Food justice has always lived at the center of my work as an artist and advocate. For the last 10 years my most meaningful work involved serving local food and supporting food education as a Just Food Community Food Educator and Trainer. The global shift caused by the 2020 pandemic resulted in a shift in my role at Just Food from educator and trainer to board member. Now, I proudly serve and support the organization’s mission to build equitable local food systems in broader ways than I dreamed possible. #PutItOnOurPlate is my first order of business!

#PutItOnOurPlate is a social media hashtag campaign and institutional toolkit celebrating African American liberation movements of the past while presenting possibilities for equitable Black Futures. The campaign invites individuals and institutions to host and post picnics, gardening days, and recipe demos recreating foods that sustained Black folks on countless liberation journeys. It is a modern national archive of the people, by the people, remembering and re-sharing the words of Frederick Douglass and scores of other thinkers, activists, and freedom fighters who challenged the notion of American independence. The movement invites the creation and circulation of archival and contemporary images of African American folks existing together with food at the center, toward a joy-filled re-writing of African American history.

#PutItOnOurPlate is a call to remember the meager weekly rations of salted meat given to enslaved adults; the oysters, crabs, and lobsters that fed poor urban Black folks along their great migrations; the sandwiches Ms. Peaches fed Black civil rights activists detained by the police; and the breakfast programs the Black Panther Party made happen for tens of thousands of Black school kids across America. It is a call to learn and recreate the family recipes passed for generations from families and communities.

#PutItOnOurPlate is the convergence of Afrofuturism, Black Joy, the Movement for Black Lives, and Afro-pessimism. #PutItOnOurPlate recognizes Black pain, Black death, and anti-Black violence while exalting America’s powerful legacy of Black liberation and finding space to gather for a good time in the face of it all.

In love and solidarity,
Tanika I. Williams
Brooklyn, NY

Spread the history of the laws that aimed to keep black folk shackled.

Spread truth about the love that aimed to set black folk free.

Spread a movement of good food and storytelling about black freedom in America.

Come, set a revolutionary table.

#PutItOnOurPlate
Vermont first banned slavery in 1777. The United States officially abolished slavery in 1865. The first Gradual Emancipation law of 1780 set some parents free while keeping their children enslaved. Each state has its own complex history of Emancipation, as a result, there is not one African American Independence Day...there are many.

July 4th is marked as a day of freedom, specifically the day the United States gained independence from Great Britain and extolled equality. The commemoration is complicated by a mix of progress yet hypocrisy, a sense of hope yet steady mis-education of the truth in history. Even though America declared independence in 1776, 245 years later, black people are still fighting against predatory redlining, gentrification, unequal school funding, serious health disparities, and a host of other social injustices.

Advocate Melissa Danielle reminds us that “New York was one of the largest slave holding colonies in the Northeast. For many years afterward, free blacks across New York State hosted parades and big dinners on July 5th, in celebration.” It’s time to collectively talk about the histories of emancipation, state by state.

No matter the struggle, food has been one of the main ways Black people pushed back against oppression. Early Africans in Colonial America were banned from using indigenous language and making indigenous music. They kept their sense of home alive by growing
West African crops using West African techniques and cooking West African-influenced cuisine. Africans in Runaway and Maroon communities used their familiarity with foraging from their home countries to survive in the wilderness of America. Black midwives, conjure folks, and plantation doctors used their knowledge of herbal medicine to deliver babies, cure illness and prevent disease in Black communities across the U.S.

Food was a central point of mutual aid along the Underground Railroad, during the Great Migration, through the Great Depression, and well into the Jim Crow South! These are a few examples of the countless stories of Black folks serving as community beacons by serving food to those in need. Food continues to be at the center of religious community building! So much Black economic liberation is connected to the church Sunday dinner sale, the Nation of Islam bean pie, and the baked-good-based building funds that pool community resources to construct necessary structures.

We know the big-named Civil Rights activists. Equally important are the names of the people who fed the fighters on the frontlines with sandwiches and snack boxes at the sit-ins and jails.

Let’s not forget the restaurants that held meetings in the backrooms and raised funds for nationwide efforts. Perhaps one of the most impressive nationwide food efforts was the Free Breakfast Program started by the Black Panther Party in 1969. At the peak of the program, the Panthers fed more than 20,000 children at 45 locations.

All across America, Black religious groups, community groups, and local activists organize food pantries that bring affordable, quality food to residents. Urban centers across the country are filled with community gardens that transform urban blight with green spaces that offer refuge and fresh food. The fish fry, cookout, and crab boil are cultural staples that offer safe space and bonding alongside a great plate of food.
There is a common consensus that collard greens originated in the Mediterranean, then the plant migrated throughout Africa, before traveling across the ocean with the transatlantic slave trade to the “Americas.”

African Greens:

This green leafy vegetable is commonly served in Sub-Saharan African meals. They are known as muriwo in Zimbabwe, morogo in Botswana, and sukuma wiki in Kenya.

Often referred to as “African vegetables” at local West African open-air markets or roadside stalls, these vegetables have often been dismissed as village food. However, these climate-hardy crops grow in abundance and are now finally being recognized as a source of food security.

Some are also used for their medicinal properties, but in various African countries collards are usually cooked in a stew-like fashion with the accompaniment of fish (fresh, smoked, dried, or a combination of all) or with meat protein (generally goat, lamb, or beef).

Dishes like Nigerian Egusi Soup, Ethiopian Collard Greens aka Ye’abasha Gomen - Braised Collard Greens, and Sukuma Wiki from Kenya are just a few traditional ways collard greens are cooked. I encourage you to please try cooking collard greens with one of these migration recipes from across the ocean, they are all very delicious!

Egusi

Ye’abasha Gomen

Sukuma Wiki
African Diaspora Greens:
Collard Greens are a staple in the African-American culture and in households all across the world. This dark leafy green from the cabbage family is full of vitamins and minerals that are healthy for us.

Collard greens date back to prehistoric times and are one of the oldest members of the cabbage family. Fun Fact: You may not know that Collard greens are also known as tree cabbage due to the height of growth. Collard greens are an extremely nutritious vegetable, rich in vitamins and minerals that help prevent and fight diseases.

Here are some examples:
- Promote lung health
- Cardiovascular protection
- A healthy transition through menopause
- Broad Antioxidant protection
- High source of calcium

Collard greens were one of the vegetables that African-Americans were allowed to grow for their consumption during slavery time. After being emancipated in the late 1800s, cooked greens were definitely comfort food aka “Soul Food” for the new freed Africans. “Picking Greens” the term means to remove the larger stems by hand, became a way for women to bond and socialize in generational family groups and friendship groups, as part of the cooking prep and as part of strengthening their communities. These sentiments still are uplifted and passed on to many African Americans to this day!

https://www.richlandlibrary.com/blog/2021-02-16/taste-history#:~:text=Collard%20greens%20date%20back%20to%20were%20originated%20in%20Eastern%20Mediterranean.

https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/277957
The Definition Benefits:

Collard, (Brassica oleracea, variety acephala), original name colewort, also called collard greens, form of cabbage, of the mustard family (Brassicaceae). The plant is a source of nutritionally important minerals and vitamins A and C. It is commonly raised as a source of winter greens in the southern United States, where it is customarily boiled with a seasoning of pork fat.

Collard bears the same botanical name as kale, from which it differs only in leaf characters: collard leaves are much broader, are not frilled, and resemble those of head cabbage.

The main stem reaches a height of 60–120 cm (24–48 inches) with a rosette of leaves at the top. Lower leaves commonly are harvested progressively; the entire young rosette is sometimes harvested. Collard is usually grown as an annual, but it is a biennial plant and will produce yellow four-petaled flowers in loose clusters in its second year. The fruits are dry capsules known as siliques. The plants are susceptible to cabbage loopers and aphids.

https://www.britannica.com/plant/collard
COLLARD GREENS

Collard Greens are a member of the Brassica family which includes vegetables such as broccoli, kale, cauliflower and cabbage. Collards have a long growing season; they are planted in the spring and take most of the summer to mature. Collards taste best after a frost, so look for them especially in the autumn and winter months.

STORAGE
♦ Store your collard greens unwashed, wrapped in a damp towel in the refrigerator drawer.
♦ Although collards are best eaten fresh, they can also be frozen.
To freeze:
clean and trim the leaves, cut them into strips, steam blanch them for 4 minutes, cool them quickly and pack them into a hard plastic container.

PREPARATION
♦ Wash the collard greens well by swishing them in a bowl of water with a little bit of salt (to help draw any dirt away from the leaves).
♦ Cut or rip out the thick center rib of the large leaves. Smaller leaves have tender ribs which do not need to be removed.
♦ Cooking collards causes them to shrink down to 1/4 or 1/8 of their original volume. Allow for 4-8 cups of greens per person.
♦ Traditionally, collards were often prepared by cooking them for several hours with a ham bone for flavoring. Unfortunately, this method robs the vegetable of most of its nutritional content and adds unneeded fat. This is not the only way to prepare collard greens!
♦ Try steaming or sautéing collard greens with olive oil and garlic.
♦ Combining collards with other greens (such as arugula, kale, mustard, chard or spinach) is also a wonderful way to prepare this vegetable.
♦ Smaller, younger collard greens are good fresh in salad or lightly cooked and added to omelets and stir-fries.

Nutritional Information
Collards are high in vitamin A and C and folate. Vitamin A is important in vision, growth and development, skin health, immune function and reproduction. Vitamin C is important in immune response, wound healing, and allergic reactions. Vitamin C also helps with iron absorption. A healthy diet with enough folate may reduce a woman’s risk of having a child with certain birth defects of the brain or spinal chord. Collards also contain calcium and vitamin E. Calcium can help maintain good bone health and may reduce risk of osteoporosis. Vitamin E is an antioxidant that helps to protect cells from damage. This protection may lead to lower risk of certain diseases.
Traditional Diasporic Collard Greens:
Chef Sia Pickett’s oral family recipe from her paternal Creole grandmother in her words
Harriet Birts of St. Charles Parish, LA

Ingredients:
2 Bunches of Collard greens picked and washed
1 onion cut into 4 pieces skin and roots removed
1 Smoked meat, Fatback, Salt Pork, Ham Hocks, or Bacon Fat
Salt (preferable Sea Salt) to taste given meat is cured in salt
2 quarts of clean water or smoky pork stock
2-3 cloves of garlic (my addition my grandmother didn’t use garlic)
1 to 2 hot to mild (to your level of heat) chili peppers minced

Instructions:
Put your choice of meat in the pot to boil, depending on the saltiness of the meat you may want to discard the water from the first boil and replenish or dilute it with fresh water and add your onion pieces
Wash greens and rinse with salt.*

Pick (remove) the stems, roll the leaves, and cross-cut up washed Collard greens
Add greens to the pot with your boiled meat. Add salt, chili pepper, and optional garlic, and cook to desired tenderness.

Note: Collard broth “Pot Liquor” can be drunk by itself for medicinal purposes or poured over cornbread as an additional delicious side.

Jwi Manje Ou! (Creole – Enjoy your meal)

* When preparing garden fresh collards make sure to wash them thoroughly and add a little salt to wash water to draw out any bugs or dirt that lodges between the stems.
The Remixed Vegan option:
(traditionally cooked with pork)

Couve a Mineira (Brazilian Collard Greens)
8 to 10 servings • Recipe by Chef Sia
Adapted from https://braziliankitchenabroad.com/brazilian-style-collard-greens/

Ingredients:
2 pounds collards, thick stems removed, washed, and cross-cut into small ribbons
2 tablespoons olive oil
9 cloves garlic, minced
2 medium-size fresh chopped tomatoes
Red Pepper Flakes or fresh hot chili to taste
Sea Salt to taste

Directions:
Pile leaves into stacks roll like a cigar and cross-cut into small ribbons
Heat the olive oil in a medium skillet over medium to high heat
Add the tomatoes and cook until broken down to a liquid-like paste
Add the garlic and cook until fragrant, about a minute
Add the collard greens and toss gently until the greens wilt, about 1 minute
HOPE

“Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave/I am the dream and the hope of the slave/I rise/I rise/I rise.” –Maya Angelou

ACTIVATE

“No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that knowledge will help set you free.” –Assata Shakur

“I am where I am because of the bridges that I crossed. Sojourner Truth was a bridge. Harriet Tubman was a bridge. Ida B. Wells was a bridge. Madame C. J. Walker was a bridge. Fannie Lou Hamer was a bridge.” –Oprah Winfrey

“Time is on the side of the oppressed today, it’s against the oppressor. Truth is on the side of the oppressed today, it’s against the oppressor.” –El-hajj Malik El-Shabazz

RESOURCES

Want to learn more? Local libraries, city museums, historical societies, historical houses, and lodges are great resources to do research on black freedom fights in your state. Websites such as the Smithsonian, Library of Congress, and your local library are great places to start.

Veggie Tips & Recipes

CSA’s and Farmers Markets

Just Food Inc.

Donate