

From the Humble to the Sublime: African Influences on Brazilian Cuisine

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Brazil's national dish is the *feijoada*—a dish of slave-origins that can be found in all parts of Brazil, with each cook preparing, modifying, enhancing it according to her family's likes and traditions, I first learned about the *feijoada* when I began to study Portuguese. It was described, in my book, as a black bean dish (thus the term *feijoada*, from the word for bean, *feijão*) cooked with dried beef, sausage, various parts of the pig (in particular, the ears, snout, feet, and tail), and whatever animal happens to run through the kitchen when the cook is preparing it. This fairly graphic description has stayed with me over the years, although after numerous trips to Brazil, I have not yet eaten a *feijoada* with unidentifiable animals/animal parts in it. It does include the rather humble parts of the pig, but those, of course, are very identifiable—you know when you've gotten a foot.

The readily-accepted theory of the origin of the *feijoada* rests in Brazil's colonial past, during its 300 years of slavery. The dish is commonly believed to have been created out of the resourcefulness of the slave cooks, who were given the left-over and unpalatable parts of meat, those that would not be acceptable at the master's table. Those cooks threw the snouts, ears, and tails into a pot full of black beans and extracted every bit of flavor they could out of the little meat they had. The result was a dish that has been made and adapted by almost every cook in contemporary Brazil. Recently, however, this theory about the origin of the *feijoada* has been challenged. Many Brazilian scholars believe that the *feijoada*, though likely created by slaves working in

plantation kitchens, was prepared for the masters as an adaptation of a Portuguese stew using local ingredients, and that the Portuguese actually prized the cuts of meat used in the dish (Goldman 73). However, the well-accepted lore that the slaves created the *feijoada* with discarded meats continues and only recently has the story been challenged. Either way, the origin of this humble dish rests with Brazil's slaves. It's truly remarkable—the *feijoada*, now a dish for special occasions (partially because it takes so long and so many special ingredients to prepare, and partially because of the heaviness of the dish, making holidays and weekends the most natural time to consume it) was crafted by Brazil's least privileged inhabitants. While almost every family prepares and eats *feijoada* in Brazil today, the image of the Afro-Brazilian cook still dominates our visual representations of it. Recently, chef Tony Bourdain, on his TV show *A Cook's Tour*, ate a *feijoada* in Rio de Janeiro. He went out of his way to travel to a *favela* (shantytown), to find a cook who made a “traditional” *feijoada*. Of course, she was black.

We will return to the humble *feijoada*, as well as the sublime dishes of Northeastern Brazil, later. Now we will move on to the history and legacy of African slavery in Brazil.

BLACKS IN BRAZIL

The large number of blacks in Brazil is the result of one institution: slavery. Slavery provided the crucial cultural contact that would so deeply affect Brazil, Brazilian culture and, of course, Brazilian cuisine.

Although the Portuguese first arrived in Brazil in 1500, it took over half a century before they established an economy. Portugal's other dominions, in Africa and Asia, were more profitable and garnered more attention. The crown only established a strict

bureaucracy in 1549, to fight off French and British incursions into Brazil. By the late 1500s, though, sugar plantations began to spring up in the Northeast, where sugar grew well. Sugar, of course, needs lots of labor, and the colonists looked to the Indians to provide that labor. However, the enslaved Indians quickly fell victim to European diseases and many fled to the unnavigated interior of the country. The Portuguese decided that the Indians were simply too fragile for plantation labor and, having been active in the Atlantic slave trade for over 100 years, they looked to African slaves to fill those empty spaces. Soon, the sugar plantation system became entirely dependent on African slave labor. While slaves were initially brought in to provide labor for the sugar plantations, the eventual overabundance of African slaves caused them to be used in almost all areas of the economy: in the gold mines of the Southeast, on the coffee plantations of the South, and in the major cities of Salvador and Rio de Janeiro as household servants. Slaves were used in every form of manual labor in the colony (Andrews 3-4). Throughout the rest of this presentation, when I refer to slavery in Brazil, I am referring to African slavery, since the number of other kinds of slaves (i.e., indigenous peoples) was negligible in terms of total numbers.

African slaves were brought into Brazil as early as 1530 and the legal slave trade continued until 1850, with abolition in 1888 (under Princess Isabel's "Golden Law;" at the time, Brazil was an independent empire, under a monarch, Pedro II). During those three centuries, Brazil received 4,000,000 Africans, "over four times as many as to any other American destination" (Andrews 4). To put this in perspective, Brazil received 40% of the total number of Africans brought to the Americas, while the U.S. received approximately 10% of the total. "As a result, Brazil is today the largest national

component of the overseas African diaspora, with a black and brown population exceeding that of every African nation except Nigeria” (4).

This map (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/dialogue/slave/images/Apdf.PDF>), created by UNESCO, outlines the routes and numbers involved in the five centuries of the African slave trade. The map is useful because it shows total numbers, as well as numbers by century. This could be turned into an excellent graphing activity for students, who could create a bar graph of total number of slaves leaving Africa in the seventeenth century, or produce a line graph depicting the total number of slaves entering the Americas over the course of the slave trade, or create a pie chart showing overall percentages of slaves going to the Americas. Students could also construct a timeline of abolition dates, provided on the map of the nineteenth century, and discuss the progress of abolition movements throughout Europe and the Americas.

The map also details, in its breakdown by century, the way that the slave trade moved through Africa. This general movement south, and then further into the continent, is loosely reflected in the areas from which Africans were brought to Brazil. For example, looking at the map for the eighteenth century, one notes slaves from Angola going to Bahia (Salvador da Bahia, or Salvador as it is generally known, was the capital of Brazil, the seat of the sugar trade, and the main port for slaves). Between 1701 and 1800, 1.4 million slaves (the number cited here varies slightly from that on the map, but all are estimates) were brought to Brazil from Angola, with less than half that number brought from other ports in Africa (Mattoso 40). “Without Angola no slaves, without slaves no sugar, without sugar no Brazil” was a common expression during the seventeenth century. During this last fifty years of the legal slave trade (1800-1850), large numbers of Yoruba people, from the area that is currently Nigeria and Benin, were

brought to large cities in Northeastern Brazil (Walker 1). So, the slave trade was cyclical, with certain parts of Africa coming to prominence during certain eras of the trade. Where the slaves came from, as well as where they settled and how many there were, greatly influenced their impact on Brazilian culture.

Slaves were distributed in Brazil based on the primary export of the time, depending on where they were needed for work. Before the gold rush of the late 1600s, slaves entered through the port of Salvador and stayed in the state of Bahia. Bahia remains the seat of Afro-Brazilian culture and it is where we find the richest examples of African-influenced cuisine, both because of the large numbers of slaves entering the port of Bahia and because slaves remained in that region the longest of any in Brazil. Sugar rose to prominence during the colony's early years and required large numbers of slaves. The sugar trade then diminished and, although slaves were distributed to other parts of Brazil, many remained in Bahia and worked in the capital of Salvador. In the late seventeenth century, gold was found in Minas Gerais (General Mines) and tripled the demand for slaves; of the estimated 1.7 million slaves brought into Brazil in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Brazil (again, 1.1 million from Angola and the Guinean Coast), an estimated 1 million went inland to the gold mines and diamond fields. By 1760, the slowdown in gold and diamonds coincided with sugar's second wind, causing a renewed influx of slaves to the Northeast. By the early nineteenth century, coffee was coming to prominence in southern Brazil: 1.3 million slaves eventually made their way to the coffee plantations. Over the course of slavery in Brazil, the 4 million slaves that arrived ended up in many places, but three export-oriented industries—sugar, gold, and coffee—directed their destinies. (Mattoso 41-42)

In order to understand the overall importance of the number of African slaves in Brazil, one must compare it to the free population. This table (see Skidmore Table PDF) offers us a portrait of Brazil in the nineteenth century, before and after its 1822 independence from Portugal, and before and after the slave trade became illegal (1850). The table breaks the population down by Brazil's traditional regions: North, Northeast, East (now referred to as the Southeast), South, and Center-West. In terms of total population in 1819, the East, home of the coffee industry of São Paulo, the mines of Minas Gerais, and the national capital of Rio de Janeiro (since 1763), constitutes approximately half of Brazil's total population and half of its slave population. This is logical, since coffee was a dominant industry at the time and the inhabitants of Rio, the largest city at the time, used slaves in their homes and for other urban labor needs. The Northeast is second to the East in terms of population and number of slaves, although the percentage of slaves (33%) is higher than in the East. The historical dominance of the city of Salvador, the former capital of Brazil (until 1763), as a major urban center explains the total population; and its dominance as a port of entry for African slaves, as well as the dependence of the sugar industry (faltering at this point, but still viable) on slave labor accounts for the higher proportion of slaves. We must also look at the Center-West, home of the diamond fields so heavily plundered during the eighteenth century, where the slave population was at its most significant: 40% of the total population. Of course, the overall population was small enough that this 40% counts for a small percentage (3.7%) of all the slaves in Brazil at the time, but it's interesting to note that slaves likely outnumbered freemen in many occupations in that region. Finally, note how all of the other regions, including the Center-West, fall far behind the Northeast and East in terms of overall population; the South, for example, had just more

than one-third the population of the Northeast. It becomes abundantly clear that people settled in regions where lucrative industries were forming, mostly along the coastline, and today 80% of Brazil's population continues to live less than 100 miles from the coast. Brazilians never went West, looking for land and fortune, as was done in the U.S. While our frontier was settled long ago, Western Brazil remains a frontier.

Moving on to 1872, we can see clearly the effects of the end of the slave trade: the highest percentage of slaves in any region is 19.5%, in the East. While the overall slave population had grown since 1819 (1.5 versus approximately 1.1 million), the growth is minor compared to the growth in the overall population, which has more than doubled in size. The slave trade from 1842 and 1851 alone accounts for three-quarters of the growth in the slave population, with 300,000 slaves entering during that period (Degler 52). One explanation for this slow growth is also a major factor in the influence of African customs in Brazil: slavery in Brazil was more reliant on importation of slaves from Africa than on reproduction of the slave population. This fact brings up an important point of comparison with slavery in the United States, where "high annual increases [in the slave population] can be accounted for only by recognizing that the principal source of the slave population in the U.S. during the nineteenth century was natural increase" (Degler 61). Roughly 5,000 slaves were brought into the US each year during the 1840s, while the slave population during that period grew by 70,000 each year. Brazil's reliance on imports of African slaves, on the other hand, is due to the "steady stream of slaves from Africa" until 1850, and beyond (Degler 65).

THE U.S. AND BRAZIL: SLAVERY AND RACE RELATIONS

For those who teach American History, or who cover World History and Geography from a comparative point of view, slavery and race relations in the U.S. and

Brazil is a ripe point for discussion. Books, including Carl Degler's Neither Black nor White, have been written on the subject. The differences in how slavery was organized and how slaves were treated has resulted in very different sets of race relations in the two countries; these countries, the two largest slave-holding societies in the New World, are particularly appropriate for comparison. While the U.S.' slave population never grew to the numbers in Brazil, Brazil evolved into what was perceived as a "racial democracy" in comparison to the deep-seated racial clashes experienced in the U.S. Quickly, I would like to discuss a few of the more salient points when comparing slavery in these two countries.

(1) Black History: "Brazil lacks a tradition of formal separation of the races"

(Degler 5). The races have constantly intermingled, and miscegenation has been a common theme in Brazilian history. The contributions of Black Brazilians has been recognized in Brazil since the nineteenth century, although Afro-Brazilian culture only reached an elevated and respected status in the twentieth century.

(2) Manumission [grants of freedom by masters to individual slaves]: While most slaves remained enslaved throughout their lives, more slaves were freed in Brazil than in the U.S. Slaver-holders often freed the sick and the old so as not to be responsible for them. Also, because of a labor shortage, freed slaves were needed in occupations that were undesired or unfilled by white men and that they could not perform within the constraints of slavery. The boom-bust economy "provided incentives for manumission during the busts and jobs for freed slaves during the booms" (Degler 44). In the U.S. South, "there has always been more than enough white men to perform all the tasks of society

except that of a plantation worker,” so slave-holders were not as likely to free slaves under those conditions (Degler 45). Still, one must consider that manumission rates never exceeded 1% of the slave population per year, but the totals still exceeded the numbers of free blacks in other slave-holding societies. “By 1800 free Afro-Brazilians and Africans were an estimated 30% of the total population—the same proportion as whites” (Andrews 7). The entire black population of the U.S., free and slave, never came close to that kind of proportion.

(3) Slave Trade: Brazil’s slave trade lasted two generations longer than that of the U.S., and more slaves were African-born than in the US. This has led to an Afro-Brazilian connection to Africa that has not been as present in the United States. The transference of African culture, in these circumstances, was much more direct than in the U.S., where links to Africa were relegated to stories of one’s ancestors rather than to one’s own experience. Only recently have U.S. African-Americans begun to develop that connection with Africa in a way that more closely resembles the situation in Brazil.

(4) Defending Slavery: As Degler points out, “At the height of the slave system in the United States, slavery was increasingly defended on racial grounds,” although the need for labor was the initial reason for using slaves (85). Blacks were seen as an “inferior race.” This was not the case in Brazil, where the key point was legal status, not race, since many black slaves had been freed and mulattoes, the product of racial mixing, were readily accepted in free society. Brazilians believed that the prosperity of their country depended on the institution of slavery, since they so desperately needed the labor, but slavery

was rarely defended on racist grounds. This is perhaps one of the single biggest differences in contrasting slavery and consequent race relations in the U.S. and Brazil. When one considers the idea of racial inferiority and fear of slave violence in the U.S. and the frequent manumission of slaves and practice of miscegenation in Brazil, one can see that, “in Brazil the slave may have been feared, but the black man was not, whereas in the United States both the slave and the black were feared” (Degler 89).

These are but a few possible points for comparison between the U.S. and Brazil, but these points reinforce the reasons why slavery affected Brazilian society in very different ways than it did U.S. society. In addition to the few issues that I’ve highlighted, this presentation might raise other potential points of comparison, which could easily be included in American History classes.

Therefore, before discussing the African influences in Brazilian cuisine, we must keep in mind a few essential points:

- (1) The number of African slaves in Brazil: Once again, there were 4 million slaves brought into Brazil between 1530 and 1888.
- (2) The diffusion of slaves in different areas of the country and in different occupations: We have discussed the major industries – sugar, mining, and coffee – that required slave labor. However, by the late eighteenth century, 40-50% of households in São Paulo, Ouro Preto (in the state of Minas Gerais), and Salvador held slaves (Andrews 11). Slaves were located in all major areas of the country, including the big cities where they enjoyed greater freedom of action (were able to sell their services to earn extra money). And they were

involved in almost every profession, outnumbering free laborers in many of them.

(3) The late date of abolition: The slave trade lasted longer in Brazil than in almost any other country in the Americas. Slavery was abolished in the British and French Caribbean, the United States, and Spanish America a generation or more before it was abolished in Brazil. When Brazil gained independence, in 1822, slavery was such an entrenched part of the system that the elites who structured the new nation never seriously debated the issue. “To the contrary: it was generally agreed that both [slavery and the slave trade] would go on as they had for the previous three hundred years” (Andrews 11). Not only was the slave trade continuing, the same number of Africans (1.7 million) entered Brazil between 1800 and 1850 as during the entire eighteenth century (Andrews 12). The late date of abolition, and the high numbers of slaves that entered Brazil late into the nineteenth century, contributed to the country’s connection to Africa.

BAHIAN CULINARY TRADITIONS

As previously mentioned, the state of Bahia received the vast majority of slaves, through the port of Salvador, and had the greatest concentration of slaves for the longest period of time during the 300 years of Brazilian slavery. While most slaves in Bahia worked on the sugar plantations, the city of Salvador was also home to large numbers of African slaves and continues to exhibit the legacy of that African presence. Bahia is still considered “the capital of African culture in the Americas” despite the “high degree of African cultural retention” in places like Suriname, Haiti, Cuba and Jamaica (Walker 1).

In the Northeastern countryside, slaves were involved in the large-scale production of sugar, Brazil's first major primary-export product. Brazilian colonists were able to count on a constant and ample supply of fresh labor from Africa, and therefore were not as focused on increasing the slave population through reproduction. Also, since the men were stronger and able to serve in more jobs than women, little effort was made to balance the sexes among the slaves (Degler 66). As one prominent Brazilian wrote in 1866, "What was wanted principally was labor, not families" (66). Scholars estimate that for every female slave brought into the country, between 3-5 men were imported (66-67).

The female slaves who did arrive in Brazil were relegated to very different duties than were the men who so greatly outnumbered them. Women cooked in plantation kitchens, served as wet-nurses and babysitters for the masters' children, worked as domestic servants in city homes, and sold food on the streets to earn extra money. Their duties were very different than that of the men, and their influence was felt very differently. In considering manumission rates, women, who tended to live in greater intimacy with the master and the master's family, were granted freedom twice as often as were men (Mattoso 164).

In 1933, Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre wrote his famous Casa grande e Senzala, translated into English as The Masters and the Slaves, about the impact of the three key components (the natives, the Portuguese colonizers, and the African slaves) of Brazilian society. The Masters and the Slaves was a landmark treatise on, as the author states, "the formation and disintegration of patriarchal society in Brazil, a society that grew up around the first sugar-mills...established by Europeans in our country, in the sixteenth century" (xi). To say that Freyre is an important text within Brazilian Studies

is an understatement; Freyre provides us with one of the foundational texts on Brazilian history and culture. The reason I mention him now is because of his fascination, as a son of the Northeast, with the impact of slaves—and especially slave women—on his culture. One must understand that before Freyre, while Brazil never embraced the racist and separatist attitudes of the United States, Brazil was trying to “whiten” its society by encouraging European immigration. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Brazil had fallen under the influence of scientific racism, as had the United States, which instituted formal segregation during this period. When Freyre came along in 1933, waxing poetic about the contributions made by African slaves to Brazilian society, he transformed the discourse about Brazil’s history and cultural roots.

This long introduction to the importance of Freyre in Brazilian intellectual history is meant only to preface this next point: Freyre begins his discussion of the African influence on Brazilian culture by considering the important roles of slave women. He begins with fond memories of the intimate relationship between the white child and his wet-nurse. Soon, however, he’s speaking of African foods and African cooks: “A number of the most nutritive values that the Negroes possessed—at least so far as vegetables went—were brought with them to America, and this contributed to the process, which was by way of being one of Africanization, that the white and natives underwent, while at the same time it smoothed over for the Africans the disturbing effects of transplantation. Once in Brazil, the Negroes became, in a sense, masters of the land: they dominated the kitchen, preserving in large part their own diet” (287). Freyre points out that African cooks, in their masters’ kitchens and working with African ingredients, were able to bring some of their world into the diet of Brazil.

The slaves themselves did not necessarily eat the African-influenced dishes they cooked. Ingredients such as palm oil, which we will discuss later, were too expensive. The slaves, who were allowed small plots on which to grow their own food in addition to getting unwanted leftovers, ate of manioc flour, corn, dried meat, game, local fruits, and, when they were on the coast, fresh fish and shellfish. “We know that the slave diet was far richer in calories, proteins, and carbohydrates than that of a poor Brazilian in the twentieth century” (Mattoso 103). In addition, slaves in urban areas were allowed to hire themselves out to earn some money of their own and could buy dishes prepared by other slaves. So, urban slaves often sold food, including fruit and vegetables, baked goods, dried meat, and African-style dishes, to other slaves and to freed Africans, who generally flocked to the cities looking for work (Mattoso 124). Those who had access and resources to buy food from street vendors were able to eat African-influenced dishes. Otherwise, those dishes were confined to the homes of the masters, where the cooks, using ingredients familiar to them, tried to please their masters’ palates. One of the first documented mentions of an Afro-Brazilian dish was in the first half of the seventeenth century, by the Dutchman Willem Pies, who lived in Pernambuco from 1638-1644. In his *História Natural* (Natural History), he mentions *caruru*, made with okra (an African food), dried shrimp, and *dendê* (palm) oil (Brandão 73).

Slave cooks had access to African ingredients, including what has become known as the “Holy Trinity of Bahian Cuisine”—palm oil, malagueta pepper, and coconut milk—that were imported from Africa along with them. The Portuguese, trading in more than people, were bringing African products into the New World. One such example is *dendê* (palm) oil, which entered Brazil not with the African slave nor for the African slave, but as a fuel source (Brandão 43-44). Only after years of being used in Brazil did

dendê oil start to be used by African cooks, because they were familiar with it as a flavoring in African cooking (44). Once again, we cannot underestimate the importance of a steady stream of African slaves in the Americas— in the United States, this lag in years would have meant a slave population unfamiliar with traditional African cooking and ways of using African products, whereas in Brazil the constant traffic in slaves meant closer ties to African customs. The *dendêzeiro*, or *dendê* palm, is a tropical palm tree that adapted very well to the Northeastern Brazilian climate.

Another ingredient that likely traveled from Africa to America was the malagueta pepper. The actual origin of this pepper (New World or Old World) has been hotly debated, but recent scholarship has indicated that malagueta pepper is not really a pepper in the sense that American capsicum is: it is a hot spice, “a small, narrow, bright red pod, having very pungent properties” (Brandão 46). The malagueta pepper is not New World capsicum, nor is it black pepper from India, but rather a member of the ginger family (Johnson 44). While cooks in Africa began to use American capsicums in place of the malagueta pepper, the malagueta was faithfully transferred to the New World and now appears as a staple in Afro-Brazilian cuisine.

Finally, the third ingredient in the Holy Trinity, coconut milk was so well-received in Brazil that today Africans are surprised by the quantity of it used by Bahian cooks (Brandão 71). Obviously, the use of coconut milk is not unique to African cooking—we know it well from various cuisines—but knowledge of its use was brought by the African cooks into Brazilian homes.

Bahian dishes featuring one or a combination of these three ingredients are among the most sublime dishes in the world and have earned Bahia a reputation for its cuisine. Any tour of Northeastern Brazil will highlight “Afro-Brazilian cuisine.” Typical

dishes include *moqueca*, a seafood stew made with fish, shellfish, oysters, or lobster and garlic, onion, tomato, coconut milk, coriander and *dendê* oil; *acarajé*, consisting of ground black-eyed peas deep fried in *dendê* oil and served with dried shrimp (another typical ingredient in Afro-Brazilian cuisine); and *vatapá*, another seafood dish with peanuts and *dendê* oil that is sold on the streets of Salvador by women dressed in typical Bahiana costume (multi-layered white-lace petticoats, bead necklaces, and turbans).

These typical Bahian dishes are also influenced by African religions, as brought to the New World. One of the most famous syncretic religions is *Candomblé*, an Afro-Brazilian religion that blends Catholicism with Yoruba beliefs. Many traditional Bahian recipes are prepared for and then offered to the gods, or *orixás*, of *Candomblé*. The gods of *Candomblé* “aren’t only gluttons, but also fine gourmets. They know how to appreciate what is good and, like poor mortals, don’t eat just anything” (Brandão 51, my translation). For example, *acarajé* is the preferred dish of Yansan, the goddess of storms and winds, and on the first Wednesday of every month, her devotees prepare it for her. In this sense, the Afro-Brazilian dishes of Northeastern Brazil are sublime not only for their wonderful flavorings, but because they have been prepared, historically, as part of a spiritual, transcendent experience.

However, as sublime as the Northeastern dishes may be, they have remained regional. People the world over travel to Salvador to sample the delicacies of Afro-Brazilian cooking (if you look up “Afro-Brazilian cuisine” on GOOGLE, you’ll be amazed at how many listings are for cruises and vacation packages to Salvador), but these foods have not become national dishes. We could compare it to “soul food” in the U.S., which is much more prevalent in the South. On the other hand, the *feijoada*, which became Brazil’s national dish, is far more humble in its origin, which was not linked to religious

ceremony, and in its ingredients, which were not imported from Africa, than these delicacies. Why did *feijoada* become so popular while *moqueca* and its companions remained in the Northeast? The availability of ingredients would likely have been problematic. Historically, transportation and communications in Brazil have been challenging. The vastness of Brazil helped to sustain a system of regional economies and producers focused on supplying European demands for agricultural products rather than on selling goods to other Brazilians. Brazilian ports were more closely tied to Europe than to other ports in Brazil. “Before steam navigation it took less time to travel from Maranhão [in Brazil’s North] to Lisbon than to Rio de Janeiro” (Bethell and Carvalho 48). While dishes such as *moqueca* and *vatapá* called for special ingredients, either imported from Africa or produced in the tropical Northeast, *feijoada*—with its base of rice, beans, dried meats, and pork—was easily made in any region of Brazil and most people, even Brazil’s poor, were able to afford the ingredients.

Over the years, however, *feijoada* has been transformed into a dish for special occasions. The process of preparing and serving a *feijoada* is more than mere routine, it is a celebration. Says one chef who has opened a Brazilian restaurant in the United State, “If you had to name one dish from Brazil, it would be *feijoada*...It’s Brazilian soul food. It’s food of the people. Until recently, it wasn’t the food of the fancy restaurant, but now you find it there as well” (Peterson). Not only do you find the *feijoada* in fancy restaurants in Brazil, you are likely to find it in any Brazilian restaurant in the world—the *feijoada* is so typical that no Brazilian cook, no matter where he or she is located, will leave it behind.

The preparation for the *feijoada* often begins the day before, with the cook buying the special ingredients and soaking the beans. The cooking begins early on the

day of the *feijoada*, since a key element to the meal is time—the *feijoada* simmers for hours as the beans cook, the meats flavor the broth, and all the elements combine. The meal itself traditionally begins with drinks (the *caipirinha*, Brazil's national drink of crushed limes, sugar, and *cachaça*, sugarcane liquor). The meats are separated from the beans and served on a clay platter, while the beans go into a tureen. *Feijoada* is always accompanied by sliced oranges, collard greens, and *farofa*.

Farofa deserves a word or two – it is toasted manioc flour and a staple of Brazilian cooking, not only served with *feijoada* but with barbecue and almost any other meat dish prepared in Brazil. Any visitor to Brazil cannot miss the presence of *farofa* in restaurants and almost any meal they will be served in a Brazilian's home. Frommer's Brazil includes some comments on it:

Farofa – what's not to like? The coarsely roasted flour of the manioc root is the perfect companion to a Brazilian meal. Served plain, *farofa's* nutty flavor stands up, while allowing it to soak up the juices on your plate only enhances its flavor. What makes it really delicious are the additions and modifications of each cook. Every Brazilian has his or her favorite *farofa* recipe. My mother makes the best sweet *farofa* with bananas and raisins; it tastes as delightful as some of the best stuffings I've had. Other cooks prefer a savory version, adding spicy chorizo sausage, olives, or bacon. A *feijoada* is just not the same without *farofa*. Next time skip those greasy french fries and add some *farofa* to your plate.

Alternately, another writer notes:

I never got *farofa*. What I mean is, I got it with *every* meal. Really, what is the point? *Farofa*...has the dry, crumbly consistency of sawdust--and not coincidentally, that's what it tastes like. Brazilians painstakingly disguise the flavor, sometimes with raisins and dried fruit, but the end result tastes like...sawdust with raisins or dried fruit. Eating it made sense in the days when Brazilians lived in peasant huts; *farofa* was the sole source of carbohydrates. Like potatoes for the Irish, *farofa* kept you going. But Brazilian cooking now incorporates lots of carbs--like rice. Potatoes. French fries. Sometimes all three at once. But no matter how many starches are piled on your plate, *farofa* will be there to top it off. Because you can never get enough carbohydrates.
(Frommers Brazil)

Beyond these observations, however, we should discuss *farofa* because of the origin of manioc. Manioc (also called cassava) is native to the Americas—specifically to the tropical lowlands of South America—and is a thick, starch-filled root vegetable. Native peoples grated the roots and then placed them in a long, straw-woven apparatus, called a *tipiti*, to squeeze out the poisonous juices. Then, the manioc was dried into a kind of flour and used to make breads and porridges (Johnson 110). Columbus found manioc in the Caribbean and took manioc bread with him to feed his crew on their return journey (111). The Portuguese introduced manioc to Africa in the mid-sixteenth century, no doubt while they were trafficking in humans and trading in other goods. “It was quickly accepted in tropical regions where other food plants were scarce” (111). The similar climates of Northern Brazil and tropical Africa allowed the same plants (such as the *dendê* palm) to grow in both areas. Africans began to use manioc in much the same way that the Native Americans used it, and within a few generations, manioc was so common in Africa that it practically seemed native. So, Africans who were brought to Brazil as slaves likely knew manioc from their homeland, although it was American in origin. Today, African foods such as *fufu*, “dumplings made from cooked and mashed manioc” are found all over West Africa (111). In this way, manioc serves as a reflection of the cultural contact of slavery, but headed in the other direction—from the New World to the Old. Little known fact: we in the U.S. also consume manioc, in the form of tapioca, which is made from dried manioc.

Returning to the main dish at hand, *feijoada* has become more than just a meal, or even a celebration. Recently, it has become a rallying call. “The *feijoada*, the typical

dish of Brazil, incorporated in all of society but having emerged from the slave quarters, was chosen as the symbol of the birth of an authentic black Brazilian cinema. The main ingredient? Black beans, very black. Its roots are in black blood. The objective of this movement is to tread the same path as the famous dish: to leave the ghettos, to rise from below, to reach popular acceptance and to become a national symbol” (Dogma Feijoada). The *feijoada*, so symbolic of the nascence of Brazilian culture, has been turned into a new symbol, one of black pride—the Dogma Feijoada, as its authors have named it. At this level, the food has transcended its purpose as physical nourishment, but not the significance of its roots. Brazil’s national dish is rooted in its slave past, in its most humble quarters, a fact that is never forgotten, despite the *feijoada*’s massive popularity at home and increasing diffusion abroad.

Feijoada is not the only Brazilian dish that is crossing national boundaries. Cultural contact has an indelible impact on the food on our plate...whether it’s Africans in Brazil, Brazilians in Europe, or U.S. chefs preparing Brazilian foods. As food travels, along with the people who prepare it, it takes on new characteristics. Thinking simply of ethnic cuisine in the United States, the very food they (Brazilians, Africans, Italians, Chinese, etc.) eat, as it is introduced to us, is adapted for our dinner plate.

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