From Soul Food to Whole Foods:  
The Soul Food Restaurant in Memphis Today

Annie Bares  
2012 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

Introduction

In the January 1969 issue of *Time Magazine*, an anonymous article titled “Eating like Soul Brothers” declared:

Soul food is often fatty, overcooked and under seasoned. Vegetables are boiled with fatback for so long that their taste and nutritional value go up in steam; meats have to be sprinkled liberally with salt and pepper to give the eater anything to remember them by. Considering the tastelessness of the cuisine, the soul-food fad seems certain to be fairly short-lived. For many Negroes, it is long since over; it ended in fact, as soon as they could afford better food. (“Eating like Soul Brothers, 57)

Noted African American cultural critic Verta Mae Grosvenor responded to the article in her 1971 part-cookbook, part-personal narrative, *Vibration Cooking, or Notes from a Gee Chee Girl* with a formidable critique in defense of soul food:

You have the bad taste to say that soul food is tasteless. Your taste buds are so racist that they can’t even deal with black food. Your comment that the ‘soul food fad’ is going to be short lived is dumb. But then your whole culture is made of short-lived fads. So you white folks just keep on eating that white foam rubber bread that sticks to the roof of your mouth, and keep on eating minute rice and
instant potatoes, instant cereals and drinking instant milk and stick to your instant
culture. And I will stick to the short-lived fad that brought my ancestors through
four hundred years of oppression…Soul food is more than chitterlings and collard
greens, ham hocks and black-eyed peas. Soul food is about a people who have a
lot of heart and soul. (Grosvenor, 176)

Over 40 years later, it seems that Grosvenor has in many ways emerged the victor of that
exchange. Restaurants that have “soul food” in their names exist in urban centers
throughout the country, particularly in the South and large cities of the North and
furthermore, restaurants that claim to serve either “soul food” or “soul inspired food” are
opening in cities across the country. On international bookseller Amazon.com’s website
there are 17 cookbooks that have been or will be published by the end of 2012 that have
the word “soul” in the title.

Memphis has been a part of this trend, with a search for “soul food” on the
popular restaurant user-review website Urbanspoon.com revealing that in the Memphis
area, there are 166 restaurants categorized as “Southern/Soul.” While 32 of them are
listed as currently closed, the existing restaurants ranged from local, historic
establishments like the Four Way Restaurant to fried chicken chain restaurant Jack
Pirtle’s to the Chickasaw Country Club. While all of those restaurants do not identify
with the term “soul food” and some restaurants that do in Memphis are left off of the list,
user-review food websites like Urban Spoon and Yelp.com provide an interesting starting
point for an analysis of what it means to be a soul food restaurant in Memphis today.
While they are unsubstantiated, user-generated reviews from these websites share several
common themes on the topic of soul food restaurants. One of the most compelling of these posts comes from Michael H. of Washington D.C.:

If you live in Memphis, if you're passing through Memphis, if you're at a convention in Memphis - GO HERE. They deserve six stars. This fun and free joint is just steps away from the convention center in a place where you'd expect to find a Subway. When you exit the convention center or the hotel across the street, your natural inclination is to walk into downtown and away from the highway. You'd be wrong. Walk under the highway. Find Alcenia's./ I walked in and the place was at least half full. Nevertheless, a woman who seemed to be the owner came over to me to greet me and gave me a hug. A hug! and not a creepy one, but a genuine, quiet, Southern hug./ I sat down and after a bit, ordered my food. I tried to avoid the grits. My server--an extremely nice, sweet, ancient woman--wouldn't let me. She strongly insisted that I ordered the grits, and I relented. I'd never had grits that I liked before that weren't heavily masked by cheese. And she was right. They were awesome. The sweet tea was great. The service was a tad slow, but who's in a hurry in Memphis?/ There was a table of women in the corner that were receiving a seminar about starting your own business. There were games in the corner, the kind you'd find in a coffee shop. The place was brightly painted and a gem in what seemed to be a rather run down neighborhood./ They've been there nine years and I hope they never leave.

(www.yelp.com)

Like many reviewers, Michael is a tourist. But he emerges as a sort of tourist twice over, first to Memphis itself and then to the neighborhood “under the highway.” Without ever
mentioning it explicitly, the author treads the waters of race, class and urban development when he directs readers to “Walk under the highway.” Like almost all reviewers of Alcenia’s, he notes that the owner’s exceptional hospitality and also comments on the slow pace of the service, but qualifies it as a product of place. He also notes that Alcenia’s seems to serve a function in the community. For a restaurant review, there is scant information about the food itself; instead, the majority of the piece focuses on the atmosphere of Alcenia’s and its characterization as “a gem in what seemed to be a rather run down neighborhood.” It seems that for Michael H., the appeal of Alcenia’s is not its food, but instead its “atmosphere,” a characterization based on intangible qualities like hospitality, sense of place, community and the general feeling that the restaurant inspired in him as a tourist.

While most online reviewers do focus more than Michael on the food aspect of “soul food” restaurants, several similar thematic threads do start emerging that judge the food not by its quality, freshness or creativity, but instead by its sense of authenticity. Using the phrases, “real soul food,” “just like my mom’s” or some variation, many reviewers point towards the definition of “authenticity” meaning, “of undisputed origin or authorship” to express their appreciation for the food. And, like in Michael H.'s review, discussions of tourism, location, how the restaurant looks from the interior and exterior and the hospitality of the restaurant staff often occupy just as much, if not more space than reviews of the food itself. From ham hocks in greens to restaurants described as “off the beaten path,” all of these descriptions point somehow to the notion of authenticity as a defining feature of soul food. This emphasis on authenticity is underlined by the fact that scholars and restaurateurs alike often default to definitions of soul food that rely on
intangible qualifications rather than criteria based on menus or preparation. This question of authenticity is even more prominent today, as changing ideas about the food industry and health related diet concerns have caused soul food restaurants to alter their food and menus for financial purposes in order to keep tourists and certain parts of the Memphis community interested and engaged in “soul food” as a cuisine.

So if Internet reviews show that *Time* magazine was wrong and soul food was not a fad, they also reveal that the error of the *Time* writer’s ways comes from his over-investment in the food aspect of “soul food.” Because ultimately, with a world of culinary options available, eating at a “soul food” restaurant today is not about simply eating a perfectly cooked and seasoned piece of meat (although it can be), but instead is an opportunity for diners to participate in a cuisine that has a specific narrative influenced by its historical, social and economic contexts, all of which have been marked by oppression and resistance to that oppression. In this paper, I will demonstrate that while it has been commodified, reappropriated and changed from its original iteration in the 1960s, “soul food” as a term still has a regenerative, identity-defining power. I do not intend to try to judge whether or not soul food restaurants in Memphis are in fact “authentic,” but instead what concerns about authenticity within the soul food discourse reveal about its meaning in Memphis today. While today’s “soul food” may not have the same meaning for African American identity that it did once did, the soul food restaurant still functions as a cultural space to contest traditional racial, economic, social and cultural hierarchies of power.

**Foodways and Methodology**
To understand the relationship between soul food and authenticity it becomes important to understand the relationship between food and culture in general. The term “foodways” emerged in the late 20th century as an academic discipline that is “the study of what we eat, as well as how and why and under what circumstances we eat it” (Edge, 8). Using an interdisciplinary scope, foodways examine the meaning of different foods, often regionally or within certain ethnic groups. Academic disciplines—including, but not limited to, anthropology, sociology, archaeology, philosophy, ecology, economics, history, literature and geography—apply the term “foodways” to research that seeks to understand what food means in certain contexts and how those meanings were constructed. There is a sizeable body of research related to the meaning of soul food within the context of African American foodways. Studies range from popular history books that use oral history and personal ethnography to academic works that draw largely on critical theory.

This paper developed out of an interest in foodways and specifically, an interest in Memphis foodways. Most foodways research studies soul food in a more national context and much of what is written about Memphis as a “food town” focuses on its barbeque culture. This paper also arises out of an interest in understanding soul food in both theory and practice in a way that available academic and popular sources have not fully articulated. I would like to offer an analysis of soul food that uses an academic framework to contextualize the current state of soul food restaurants in Memphis. In order to do this, I have used a variety of academic and popular literature to understand the discourse and historical context that surrounds soul food, and that has shaped its contemporary meaning. To analyze soul food on a local level, I conducted ten interviews
with a variety of stakeholders in Memphis, most of whom owned restaurants that identified with the term “soul food” to varying degrees. The restaurants were located throughout the city and varied in age and size. I asked a variety of different questions during the interviews depending on time allowances and interest of the interviewees. But in all the interviews I asked about the meaning of soul food to restaurant owners, both as individuals and business owners. Time and availability of the interviewee were the factors that contributed to how many and which restaurants I visited. Time also restricted how long I could spend in the restaurants and a weak point of my research came with the fact that I visited most of the restaurants during their slower points of the day when the owners were available for an interview, but when there were fewer customers. If I had more time, I would have also liked to ask customers, rather than only restaurant owners, what soul food means to them and why they choose to eat it.

Discussing race in an analysis of soul food is an unavoidable—and unavoidably complicated—prospect. The term “soul food” found its origins during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and has since always been associated with “the African American community.” While race is now understood as a social construct, it remains important to examine the connection between soul food and the socio-political circumstances of modern African Americans. As this paper will discuss, the idea of soul food developed specifically in protest to racial inequality as a way to acknowledge African American cuisine as a source of pride and a force for political cohesion. While it is important to acknowledge the social significance that a term like “soul food” had in the 1960s, I want to avoid essentialism and what African American foodways scholar Psyche Williams-Forson calls “culinary malpractice” which “describes the misrepresentation of African
American food and foodways by reducing blacks’ culinary repertoire to ‘scraps’ and leftovers. Discussions of African American foodways can take the path of either a pleasant review of the Sunday dinner menu or a gut wrenching tiptoe through a culinary minefield. As with most situations that are potentially dangerous, the worst thing one can do is to plow ahead without knowing what one is doing” (Williams-Forson, 196). With this in mind it is important to acknowledge that soul food is not wholly representative of African American cuisine in Memphis or on a larger level. With this paper, I do not intend to represent any type of food as monolithic or representative of one, monolithic African American experience. Instead, I wish to examine how the soul food restaurant in Memphis engages with preexisting conversations regarding power and resistance.

**The Emergence and Meaning of Soul Food**

In order to understand the relevance and meaning of soul food today, it is first important to understand the context of its emergence as a term. The meaning of the term “soul food” is inextricably linked to its historical narrative and lore and when examining its varied definitions, it becomes difficult to separate exactly where a definition of “soul food” begins and where its cultural, historical and literary emergence ends. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment that it came into being, it is generally agreed to have arisen during the 1960s, with the emergence of “soul” as a larger cultural force—“a term often defined as indefinable and discussed with reference primarily to men and music” (Witt, 80). The word “soul” was rooted in racial ideology, emerging from the Black Power arm of the Civil Rights movement that emphasized cultural cohesion over earlier strategies of racial assimilation. Jessica Harris explains, “The 1960s created a place where for the first time in many lives there was a palpable pride in the uniqueness
of the African American experience in the United States. The word soul was first used among blacks to establish a cultural community, as in ‘soul brother’ and ‘soul sister’” (Harris, 208).

To noted cultural critic Amiri Baraka, the idea of “soul” marked an important shift in African American consciousness. As Witt explains of his essay, “Blues People,” “to Baraka, ‘soul’ is much of a ‘move’ within the black psyche as was the move north in the beginning of the century. The idea of the Negro’s having ‘roots’ and that they are a valuable possession, rather than the source of ineradicable shame is perhaps the profoundest change within the Negro consciousness since the early part of the century” (Witt, 118). In his 1961 essay, “Soul Food,” Baraka cites soul food as a response to an article in *Esquire* magazine that bemoaned the lack of a unique cuisine, or language of African Americans. Baraka responds, “No language? No characteristic food? Oh man, come on” and goes onto write, “There are hundreds of tiny restaurants, food shops, rib joints, shrimp shacks, chicken shacks, rotisseries throughout Harlem that serve ‘soul food’” (Baraka, 101-103). With his essay, Baraka provides a first-hand account of the state of soul food in 1962, but also draws attention to the importance of soul food as a form of protest against the idea that African American culture was in some way lacking.

By asserting African American ownership of soul food as a unique cuisine, Baraka disrupts the monopoly of power that white America had on the cultural and culinary narrative. Soul food, then, became a site to represent the oppression and resistance to that oppression as part of the idea of an African American experience. The traditional story of soul food traces its origins back to the slave experience when West African food was traditionally steamed, baked, fried or roasted, and consisted largely of
yams, rice, millet and corn. With the Atlantic slave trade beginning in 1619, Middle Passage ships picked up cheap foods like rice, okra, maize, yams, black-eyed peas and corncakes. While the experience of slavery certainly shaped all aspects of African American culture, including foodways, it was not, however, monolithic and included a range of food-related experiences (Edge, 15). Slaves survived mainly on subsistence farming, with salt pork and cornmeal being the major supplements to a vegetable diet. During slavery and Reconstruction, African Americans ate “low on the hog,” receiving the least desirable pig parts including the intestines, feet and head. During the Great Migration, many African Americans took their rural, Southern food to urban centers of the North, most notably Harlem and Chicago and opened restaurants that served “soul food” to homesick Southerners (Witt, 196). This simplified narrative provides an historical grounding of soul food in Africa, allowing African American cuisine to be primarily African and then American. The grounding of soul food in the slave experience makes clear the links between African American oppression and soul food. The experience of soul food as a product of homesickness for the South plants firmly soul food’s roots in the rural, Southern aesthetic. This narrative has been contested (Opie, Witt, Harris), but the purpose of this paper is not to determine what the “true” story of soul food is, but however, to examine the relationship between this popular narrative on contemporary understandings of soul food.

This narrative of soul food as having its origins first in Africa, then on the plantation and finally in the North is a common introduction to many soul food cookbooks of the era as a way to explain authenticity of experience—racial, cultural, economic—as the root of soul food. The *Soul Power Cookbook* opens and explains that,
“Originally, of course the need was to keep alive in spite of the paucity of scraps and the sometimes unsavoriness of the leftovers. Somehow, in transforming such things as animal fodder into rich peanut soup or wild plants into some of our favorite and tastiest vegetable dishes, there grew a pride—a pride in ingenuity and a pride in producing ‘our own thing’” (Soul Power, 105). This passage makes clear that the origins of soul food are in vegetable dishes and “scraps.” By the inclusion of the phrase “our own thing,” the author also makes certain that this type of cooking belongs to African Americans and is born from the African American experience that has used inequality to produce ingenuity and is now using this narrative to inspire a sense of communal cohesion and pride.

In her 1971 part-cookbook, part-personal narrative, Vibration Cooking: or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl, Verta Mae Grosvenor offers the most radical reading of soul food and its origins in racial oppression:

Isn’t it amazing that black people in spite of all the misery and oppression have been able to keep on keeping on? The fact that we survived Middle Passage is a credit to our race. Black people still have a lower suicide rate than whites. White folks just seem not to be able to take it when times are hard. Look during the depression how they jumped out windows when they lost their money. If they had known about neck bones and dry peas they might have realized they could survive. (Grosvenor, 20)

While Grosvenor often employs satire throughout Vibration Cooking, quotations like these still do offer important characterizations of soul food through humor. Here, Grosvenor characterizes the African American experience as one marked by oppression, specifically in the slave experience, and locates food as a survival method. She also posits
that African Americans are more resilient than white people and attributes this survival to foods traditionally associated with the term “soul food.” In the process, she claims them as exclusively African American foods. The emphasis on the meaning of the term “soul food” as an outcome of years of racial injustice, oppression and inequality and the struggle and perseverance that accompanied them, points to the intertwined nature of the relationship between its definition and its origin story. The fact that “soul food” relies as much on a historical narrative than a specific menu, points towards the importance of the ideal of authenticity and its emphasis on origins as a way to delineate the ways that soul food are judged and understood.

In *Vibration Cooking* Grosvenor also emphasizes the importance of the idea of improvisation to the soul food tradition, so much so that it is in fact the premise of the cookbook’s title as Grosvenor explains in its introduction, “When I cook, I never measure or weigh anything. I cook by the vibration” (Grosvenor, xiii). Grosvenor’s mother, grandmother and aunts also play important roles in informing much of the recipe content of the book, suggesting the importance of recipes that are “passed down” from one generation to the next. And Grosvenor’s “recipes” offer scant direction of concrete measurements. Take, for instance, her recipe for crab cakes, ““Crab Cakes: Combine crab meat, bread crumbs, salt and pepper, chopped onions, a little flour and just enough heavy cream to hold it together. Brown in peanut oil.” A recipe like this does not explain to anyone how to make crab cakes, but is useful in explaining Grosvenor’s understanding of soul food, which is based on the idea that one cannot simply make soul food based on measurements in a recipe. As she explains, soul food is a much more involved enterprise, “soul food depends on what you put in it. I don’t mean spices either. If you have a
serious, loving, creative energetics attitude towards life, when you cook, you cook with the same attitude. Food changes into blood, blood into cells, cells change into energy which changes up into life and since your life styles is imaginative creative loving energetic, serious, food is life. You dig” (Grosvenor, 171). This lyrical definition of soul food grounds the cuisine in an artistic tradition, rather than simply as an easily replicated set of dishes based on measurements and easy to follow instructions. This idea that food is an act of artistic creation that is not accessible to just anyone also grounds it in the idea of its authenticity in the sense that it must be an original creation rather than simply something that is easily replicated.

Published in 1971, The Integrated Cookbook or the Soul of Good Cooking also opens by characterizing soul food as a cuisine based on myth and improvisation, explaining that, “‘Soul Food’ originated through a kind of cooking lore, created and perpetuated by black people whose only means of communication was word-of-mouth. Like jazz, it had a solid base, but the rest was improvised, varied to suit deep down feelings. Most soul food recipes, therefore, may be changed and developed, altered to suit your mood of the moment. Much originated as necessity, the use of whatever was at hand, but only what proved to be tasty and satisfactory, only the very best survived…Conventional foods were beyond the reach of slaves. But everything was prepared with the Black mother’s love for her family, developed with great care, and served with dignity” (Jackson and Wishart, 1). This cookbook comes later in the wave of soul food cookbooks and this passage seems to ponder not only the food itself, but also “soul food” as a specific kind of cuisine with a “lore” that draws upon many facets of African American culture including the oral history and jazz traditions. By situating soul
food within the realm of jazz and oral history, Jackson places it in an already established category that highlights the importance of improvisation and storytelling in African American history. This alliance suggests that soul food is more than simply certain foods on a plate, but instead the inheritor of a tradition that privileges “feelings” rather than quantifiable measures and uses improvisation and a “make-do” spirit to overcome and overwrite oppressive means of economic and social control.

Harris provides an excellent analysis of the very “feelings” that soul food seems to inspire:

Soul food, it would seem, depends on an ineffable quality. It is a combination of nostalgia for and pride in the food of those who came before. In the manner of the Negro spiritual ‘How I Got Over’ soul food looks back at the past and celebrates a genuine taste palate while offering more than a nod to this history of disenfranchisement of blacks in the United States. In the 1960s, as the history of African Americans began to be rewritten with pride instead of with the shame that had previously accompanied the experience of disenfranchisement and enslavement, soul food was as much an affirmation as a diet. (Harris, 208)

Here, Harris locates not only the historical oppression of African Americans at the center of soul food’s ideology, but also the importance of the idea of overcoming struggle born from oppression that shaped conceptions of African American identity. By serving as an “affirmation,” soul food functioned as a political and social construct meant to celebrate, rather than denigrate or completely omit cultural and culinary contributions of African Americans. And by functioning as a category of food based on the idea of improvisation and a sense of artistic inspiration, “soul food” emerged as a way to express an identity
based on authenticity and its assumption that “soul food” cannot be easily replicated despite the plethora of cookbooks on the subject.

While its meaning is inextricably linked to its emergence and origins, it also becomes important to answer the question of what exactly soul food is and is not. In his 2008 book, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from African to America*, Frederick Douglass Opie offers the most comprehensive in scope and authoritative in tone definition of what exactly soul food is:

I have arrived at multiple definitions of ‘soul’ and ‘soul food.’ As I understand it, soul is the product of a cultural mixture of various African tribes and kingdoms. Soul is the style of rural folk culture. Soul is black spirituality and experiential wisdom. And soul is putting a premium on struggling, endurance, and surviving with dignity. Soul food is African American, but it was influenced by other cultures. It is the intellectual invention and property of African Americans, soul food is a fabulous-tasting dish made from simple, inexpensive ingredients. Soul food is enjoyed by black folk, whom it reminds of their southern roots. This book argues, then, that soul is an amalgamation of West African societies and cultures, as well as an adaptation to conditions of slavery and freedom in the Americas.

(Opie, xiii)

Opie’s multi-faceted idea of soul food is grounded in African heritage, but also in the idea of multiplicity as a defining trait of the category of food. This idea of multiplicity encompasses the cultures that created soul food, but also the experiences that were born from African American experiences with slavery and oppression. The historical narrative that Opie presents is generally aligned with most scholarship surrounding soul food. Opie
defines soul food in its socio-historical context not only as a way to celebrate and broadcast African American cultural achievements, but also as a driving force behind the creation of an African American subculture, “Soul gave [working class African Americans] insider status in a racist society that treated them like outsiders, and it emerged as an alternative culture that undermined white definitions of acceptability” (Opie, 124). Opie’s definition of soul food, based on the idea of it representing the working class, black experience and providing a sense of subcultural cohesion again points to questions of racial and cultural authenticity in judging what is considered “soul food.” By framing “soul food” in a subcultural light, Opie allows it the power to disrupt traditional hierarchies of economic, social and cultural power that benefitted from African American patronage and dependence.

Opie also traces soul food’s decline in the 1970s and 1980s, although his analysis is very limited both in geographical scope and ideology. He only discusses the decline of soul food in New York City and attributes it largely to increases in immigrant population in the city, a conclusion that ignores the myriad other factors that contributed to its alleged waning influence throughout the country. He does go on to explain that, “Soul food, like soul music, represented another example of the subculture that served as an exclusive African American club, off limits to those who did not live the black experience. The use of soul food as a part of the black experience becomes difficult, because there is no single black experience, just as there is no one type of soul food” (Opie, 130). This conclusion points toward the complicated nature of allowing soul food to represent “the black experience,” echoing other scholars’ critiques of its relevance as
more nuanced understandings of African American history and culture are explored (Witt, Harris).

An article from the journal *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* examines changes in African American diets from a nutrition and health standpoint. Entitled “What’s Happening to Soul Food,” the study compiled regional surveys to determine what African Americans were eating in their homes. The study is simplistic and operates under the assumption that “soul food” is a label for African American cuisine. Its purpose “is to further the dialogue on contemporary African-American food practices. If soul food is to continue as the label for typical African-American fare, do the foods remain the same as those previously cited in literature? How do they differ?” (Harris and Nowverl, 587). The study argues, “Today, traditional food consumption habits are challenged by socioeconomic, religious, and cultural changes and healthy concerns. Soul food, the popular term coined in the 1960s for traditional southern black cuisine, does not look and taste as it did back then” (Harris and Nowverl, 588). This thesis, firmly grounded in nutrition studies, is easily defendable, though not very compelling and the study offers little analysis of the factors that contribute to this change, save for health concerns.

*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Foodways* provides a more holistic analysis of the decline of “soul food” as a term, first attributing it to the fact that the word “soul”:

…has lost some of its relevance. The African American culinary frontier has expanded so that *soul* no longer wholly characterizes the cultural and social choices made by people of color in this country…In a time of rising middle-class values and social conditions, it was perhaps inevitable that a ‘new’ style of
southern and soul cooking would emerge—leaner cuts of meat, lighter styles of
cooking and seasoning, an emphasis on health and nutrition…Contemporary
African American cooks are liberated from the association with survival foods
from the slave kitchen. Many restaurants prefer terms like *home-style, southern-
style*, even *Mama’s cooking*…As a consequence, new African American cooking
may have lost its ‘soul’ but not its spirit of experimentation and originality.

(Bolsterli, Edge, Tipton-Martin, 106-107)

This assessment of “soul food” as a term is in many ways compelling, particularly in its
assertions that the word “soul” has been largely divested of its meaning and connection
with African American identity and that soul food is adapting to changing ideas about
food and health. And while it is true that many restaurants use “soul food” and “home
cooking” interchangeably, with some preferring alternatives, throughout the course of my
interviews, I did not encounter any cooks who have dismissed the moniker “soul food” as
an irrelevant or meaningless term.

**Soul Food Today**

What I did find, however, was a lively and engaged community of restaurant
owners who engaged with the idea of “soul food” and their stake in the Memphis
community in different, but meaningful ways. Their insights and understandings of soul
food sometimes confirmed, but often complicated the academic and popular literature on
the subject that all point towards the importance of recognizing the meanings of “soul
food” as multi-dimensional, rather than monolithic. While I asked basically the same
questions about all of the restaurants, the interviews centered on what the interviewees
were most enthusiastic about and what was most meaningful to them personally and as
business owners. Everyone had different answers and opinions about the questions that I asked, but a number of common themes emerged among restaurant owners. With a small sampling of restaurants, I will be able to include most of the answers received on different topics. I will organize my interview results around those common themes in order to compare and contrast understandings of soul food in Memphis in order to come to a conclusion about its greater meaning.

The first questions that I asked the interviewees were what kind of food they serve and if they consider it to be soul food. Three of the restaurants (Cave’s Soul Food, Déjà vu Creole Soul Food and Vegetarian Restaurant and Ellen’s Soul Food) use “soul food” as part of their name and signage, so their answers were most resondingly affirmative. Gary Williams, who opened Déjà Vu in 2008, was clear that it is a “soul food” restaurant, but is also influenced by Cajun and Creole cuisine, “We do soul food with a Creole twist. I grew up on traditional food, but working in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, I learned how to do vegan food and learn how to season food without meat. I was one of the original owners and I married the vegan food with the Creole food.” So for Williams, “soul food” is just one genre of food that exists in tandem with other types of cuisine that he considers separate, but related. Cave’s owner Carl Johnson explained that he and his wife Veronica opened Cave’s in 2011 because, “[A soul food restaurant] was needed. We used to go out and we wanted to try different food. You couldn't find any good southern food at that time. You go out at five or six and couldn't get any fried catfish, good greens, pinto beans... [soul food] is what we do. The food that we cook, that’s what it is. [the sign] could have said home cooking, but collard greens, turnip greens, candied yams, green beans, squash that’s what we serve, home cooking.” As Carl Johnson’s answer
reveals, “soul food” does exist in one capacity to define a fixed list of foods. He also importantly equates the term “soul food” with the term “home cooking” to suggest, as other restaurant owners will, that soul food is a term to encompass foods associated with family and family origins.

While some restaurants choose to use “soul food” in their name, for some older restaurants, it goes without saying that they sell soul food. The Four Way Restaurant, The Gay Hawk and Willie Moore’s are some of Memphis’ most established surviving soul food restaurants and, as such, they describe their food as “traditional.” Originally founded in 1946 by the Cleaves, the Four Way Restaurant occupies an important space in Memphis history, becoming a landmark South Memphis restaurant during segregation and serving the likes of Martin Luther King and Elvis Presley. After its closing, Willie Earl Bates reopened the restaurant in 2002, using some of Mrs. Cleaves’ original recipes for the menu which he described as, Greens, yams, peach cobbler, mac and cheese, turkey and dressing, pinto beans, pork chops, neck bones, even chitterlings. We’re excited about the corn bread” (Bates). Bates’ emphasis on the fact that he was able to use and preserve the original recipes of the Four Way reveals the importance of its historical identity and privileges the idea of historical authenticity over culinary innovation.

Thercia Bobo is the second generation owner of the Gay Hawk restaurant, which was opened in 1951 and purchased by her father in 1963. She describes it as “a first class restaurant for African Americans before and after integration, but particularly before” that serves “authentic soul food: fresh greens, yams, ham hocks, neck bones, and our signature dish, peach cobbler” (Bobo). These menu descriptions offer the fairly standard
soul food fare and identifying it as such shows the importance of defining and serving a “traditional” soul food menu.

Throughout the course of my research, I also encountered some owners who had a more ambivalent relationship with the phrase “soul food.” When I interviewed Lou Martin of famed Uncle Lou’s Southern Kitchen, he told me that he did not consider his restaurant—that serves primarily fried chicken—a soul food establishment because, “Soul food is a meat and three with greens and beans, and we don’t do that. We do fried chicken, ours is more like fast food” (Martin). Interviewees Emma Lincoln, Ruby Johnson and Peggy Brown all had similar reactions when I asked about whether or not they considered their food to be soul food. As the daughter of former caterer and head chef at the Memphis Hunt and Polo Club, Beneva Mayweather, Emma Lincoln’s professional culinary identity has been shaped more by catering to client’s requests for “refined southern food” (Lincoln). But while she did not identify with soul food in a professional capacity, she still offered important insights on the subject. When asked if she considered her food “soul food,” Ruby Johnson, owner of Ruby’s Sizzling Skillet, explained that, “I don’t know if we called it soul food [when she was growing up], but that’s actually what [her food] is because it’s the beans and the greens and that type of thing. We only do hamburgers on Friday. The beans and fried chicken and baked chicken, meatloaf, smothered pork chops, fried and grilled fish are all considered soul food.” Peggy Brown, owner of Peggy’s Healthy Foods is also the daughter of a country club chef and herself a former preparation cook at the Peabody Hotel and she primarily identifies as a chef and second, as a “soul food” restaurant owner. While Lincoln, Johnson and Brown do not make the idea of “soul food” as central as other restaurant owners...
owners I interviewed, they did however, still considered their food as a part of the “soul food” category and as such, had important insights about its meaning in Memphis today.

While all restaurant owners described “soul food” in terms of menu items that they served, they also all emphasized the intangible nature of the term “soul food” and its appeal. Carl Johnson offers the most concise of these definitions when asked exactly what it means to cook soul food, he said, “It’s just when you cook with love and soul. That’s what it is. We put all our love in cooking. We didn’t want to just cook anything. Soul food is cooked with love from the heart.” (Johnson). This definition aligns with much academic research and analysis on soul food that has placed an emphasis on the intangible nature of “soul food” and its definition through intangibility. Emma Lincoln echoes Johnson’s understanding of soul food as a means of preparation and dependent on the sentiment on the chef, rather than simply a meal, “Most people’s definition of soul food is basic food that you eat. Any of it can be soul food because of how it’s prepared. It’s all relative. It’s food that makes your soul happy” (Lincoln). Peggy Brown shares a similar opinion of soul food, “to me soul food is just a good home cooked meal from scratch. And you have to love what you're cooking. When people ask me what makes my food so good, I tell them that it’s love” (Brown). Willie Bates shares a similar view of soul food, “I think that the word soul food is about individuals taking what they had in the kitchen and putting a special determination in terms of preparing food. Soul food comes from a nourishing heart and preparing food for a loved one. We try to continue that.” The repeated use of the word love—in many ways the ultimate intangible, indefinable idea—places the term “soul food” and its meaning in a purely idealized realm. The act of serving or eating soul food then becomes more than a process of
consuming food, but instead an attempt to transmit something as intangible as “love” and “soul” through food.

Like Grosvenor in *Vibration Cooking*, in addition to soul food existing in an intangible realm, for some restaurateurs, it also depends on the person making the food, making it impossible to truly replicate a dish considered “soul food.” Willie Moore emphasizes the idea that “soul food” depends on intangible qualities, “Soul food is basically within the person making it. It’s the love you use making the food. We don’t use recipes. I cook the same food every day, but it’s all in my mind, how much of each ingredient I use. It’s just defined by the person who’s doing it and what they’re calling it. Just because you call it soul food doesn’t mean that it’s soul food. Two people can make the same item and it can be totally different” (Moore). Thercia Bobo explains a similar understanding of soul food and its preparation, “It’s a lot of love that’s cooked into cooking soul food. Whenever you ask the average soul food cooker about a recipe, there are no measurements. It’s what you call ‘a smidgen’ ‘a heap’ ‘a little bit of this and a little bit of that’ It’s just so much love. And good soul food, you really can’t get any better than that. It’s a food that’s cooked with a lot of love. It’s cooked from the soul” (Bobo). Moore and Bobo both begin their characterization of soul food by describing it as an act of love and then explain that it depends on the individual making it. They then both point to the absence of recipes as a point of pride and in many ways, a kind of criteria for a proper soul food chef. Soul food then, with its emphasis on inherently knowing how to cook a recipe, presumably from having cooked it many times, becomes a culinary ritual.

This emphasis on ritual and the idea that soul food is not easily replicated, gestures towards a mystification of “soul food” both as a process and as an idea, pointing
to the idea of authenticity. Many of the restaurants that I visited have appeared in local newspapers, national newspapers, internationally read blogs like Urbanspoon and Yelp. The Food Network seems to be a sign that a restaurant has really “made it” and it comes to Memphis often. Debbie Mitchell of Ellen’s Soul Food explained to me that she moved her restaurant from its North Memphis location to its South Bellevue location, in part because it’s closer to the interstate and easier for tourists to access. This emphasis on tourism seems in many ways at odds with soul food as a cuisine that emphasizes racial, economic and cultural authenticity. In Dean McCannell’s *The Tourist*, he analyzes the touristic desire towards authenticity, using a Marxist frame of analysis to argue that modernity is characterized by an alienation of interpersonal relationships that weaken a sense of social reality and that “sustaining a firm sense of social reality requires some mystification.” He goes on to argue that “Authenticity itself moves to inhabit mystification” (McCannell, 93). While these restaurant owners are certainly no “soul food” tourists, McCannell’s statement still aligns closely with their characterizations of soul food as “authentic” through its mystification as a cuisine based largely on intangible ideas like love and a process that evades replication. In my interviews, I found that this emphasis on authenticity and mystification in many ways informed the discourse surrounding the soul food restaurant and its place in Memphis, both in its insistence on references to the past and in its changes to reflect the present.

The question of soul food’s authenticity manifests itself in its origin story that emphasizes its African roots and political position as a force of cultural cohesion for African Americans during the 1960s. These connections were reflected in answers of some interviewees to varying degrees. The Four Way’s décor makes its connection to the
Civil Rights movement clear with pictures of Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King and Alex Haley on the wall. The Four Way’s proprietor Willie Bates does characterize the soul food restaurant as a historically African American space and, as such, a place that resists traditional hierarchies of racial power, “There was a time when African American brothers would go to work in other homes and eat and clean up. Now I tease my brothers and tell them that you can relax and eat and afterwards put your feet on the table” (Bates). When asked to explain what “soul food” means, Thercia Bobo answered, “I’ve been asked that question so many times and I always find myself stumbling for words. But it really is the heart of African American cuisine. There is a lot of history as far as soul food goes. It dates back to the day when African Americans didn’t have very much to eat and they just did they best they could with what they had. But it was cultivated into the thread of American cuisine” (Bobo). Bobo’s answer positions soul food within the context of African American history and the economic and social oppression that this history includes. Bobo also acknowledges the extent to which soul food has become a more mainstream food than it was in the 1960s.

Willie Moore also acknowledges the racial dimension of the idea of “soul food” when discussing reopening in a new location after his original Third Street restaurant burned earlier this year, “well it depends what you call soul food. When I moved to this location, my customer base became about 65% white when it used to be about 95% black. I don't know if you call that soul or not. Soul is a black thing, but I think that everyone in the south has soul. In my experience white people eat the same thing we eat, as a rule. One of my biggest sellers down here are neck bones, smothered pork chops. This is a new area, new location, what I’ve found is that everyone eats the same food”
Moore’s comment is interesting because he first acknowledges a change in his restaurants demographics and what that might mean for the veracity of calling his a “soul food” restaurant if the majority of the customers were white. While Moore does at first point to racial difference as a determinant of who eats what food, he ultimately decides that everyone does in fact eat the same food.

Gary Williams of Déjà vu explained that, “Food has no color, yeah in the black household, you know about traditional food. We might have the leftovers from the big house, but we would stretch that out. That stuff has been going on forever and forever. You stretch it out, you make it work, and you have a great meal. That’s what we do every day at Déjà vu, we stretch it out and we make it work and there are different sauces, but it’s still the same.” His estimation of soul food is also interesting because he acknowledges the soul food narrative that traces it back to survival food, suggesting the importance of authenticity maintaining its historical narrative, but instead of using it as a means to delineate racial difference, he points to food as a shared experience between races. Like Moore, Williams also shared the racial demographics of his restaurant, “They told me when I started working on this place, ‘white people aren’t going to come to this area.’ And now 75% of our clientele is white and that’s a soul food restaurant. We’re just holding our own over here.”

In addition to acknowledging his clientele as not necessarily African American, Williams also told me that soul food itself does not necessarily have to be identified as African American, “Food brings people together. I don’t care who you are, white or black, it’s the center of the conversation. I learned how to do kosher food and oriental food. And that’s all soul food to me. Any kind of ethnic food, that’s soul food.”

Williams
interestingly frames soul food not as an exclusively African American cuisine, but as any ethnic cuisine. “Debbie Mitchell of Ellen’s Soul Food explained to me that in order to make soul food, “You can be any color you want to. As long as you season it right and have it tasting right, because everybody cooks.” Mitchell makes soul food completely universal and while her answer is not reflective of the other interviewees, it does point towards the fact that there is a gap in the academic definition of soul food that still finds it representative of contemporary understandings of soul food that equate judgments of its “authenticity” not on whom is eating it, but instead on what it is and how closely it is aligned with other intangible measures of authenticity.

One of those measures is the degree to which soul food is associated with the idea of family. Everyone to whom I talked spoke of the deeply connected nature of family and the idea of “soul food,” particularly in the sense that it is a tradition passed down from one generation to the next. Every restaurant that I visited was a family owned business. Ruby Johnson learned to cook from her grandmother and is now employing that family connection for her restaurant: “I come from a family of cooks, all my grandmothers and aunt and mother were all excellent cooks. No one has ever taken it to this level” (Johnson). Carl Johnson also “comes from a background of cooks. My mom and my grandmother used to cook out and now I’m doing that on a bigger scale with Cave’s” (Johnson). Gary Williams cites the cohesive nature of soul food to a family, “soul food to me is stuff that you grew up on that grandma used to make. And when you’re sitting around the table, it brings back a lot of memories. Food brings you together, after funerals and wedding, divorce. Your family will get together and make everything come together, that’s soul food.” This sentiment is also a part of the restaurant’s name as
Williams explained how he arrived at the name “Déjà Vu,” “I was sitting at home in Byhalia MS trying to think of a name, getting all cute and fancy. We want people to have to feeling that ‘oh my grandma used to cook like that’ or ‘my aunt used to cook like that’ and then I thought ‘Déjà Vu’ and it just took off. Peggy Brown explained that with her restaurant she is trying to create a “family atmosphere” with her restaurant. Thericia Bobo seems to explain the impulse behind the desire to create a “family” atmosphere in the soul food restaurant, “When I was a young girl, people were more family oriented. People ate at home more. Sundays was a time when three generations of family members got together ate. The fact that people don’t cook at home anymore changed that” (Bobo). This statement reveals the sense of nostalgia inherent in soul food’s foundation in authenticity, in this case, born from the supposed dissolution of the family dinner and perhaps the dissolution of the family in general.

Bobo’s statement about the family is connected to the idea of soul food as steeped in the rural Southern tradition, a common subject in my interviews. Emma Lincoln describes her family’s farm in Helena, Arkansas, “The lifestyle in the country was such that no one ever went hungry because everyone shared their crops” (Lincoln). Lincoln cites her mother’s rural upbringing as the nexus for her insistence on fresh vegetables. Debbie Mitchell also defines soul food in the language of the rural tradition, “To me it’s cooking with soul. It’s what you cooked years ago when folks grew their food. It’s greens, black eyed peas, that's soul food” (Mithcell). Ruby Johnson described her time growing up in Bobo, Mississippi, “Back when I was growing up it was what I did here. We raised a garden, greens and peas and beans, potatoes. I grow up on a farm in Mississippi. Moved to Memphis in 1967 and it was a new start. I didn't want to go any
further from my hometown where I could go back to visit. We raised our own hogs, chickens and ducks. Every beast that you can name we had, chicken, guenia, horses, cows. I grow up with the food I’m doing now, so I just decided to branch out and do something that my family didn't. My mom and grandmother cooked out” (Johnson). Peggy Brown’s experience is strikingly similar, “growing up on a farm in Arlington, we ate what we grew. We had our own pigs, cattle, hogs. I think that my best memories were going to my grandmother’s house, eating and talking. Those were good memories for me, so that’s the kind of atmosphere I wanted in here” (Brown). These idealized descriptions of rural life also express a similar nostalgia for a pastoral lifestyle that contrasts the reality of urban living in Memphis. They suggest a similar kind of search for authenticity as do the equation of soul food and the family.

The connection between soul food and the rural, farming tradition is also related to ideas about soul food as a time intensive cuisine. Almost every interviewee cited soul food in opposition to fast food restaurants, particularly McDonalds. Debbie Mitchell explained that, “People don't cook like they used to. It’s a microwave world now. We skip a whole lot of stuff. You don't have to pick greens anymore you can buy them in a bag.” Peggy Brown also explained the time intensive nature of soul food, “soul food is not that mess out of the can that you doctor up. It’s nothing that you didn’t take the time to cut up, peel up, chop up. That’s not soul food, you opened a can and dumped it in a pot and dressed it up, but that’s not soul food. I’ve had people come in and say, ‘you’ve got a soul food restaurant?’ ‘Well if you want to call it that.’ ‘I don't want sweet potatoes out of a can.’ And I say, ‘nothing here is out of a can.’ It’s all fresh out of the garden” (Brown). Ruby Johnson also characterizes her soul food as a counter to fast food
culture, “I call it soul food. That means beans and peas; it’s not a hamburger, that’s fast food. Soul food is on a different level of food and it should be healthier food. It’s not like going to McDonalds, the French fries, and the hamburgers has so much fat and all kinds of stuff in it. Basically, what I do is try to prepare healthy food. Soul food is basically mashed potatoes green beans: fresh food and not out of a can” (Johnson). This consistent emphasis on the importance of time intensity in contemporary understandings of the idea of “soul food” positions it as a counter to the industrial food system that is based on efficiency and convenience. In their insistence on time intensity and fresh ingredients, Memphis soul food restaurateurs are expressing a similar resistance to multinational, exploitative industrial food systems as the “Slow Food” movement and in the process, offering a local, accessible alternative to healthier food options.

While it is important to note that not all “soul food” restaurants offer “healthy” food choices, most of the ones that I visited do. Soul food’s history in reference to ideas about “health” is complicated. It has been characterized, in some cases, rightfully so, as extremely unhealthy because of the ubiquity of pork fat in its vegetables. Soul food restaurants have responded to these changes in ideas about health in different ways. Today, most of the restaurants that I visited no longer use animal fat in their side dishes for varying reasons. As Carl Johnson explained, “We want to have a bigger variety and be up to date. Our parents used to cook with ham hocks, fatbacks in our greens and pinto beans. People don’t want that, now we do good vegetables with no pork. We have to respect other people’s religion and what we do and don't. We don't cook with fatback or pork” (Johnson). The Little Tea Shop and the Gay Hawk also do not cook with animal
While the idea of “authenticity” and “health” are seemingly at odds when talking about “soul food,” the health concerns that restaurant owners have are authentic on both personal and greater social levels. Gary Williams explained that “There are people putting meat in the greens and cooking with fat back, but that’s not Déjà Vu. And I had to back up, I had a stroke 2 years ago and I had to back up. Now I’m healthy and good. But we’re taking soul food to another level. I grew up eating meat in the greens because that’s all my mom knew. But when you know better you do better.” This legitimate concern about health in a way is echoed by Ruby Johnson on a larger scale, “The fast food is what’s wiping our people out. People aren’t cooking anymore. So if my goal is to get people healthy, I just want to make a home cooked meal.” Peggy Brown’s mission is to serve healthy food to the community with her restaurant. As Peggy explains, “Our food runs about $7, which is about the same price as a combo meal at McDonalds and we even have the $5.55 deal on Tuesday to Friday. But our food is healthy, so we’re giving people healthy food at cheap prices” (Brown). Brown’s statement illustrates a social consciousness that responds to the local economy and customer needs in a way that is both healthy and accessible in a way that expensive restaurants in Memphis cannot be. In this way, Peggy’s serves as an example of resistance both to multinational fast food restaurants that are unhealthy and rely on exploitation.

Conclusion

Despite what much of the literature surrounding soul food has proclaimed, the soul food restaurant in practice is not a relic of the past. While ideas about what soul food
means have changed, particularly in regards to African American identity, today “soul food” still has a powerful, regenerative meaning. In their insistence on time intensity, fresh ingredients and community accessibility, soul food restaurant owners and chefs in Memphis are playing an important role in conversations surrounding social, economic and cultural changes in food. Because they provide a local, in many cases healthier, alternative to fast food or convenience food in a public space, soul food restaurants in Memphis today, serve as a way to contest traditional ideas about who is in power as in the food economy and who is not. Ultimately, through its insistence on the idea of “authenticity” in ingredients, preparation and connection to ideas about family, “soul food” today acts as a site that resists traditional hierarchies of power in favor of a more holistic understanding of food in its relation to the Memphis community.

By the definition that I have gathered, soul food in Memphis is about a community of restaurants who both gesture to the past and adapt to changing ideas about food in order to both create a successful business and continue to engage with the interests and needs of the Memphis community. Soul food has a historic and cultural narrative whose resistance over prevailing power hierarchies has an important place in defining its role as a cuisine that resists the industrialized food system and its multinational market control in favor of one that emphasizes quality of product, time intensity, health, and community cohesion and access. When “soul food” is allowed to exist as an adaptive rather than static cuisine, it can play a powerful role in conversations surrounding poverty, wellness and justice.
WORKS CITED


Brown, Peggy. Interview, July 2012.

Bobo, Thercia. Interview, June 2012.


Johnson, Carl. Interview, June 2012.

Johnson, Ruby. Interview, June 2012.

Liauk, Su. Interview, June 2012.

Lincoln, Emma. Interview, June 2012.


Mitchell, Debbie. Interview, June 2012.


Williams-Forson, Psyche. *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power*.

Williams, Gary. Interview, July 2012.