified tells us something about how the Invisible Fist operates. It takes what it can sell. Oxtails were easy: they look like a steak, they taste like beef, the braising technique is familiar. Collard greens were easy: they photograph well, they pair with wine. But chitlins resist commodification because they resist the aesthetic preferences of the gentrifying class. They are too foreign, too pungent, too *much*.

Which means, paradoxically, that chitlins are the freest dish in the soul food tradition. They are the one thing the market hasn’t come for. They remain, fully and completely, in the hands of the people who made them. Sometimes the best defense against appropriation is the thing that makes the appropriators uncomfortable.

I have never cooked chitlins. I would not presume to. But I respect the hell out of their refusal to be taken.

Cooking Someone Else’s Resistance

I need to be honest about my own position here, because this chapter demands it.

I am not Black. I am not American. I am a Bolivian mestizo who grew up in La Paz, studied economics, and ended up spending decades traveling the world and thinking about inequality. I have no ancestral claim on soul food. When I braise oxtails in my kitchen, I am cooking someone else’s resistance food, and I should say so plainly.

But I also know something about the dynamics this chapter describes, because I've seen them from the other side of the hemisphere. In Bolivia, there are dishes—chuño, chairó, api—that carry the same freight. Foods born from indigenous poverty, looked down on by the urban mestizo class, treated as markers of backwardness. I grew up ashamed of my grandmother's food. It took me thirty years and a pandemic to understand why. When I stood in that Brooklyn butcher shop and listened to a woman grieve over the price of oxtail, I didn't understand her experience—I can't, and I won't claim to—but I recognized the structure. The structure is the subject of this book.

* * *

The oxtails I braised that night were good. Very good, actually—the meat falling off the bone into a sauce that had gone dark and sticky with reduction, the Scotch bonnets giving everything a slow, spreading heat that built in the chest. My daughter ate two helpings, which is her version of a Michelin star. We ate with rice and a salad because I didn't have collard greens that day.

She asked me if the people who first made oxtails would be happy that other people liked them now.

I didn't have a clean answer. I still don't. There is something real in the recognition of a cuisine that was ignored for centuries. That recognition is not nothing. It matters. But recognition without redistribution is just another form of extraction. If the cuisine is celebrated but the community is priced out, if the tradition is honored but the originators don't benefit, if the story is told but the tellers are erased from it—then what exactly has been gained?

Meanwhile, the woman on Nostrand Avenue pays twelve dollars a pound for the tail she used to buy for two.

The invisible fist doesn't always wear a colonial uniform. Sometimes it wears a chef's apron. Sometimes it writes a check to a land-

lord. Sometimes it just moves the decimal point on a price tag and calls it the market.

* * *

Before we leave this chapter, I want to return to one image. The woman on Nostrand Avenue. Her voice when she said *oxtail was ours*.

She was not making an argument about intellectual property. She was describing a relationship—between a community and its food, forged in the worst circumstances imaginable and maintained across four centuries through an unbroken chain of kitchens. That relationship is not a commodity. It cannot be bought at market price. And when the market price rises beyond reach, what is lost is not merely access to a cut of meat. What is lost is a thread in the fabric of continuity. One more thing that was *ours* that is now *theirs*.

Every chapter in this book will introduce you to a different version of that woman. Different city, different language, different dish, different century. But the voice will be the same. The possessive will be the same. The grief dressed as a grocery complaint will be the same.

The invisible fist doesn't discriminate. It operates everywhere, in every century. It takes the best and leaves the rest. And from the rest, someone—always someone, always a woman, usually poor, usually unseen—makes something extraordinary.

That's the story. Let's keep going.