

Out of Africa: Foodways of the Gullah-Geechee Culture

BY SUSAN SLACK (CHARLESTON)

*The Global Culinary Initiative helps Dames to explore global cultures and food customs and to examine how these influences take on culinary relevance in our own countries,” says Global Culinary Initiative Chair **Sandy Hu** (San Francisco). “In Charleston we’ll have a unique opportunity to trace West and Central African foodways through the extraordinary contributions of slaves.”*

The Gullah-Geechee peoples—called Gullah in the Carolinas and Geechee in Georgia and Northern Florida—are one of the oldest, surviving African cultures in the U.S. Their enslaved ancestors, of various ethnic groups, were brought from Africa to work on coastal plantations and the Sea Islands—a cluster of barrier islands along the Eastern coast of South Carolina and Georgia. Through isolation, their diverse traditions blended into a hybrid African-American culture with strong African characteristics evident today. South Caro-



Charleston artist Jonathan Green. Chef Matthew Raiford. Chef Kevin Mitchell. Photo by Jonathan Boncek.

lina’s rice-based economy made it one of the richest colonies in the eighteenth century; Charleston was one of the wealthiest cities and the most fashionable. Slave chefs and cooks played an important role in shaping Lowcountry cuisine, infusing it with African ingredients and preparation methods. This session looks at the building blocks of Gullah-Geechee cuisine: Caribbean influences, cooking techniques; seasonings; African heritage foods like benne (sesame), field peas, and okra; and abundant local ingredients like seafood and grits. Our expert panel members have deep, abiding connections to Gullah-Geechee culinary traditions.

JONATHAN GREEN, a nationally acclaimed and awarded professional artist,

begins the conversation with an overview of the historical connection the Gullah-Geechee have to West Africa. Jonathan was raised in a small Lowcountry community near the S.C. Sea Islands where his grandparents were independent rice farmers. He graduated with a degree from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1982, and received an honorary doctorate from the University of South Carolina in 1996. The book, *Gullah Images: The Art of Jonathan Green*, was published in the same year. Head of the nonprofit Lowcountry Rice Culture Project, Jonathan’s humanitarian and civic contributions are extensive. He explores the history of Carolina Gold Rice in the exhibition, *Unenslaved: Rice Culture Paintings*. Jonathan sees the world through the eyes of an artist, splashing images with bold, vivid colors and intricate patterns. Writer Pat Conroy writes in *Gullah Images*, “The Gullah people depicted in Jonathan Green’s world look like they got dressed while staring at rainbows.”

CheFarmer **MATTHEW RAIFORD** grew up eating Reezzy Peezy (Sea Island red peas and rice), Tomato Pilau, and Hoppin’



Leveraging Brock Circle Helps Differentiate LDEI from Other Organizations

By LORI WILLIS (ST. LOUIS)

The Board convened an ad hoc panel of Brock Circle members to brainstorm concepts as a first step in determining where Brock Circle funds could be invested in keeping with the mission to enhance conference education and beyond to the benefit of the greater membership. **Carol Brock** (New York); **Patty Erd** (Chicago); **Mary Ellen Griffin** (New York); **Suzanne Brown** (Atlanta); and **Alice G. Forman** (Seattle) joined me with Immediate Past President **Beth Allen** (New York) to weigh in on the issue. We came up with some very promising ideas.

The brainstorm gave rise to a strong interest in branding, public relations, and social media centered around Annual Conference, professional development, workshops, and demonstrations. The ideas include: earned education credit at colleges and universities, new chapter development, greater leveraging of our heritage programs (Legacy, M.F.K. Fisher, Global Culinary Initiative, Green Tables) and more. Some ideas can and, in some cases, are being addressed within the normal operating budget. Others seem perfect for the fund, but will likely take some time. But, our diligence will pay off. As Past President Suzanne Brown said, “Objectives, strategies, and tactics for the Brock Circle funds will give us the tools needed to better market and differentiate LDEI from other culinary organizations”.



In keeping with the trust placed in the Board to manage the fund, we are working very carefully and deliberately to determine where the money is best spent and where it can do the most good—for the most people. Currently, we are looking into partnerships for professional development among our members and educational opportunities that will add meaningful experiences at Conference, which can be shared across the entire membership. At some point, we will reach out to the full Brock Circle membership for their thoughts. In the meantime, if you are a member and would like to weigh in with ideas, please email me at lwillis@schnucks.com with the subject line, “BC BIG IDEA.”

As a reminder, current guidelines dictate that we spend only 40 percent of funds collected annually. That amount varies greatly and is slowly growing over time. I am pleased to report that Brock Circle currently has 44 members (including chapters); it is strong and growing. If you, or your chapter, hope to join us in creating lasting legacies through the Brock Circle, please access the Brock Circle information online at LDEI.org or call Greg Jewell and request a form. We thank all of our current members and for those who have not yet made the decision to join, please know that the more the fund grows, the more we increase our opportunities to connect and make a difference.

John—heritage dishes that descended from African slave kitchens. The Coastal Georgia chef/farmer will discuss agricultural contributions of Africans in the Lowcountry and share his culinary expertise on various components of Gullah-Geechee cooking from “the roots up.” Matthew is a proponent of the seed-to-table movement; his mantra is, “fresh, organic, and local.” He and his sister, Althea Raiford, are the sixth generation to own certified, organic Gillard Farm. Located near Brunswick, it was established by their third great-grandfather in 1874. The siblings are testing strains of Carolina Gold Rice and the original southern peanut—introduced by Africans to North America in the 1700s. Mathew graduated from The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY and has a certificate in Ecological Horticulture from UC Santa Cruz and The Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems.

The culinary training of Chef **KEVIN E. MITCHELL**, CEC, BCA, CFSE, ACE, began in his grandmoth-

er’s kitchen cleaning collards, spinach, and kale; it was completed at the Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, where he earned two degrees. Kevin is chef instructor at the Culinary Institute of Charleston within Trident Technical College. His work embraces delicate French cuisine, yet reveals sumptuous soul food flair. Kevin discussion will include the development of Charleston’s Gullah cuisine, its influences, ingredients and dishes. “Trident Tech has an enduring interest in Gullah culture,” says **Marion Sullivan** (Charleston). In 2009, Kevin ran a test kitchen at the college for Chef Charlotte Jenkins’ acclaimed cookbook, *Gullah Cuisine*. In April, he was chef-coordinator for Nat Fuller’s Feast, the illustrious re-creation of an 1865 Charleston banquet hosted by African-American chef Nat Fuller at his restaurant, The Bachelor’s Retreat. It was the first occasion to bring black and white patrons together to break bread and celebrate the Civil War’s end.