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FIQWS

Food History and Culture

Growing up in a West Indian household, I was always surrounded by family members who prepared a variety of dishes when it came to dinner. Our family would either go over to our relative’s houses with dishes prepared or have them come over to exchange and bond over all of ours. We would always have food prepared for us by my grandmother, whether it was traditional dishes like chicken seasoned with curry, diced potato fried golden brown with seasoned cauliflower, sliced eggplants seasoned with diced potatoes, or another variety of mixed vegetables and meat. I remember being in my room and suddenly getting sensations of the breeze traveling from downstairs. Inhaling the mild spices with hints of cumin instinctually stopped me from what I was doing to see what was being prepared. I would hover over my grandma and exchange a smile because I was always the first one there as she finished cooking. I would stand near the kitchen and joke around questioning how much longer. She takes my anticipation as a compliment to her cooking and sits me down as she prepares the food neatly on the table.

Then started high school, and I would ditch all of my friends and their plans because I knew my grandma was home by herself anticipating on my return so she can feed me. Coming home everyday to the precious smile on my grandma’s face was something irreplaceable. I would get situated and change into my home clothes as she finished cooking her vegetarian dishes that consisted of mildly steamed softened spinach with black cumin seeds, light turmeric powder and diced green chili peppers. I would then skim the dining table and lift up every lid until I found the dish that best suited what I was in the mood for. One of the dishes made when I lifted the cover was goat curry mixed with thin, long and softened potato slices. I would be overwhelmed by the beautiful exotic yet mild spices exuberating from its steam. I can tell it was just made. I would move onto the next dish, and would see spinach curry softened and lightly fried with turmeric powder, salt and fennel flowers with diced bell peppers that would give be bursted with a tangy taste. The spinach would look stringy but tasted like no other. Before I can finish observing the rest, my grandma would take my plate and prepare my food for me. She would put rice with spinach, fried potatoes with broccoli. She knew I could not finish more than that. My grandma would then mix the plate of food together and feed me since she assumed the food would be too hot for me to handle. This was the highlight of my day. From the meals within our celebrations, birthdays, guests invites, and our everyday lives, my grandma had always been the one to give a memorable experience, all done with a smile.

All of the meals, pampering, and caretaking had fallen short when my grandmother gotten ill due to heart failure. The organs of her body slowly started to deteriorate, and she was in pain. My parents and siblings and I would visit her at the hospital everyday after school or work and look at her. Her enthusiasm was gone. She couldn’t open her eyes. She didn’t have an appetite for the food, the energy to move, or the ability to speak. As painful as this situation was, she was eventually set free. Losing her was like losing everything- we were just unable to cope with it. We moved in silence. We moved in sadness. We had lost our family member who allowed us to stay in unity from all of her hard work. It felt like we had lost our will to continue any sort of tradition. Her death made us realize how great her ambition to maintain our tradition was, and after months of recuperating, my family knew that it was time to continue her legacy. Our tradition follows a custom of being unable to cook any meats after the passing of a family member. It was extremely difficult.

After several months, my mother quit her second job and started to carry the practice. She began reading recipes, inviting family members, and performing trial and error. She knew the basics of defrosting and preparing meats, however she was missing the trait of giving the food its culture. Sometimes, she would cook too salty, or miss a specific ingredient. My family and I would still give her the benefit of the doubt and encourage her, and she took the encouragement and went far with it. One day I walked into the kitchen, and I seen her frying onions. As the onions fried, she would dice potatoes and place it in a drainer. Then my mom would mix it with turmeric powder, salt, cumin, seeds, and curry powder. She would then throw in the cauliflower and eggplant with the potatoes, and add more of the mixture. She then explains to me how once the onion slices turn into a slightly darker color, she would throw the potatoes, cauliflower, and eggplant into the pan and mix them all together until they turn into a golden brown color, stirred with onion slices and topped off with chopped cilantro. I began to smell the same exact spices exuberating from her cooking the way I did with my grandmother. She then starts her next dish as she defrosts the chicken by soaking it with salt for a few hours and then removing the excess chicken fat. After, she marinates the chicken with plain yogurt, teaspoons of cayenne pepper, masala, chopped cilantro, grated ginger, chopped onions, and a clove of minced garlic, I began to take over and place the marinated chicken onto the pan. After it has been stirred for 30 minutes and I am able to smell the scent of the strong exotic spices and onion, I garnish my dish with cilantro and squeeze one slice of lemon all over as this mild taste of lemon compliments the exotic spices of my completed dish of tandoori chicken. The yogurt allows the chicken to have a nice creamy sauce tasting sweet and spicy, and eating this with rice perfects the culture of the dish. We were both smiling because it was meant to be. She places it on the table as everyone comes down to eat, serving it warm with rice. She brought back the joyous moment of us bonding. As we begin to eat her food, we start exchanging smiles, tears, all forms of happiness. She brought back the culture.

With my grandmother being gone, it allowed us to understand the severity of being knowledgeable to our family, as well as our traditions and customs. Consistently depending on one person to demonstrate the roots of our background was not healthy, and I believe my grandmother would be so grateful to know how we deeply respect all that she has done for us. She had a heart of gold and now a day doesn’t go by where I don’t cook in honor of her.