

mmmm, that smells
good!

February 9

Dear Diary,

Have you ever wanted something so bad that you can taste it? The single thought of good soul food sometimes will trigger that desire. Tender, meaty oxtails; juicy mustard greens; sweet candied yams; spicy finger-lickin' barbecue; cheesy baked macaroni and cheese; golden-fried catfish; mouthwatering hot-water corn bread; warm, melt-in-your-mouth peach cobbler. Mmmm, I get hungry just thinking about it!

Before I left home and discovered fine dining, I indulged in healthy meals like this on a regular basis (Oh, come on, all of the food groups were always there.) Anyway, healthy or not, these dishes are as common to

me as a redneck in Texas, but I guess everyone didn't have the same privilege.

"Mmmm, that smells good. What's that?" Peter asked.

Why is it that when minorities are eating anything that hasn't been tossed or chopped, we can never eat in peace at work? After the finger pointing and close breathing, you always seem to lose a smidgen of your hunger.

"Mac and cheese, yams, and oxtails," I answered with my mouth full.

"What's oxtails?" he asked.

I'm at lunch and I'm hungry. I don't have time to teach Soul Food 101.

"Beef."

I don't know why I was bothered. But haven't you noticed that the smallest things set you off during Black History Month? Especially coming to work and being forced to look at them the morning after an evening of Roots.

"Well, it smells really good."

So, does he want me to offer him some? Maybe next time...

"Thanks."

But some people are bolder . . .

"Mmm, that smells so good!" Kathy said as she passed by a few minutes later.

"Thanks!"

Keep moving.

"Ooooh, macaroni and cheese. I love macaroni and cheese!"

"Yeah, it's my favorite."

Please don't beg. I have three spoonfuls left, just enough to finish with my oxtails.

"I have to say that it's my specialty," she proclaimed.

Just ask already.

"Yeah, everybody doesn't know how to cook mac and cheese," I said with my mouth full.

"Can I have a bite of yours? I can let you know if it's up to par," she suggested.

Don't you hate it when people justify begging?

"Um, sure."

"Oh, but you just have a few bites left. Are you sure it's okay?"

"Oh, well..." I shrugged.

"I just need a tiny bite to see how it compares to mine."

Maybe I missed your show on The Food Network.

"Do you have a fork?" I asked.

Who carries forks with them? Of course she doesn't. Oh, well...

"Here, just break it off and put it on this sheet of paper," she insisted.

Damn, I'm trapped!

I felt like a deer caught in the headlights. Call me selfish but I had to wrestle my sturdy fork to break off a "tiny bite." As I watched the small piece move to her lips, I wanted to regain my strength and snatch it back. It's mine! It's mine! But then it disappeared in her greedy mouth.

"Mmmmm, this is really good!"

yeah, right. I really need your confirmation to know

that I can throw down with mac and cheese. Are you now going to give me another stupid project because I can cook better than you?

"Thanks," I said.

"I must say that this is better than mine. We have to exchange recipes."

Did I ask for your stinky recipe? Why do I want your recipe when mine is better? Just say that you want mine.

Not that I'm not taking full responsibility for good soul food. You can find "real" food in homes of all races, especially in the south. But even though Southerners, black and white, share these menus of down-home cooking, there is still a difference between the two households. One just has more of a kick, if you know what I mean.

"Yeah, we have to do that."

Now can I eat my last two bites of mac and cheese in peace?

"Well, enjoy the rest of your lunch," she said as she finally left me alone to eat in peace.

Thank you!

You would think with all the soul food restaurants that have emerged and have become popular with not just us, but with all races, that they wouldn't be surprised every time they see our food. And it never fails, every time they smell it, they have a story to tell about the time they went to this soul food shack in a not-so-nice neighborhood and had the best corn bread on the planet.

"Hey, what's up, girlfriend? You know, your lunch always smell so good," Amy said as she approached me moments after Kathy left my cubicle.

"Thanks."

"What you got today?" she asked.

"Mac and cheese, yams, and oxtails."

"You know what you need?" she suggested.

Maybe peace and quiet so I can enjoy my lunch?

"What?"

"Hot-water corn bread! Have you ever been to Real Soul?"

Just because you want to be down doesn't mean you really are down, homie. How can you even consider a place that sells shrimp fried rice a soul food restaurant?

"Yeah, a couple of times."

"The food is da bomb! Their corn bread is the best I've ever tasted."

That's because you never tasted Aunt Margaret's corn bread.

What makes an expert on soul food? Is it tasting watered-down greens at a subpar restaurant that has the reputation of the best greens in town by a food critic who can't tell the difference between mustards and collards? Or maybe it's dining at a rib shack that claims to have a unique recipe for Texas barbecue sauce that tastes a lot like Kraft? All I know is that I know good soul food like the old woman on the front pew wearing an oversized hat knows every spiritual. I know verse after verse of seasonings and ingredients. I can pick a dish apart, and if I don't know what's missing, I know enough that I can create a better recipe on the spot. But these guests didn't even know the congregational verse. They had never attended a Southern Baptist service. They couldn't feel the music. They hadn't experienced enough hardship to taste the words of the hymn. These people weren't even saved!

Before I took the last scrumptious bite of my mac-

aroni and cheese, I began to think about Auntie's delicious Sunday dinner and how the aroma alone made me smile. Man, that woman knew she could cook!

"Mmmm, that smells good! What we got there?" Miranda asked.

Well, enough of memory lane. I wasn't about to lose my last bite. I immediately shoved my fork in my mouth and interrupted my nostalgic moment. I shook my head with a mouthful of food. "Hmmm-mmm."