

Article: "Akara from Africa: Black-eyed pea fritters, inspired by Hercules"

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As our First Chefs recipe series continues, exhibition curator Amanda Herbert writes about a recipe for akara (black-eyed pea fritters) that draws on African traditions and was inspired by Hercules, a chef who was enslaved by George and Martha Washington. Michael W. Twitty, author of the James Beard award-winning book *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (2017), developed this recipe for the Folger's First Chefs exhibition and joined our curators in cooking it.

What is a black-eyed pea? The small bean with a black spot is of African origin. It was, and still is, popular among people from West Africa, especially in Nigeria and Cameroon. For many women, men, and children living in these parts of the world, black-eyed peas are integral to their diet, history, and sense of culture. Black-eyed peas are central to American diets, histories, and cultures, too.

When Shakespeare was writing and performing in Britain, black-eyed peas were a staple crop for West African people. As Europeans enslaved people of African origin in ever greater numbers, they loaded black-eyed peas onto ships alongside the women, men, and children they had forced into permanent bondage. Traveling across the ocean from Africa to the territories claimed by Europeans in South, Central, and North America, black-eyed peas were part of the meager, inadequate rations provided by slavers to their captives. But when they arrived in the Americas, enslaved people reclaimed black-eyed peas as their own. Rescuing leftover peas from the remaining stores sold from slave ships (in some legends, enslaved mothers hid African seeds and grains in their own hair and their children's hair, in order to help ensure their survival), enslaved people planted and cultivated black-eyed peas in garden plots that were allotted for their own use. Black-eyed peas, a familiar and cherished food from Africa, sustained many enslaved people in the dangerous, deadly "new worlds" of the Americas.

Choosing Akara

When it came time to recreate a recipe that represented Hercules, one of our five Folger "first chefs," we knew that we had some unique opportunities and challenges in representing his legacy. There are many surviving recipes written by and for George and Martha Washington. Hercules surely made some of these dishes, but were they "his" in the fullest sense of the word? Author, chef, and historian Michael W. Twitty helped us imagine the food traditions, touchstones, and tastes of enslaved people in the 18th century. What might people like Hercules have made for their own families, in their own ways, and according to their own choices?

This brings us to akara, the black-eyed pea fritter. Crunchy and savory, it's a delicious snack with a rich, fascinating history. Black-eyed peas are the central ingredient in akara, and they are instantly recognizable: a small, cream-colored bean with a distinctive black spot, marking the place where the growing pea attaches to its pod. They're not always easy to define, however, especially historically. We know that they originated in Africa. When they made their way to Europe and the Americas, they were renamed and

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reclassified, sometimes dozens of times. They are and have been called cowpeas, southern peas, field peas, calavance, ervilha de vaca (Portuguese) and chicharo de vaca (Spanish). In France and its colonies they were occasionally named mogettes or mojettes, supposedly because they reminded people of nuns' or monks' habits. Today they have been assigned the scientific name *Vigna unguiculata*.

We can't find a specific reference to black-eyed peas in Shakespeare, but in *Henry IV, Part 1*, one of Shakespeare's characters complains that the worst inn outside of London serves its patrons "peas and beans...as dank here as a dog," implying that both bad inns and good ones served peas and beans. In his authoritative 1633 *Herball*, botanist John Gerard praised black-eyed peas. Gerard also recognized that black-eyed peas were well-traveled; he called them the "Indian Kidney beane" and noted that they had "been brought [to Britain] out of the East and West Indies, and from some parts of Africa."

Black-eyed peas were also absolutely essential to enslaved people of African origin, providing them with sources of nutrition, control over their own diets, and a sense of place, space, culture, self, and home. In this period black-eyed peas were made into stews and soups. These are food ancestors of the dish Hoppin' John, in which black-eyed peas are stewed, sometimes with pork, onion, or rice, and served with greens, to be eaten on New Year's Day to encourage luck and good fortune. They were also ground, seasoned, soaked, patted, and deep-fried into akara.

Deep-frying foods in vegetable oil seems like a modern American craze, but it was an ancient cooking tradition in West Africa, and one that we have inherited from enslaved people. In 17th- and 18th-century enslaved communities, fritters could be made of fish, fruits, rice, or cornmeal (another food ancestor—in this case, of the modern-day hush puppy). Very often, though, they were made of black-eyed peas. Akara was cooked in Africa. It was cooked in British colonies in the Caribbean and in North America and in the new United States. It might have been cooked in Hercules's own community. Akara is as much a part of America's food history as apple pie, and it helps us to commemorate and honor a fuller, more real sense of American foodways.

Learn More

In addition to the books mentioned above, the following offer further reading on the topic; all of them were also of assistance for this blog post. You can also find many of these for sale in our Folger gift shop.

- Carney, Judith A. and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff. *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- Davidson, Alan. *The Oxford Companion to Food*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Harris, Jessica B. *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Shields, David S. *Southern Provisions: The Creation and Revival of a Cuisine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Jas. Townsend & Son Inc. 18th Century Cookery DVD Series g. Townsends website.
- Twitty, Michael W. "Afroculinaria: Exploring Culinary Traditions of Africa, African America, and the African Diaspora."
- Washington, Brigid. "Stewing Black-Eyed Peas for New Year's Luck," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2018.

AKARA RECIPE

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup dried black-eyed peas
- 1 small red onion
- 1 bunch parsley
- 4 cups water
- 1 cup flour
- 1-2 cups lard or vegetable oil



Photo Credit: Johnny Shryock

PREPARATION

- 1) Crush the black-eyed peas into very small pieces using a mortar and pestle or food processor. It's okay if the mixture is uneven, but the largest pieces should be no bigger than a grain of rice.
- 2) Set aside in a large bowl. Mince onion and parsley and mix together.
- 3) Measure 1/4 cup of the onion and parsley mixture and add it to the crushed peas.
- 4) Boil the water. Add the boiling water to the peas, onions, and parsley and stir well.
- 5) Let sit for 45 minutes, or until the peas have softened and fallen to the bottom of the bowl and the water is thick and cloudy.
- 6) Add in the flour gradually, until the mixture looks like a thick pancake batter and holds its shape in a spoon.
- 7) Add lard or oil to a cast-iron skillet until it is 1/2-inch deep, and heat until the surface shimmers.
- 8) Drop the batter into the skillet using a spoon. You can make the fritters whatever size you like, but 1/4 cup works well.
- 9) Cook until the fritters are brown and crispy and have loosened from the bottom of the pan; flip and repeat browning.
- 10) Remove and allow the fritters to drain on paper towels.

Akara is delicious right out of the pan, but you can also eat it with salt, herbs, and spices sprinkled on top, hot sauce, or all of the above.

This recipe was developed by Michael W. Twitty for the Folger exhibition, *First Chefs: Fame and Foodways from Britain to the Americas* (on view Jan 19–Mar 31, 2019), produced in association with *Before 'Farm to Table': Early Modern Foodways and Cultures*, a Mellon initiative in collaborative research at the Folger Institute.