

*The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South.* By Michael W. Twitty (New York: Amistad Press, 2017). Pp. 464. Hardcover, \$28.99.

At the 2018 James Beard Awards, the Foundation announced Michael Twitty's *The Cooking Gene* as winner of the Writing Award as well as Book of the Year. This blogger, food writer, independent scholar, Judaic studies teacher, and food activist rightly deserves these prizes. His work began with his 2012 "Southern Discomfort Tour," during which Twitty visited sites of cultural memory, particularly places critical to his family history, while simultaneously studying food history and contemporary culinary culture. In *The Cooking Gene*, Twitty documents the connection between food history and family history, from Africa to America and from slavery to freedom.

Twitty defines the scope of the book as pertaining to "The Old South," meaning the former slaveholding states and the "history and culture they collectively birthed from the days of contact through the Civil Rights."<sup>1</sup> Twitty uses this term to define his work, placing it in the title and defining it in the preface. However, two pages later he acknowledges the term is a "misnomer." "The Old South" exists in the collective American mind as the "home of the original American rebel"—though Northerners might argue this title belongs to Revolutionary-era Bostonians.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, defining the Old South as a "forgotten Little Africa" negates the cultural adaptations both forced upon and chosen by Americans of African descent over the past four hundred years. To do so also erases the role of European empires, white settlers, Native peoples, and Latino communities in shaping the varied quilt work of Southern culture.

*The Cooking Gene* undeniably spans beyond the timeframe that Twitty presents in the introduction. It is largely a memoir of his experiences with food, and rightfully so. Twitty describes that his "entire cooking life has been about memory"—a fitting statement for a culinary historical interpreter. The author takes the reader back to his childhood experiences with food, recounting his hatred of "slave" foods and tastes of his first trips to the South for family reunions. Likewise, Twitty writes about the relationship between food and his Jewish faith as well as the bond he formed with his mother and grandmother through their shared passion for cooking. Ranging from awkward to uncomfortable to hilarious, at the center of the book lies a deeper examination of the culinary contributions of enslaved people and their decedents.

Over the chapters titled "Missing Pieces," "No Nigger Blood," "White Man in the Woodpile," and "0.01 Percent," Twitty describes the research efforts he poured into better understanding his family tree. His conclusion? He rejects his past of being "just black or brown" and instead proclaims "I am an obsessive cook with compulsive genealogist tendencies who can point to a map of Africa, Europe, North America, and with it, the South...my food is my flag."<sup>3</sup> My first thought upon reading this conclusion of the questions and answers covered in the four chapters was, "Well, what's your food?" Fortunately, I kept reading, and found that the remaining twelve chapters answered my question.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (New York: Amistad Press, 2017), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Twitty, *The Cooking Gene*, xv.

<sup>3</sup> Twitty, *The Cooking Gene*, 139.

The final two-thirds of the book grapple with the origins of an African-American food tradition by tracing food from slavery to freedom and back to Africa. The chapter titled “Mother of Slaves” explains the negotiation and conflict surrounding food bearing an African American culture. Working through different portions of the American South, from the Chesapeake and down the coast to Virginia, through the Lowcountry, and across the Mississippi and Gulf, Twitty describes that the landscape itself shaped regional cultures. African bondsmen were forcibly migrated to these new environments, integrating into a well-established cultural exchange with white settlers and indigenous peoples. Subsequent chapters weave through specific foodstuffs. Twitty focuses his chapter on sugar on the commodity’s marked relationship with New World slavery. The author expands on Afro-Caribbean culture and its culinary influence in colonial America, particularly the coastal South.

Twitty also discusses the ethnobotanical history of the colonial and antebellum South’s staple crops of corn, tobacco, and rice—particularly the labor performed by enslaved fieldhands and cooks in preparing the crops for local consumption. His chapter titled “Adam in the Garden” focuses on crops grown in enslaved peoples’ provision plots and the African-origins of many of the cultivars selected by them. In this chapter, his work builds on arguments laid forth by other authors of the African Diaspora such as B.J. Barickman’s work on early nineteenth-century Brazil, Amar Wahab’s work on nineteenth-century Trinidad, and Judith Carney’s study of Africanized foodways on plantation societies throughout the Americas. Expanding beyond their knowledge, Twitty investigates the labor performed by bondspeople to grow these genealogically-African foods. The chapter titled “Crossroads” returns to present day and details Twitty’s exploration of self-identity. He particularly focuses on the intertwining of food and spirituality in African and African American traditions, specifically those surrounding death. The final two chapters of his book record Twitty’s thoughts, feelings, and degrees of comfort on trips returning to his two ancestral homelands- Western Europe and West Africa.

All in all, Twitty achieves the “sense of the bric-a-brac mosaic that is the average African American’s experience when he or she attempts to look back to recapture our cultural and culinary identities.”<sup>4</sup> So unique to this book is Twitty’s writing style, which successfully weaves together his personal memoir with the cultural and culinary past. A fascinating read and a unique journey, *The Cooking Gene* leaves this historian wanting more. Twitty’s claims are exciting and progressive in the field of Southern culture, African Diasporic studies, and culinary history but leave me craving source citations for his profound assertions. I look forward to continuing digesting the future works from Twitty’s “cooking pot of human kind.”

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<sup>4</sup> Twitty, *The Cooking Gene*, 417.