

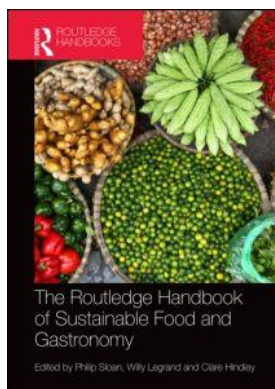
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8

ABORIGINAL FOOD

Traditional dishes surviving in the fast food era

Donald Sinclair and Carolann Marcus

Introduction

The focus of this study is the menus that are rooted in the ancestral traditions of the people that comprise modern-day Guyana, the styles of food preparation that have survived through time, been passed on principally through oral transmission and have left an indelible print upon even the most sophisticated modern Guyanese dish. Aboriginal food finds a place in these ancestral traditions, embracing recipes and cooking methods that go back centuries, are just as popular and appealing today and are a feature of mainstream culinary practice. There is a manifest strength and persistence in this Amerindian culinary tradition in Guyana that serves as a tool for the enhancement of the indigenous cultural identity. In the context of this article, the survival and persistence of Amerindian food and Amerindian culinary tradition must be seen essentially as the triumph of 'the bush'. In terms of the anthropology of food, the pattern that emerges is of an interior culinary tradition that survives and coexists with 'coastal' and foreign concoctions of more recent vintage. This theme of a triumphant interior tradition will underlie the discussion in the section that follows.

Guyana – brief background

Guyana (formerly British Guiana) lies on the north-eastern coast of South America, occupying an area of 214,970km² (83,000 square miles). The country shares borders with Brazil to the south, Venezuela to the west, Suriname to the east and it abuts the Atlantic Ocean to the north-east. The official language is English, although some Amerindians, especially those residing in the remote interior locations, speak their indigenous languages. The total population, as recorded in the census of 2002, is 751,233. The capital city is Georgetown, situated on the north-eastern Atlantic coast (Daniels, 2010).

From the standpoint of the thematic of this chapter it is important to observe that the colony of British Guiana was the object of a colonial exploitation that was concentrated largely and almost exclusively on the coastal lowland and the area immediately behind the sand and clay region. Alvin Thompson writes: 'Attention was paid by the European class almost exclusively to those areas of the country and those aspects of the economy that could produce relatively quick and large scale profits' (Thompson, 1987: 15). The colonial export economy,

narrowly based upon plantation sugar production, needed only a network of productive sugar estates to sustain it. In a paradoxical way, inattention to the interior areas meant the retardation of development in those regions (predominantly inhabited by indigenous populations) but it also facilitated a consolidation of the cultural forms and traditions of the interior and its forest peoples. Hence rituals, dialects, customs and traditions flourished by virtue of the neglect of the coastal masters. In this matrix Amerindian cultural traditions prospered.

Amerindian cultural traditions in Guyana

The phenomenon of cultural retention among the Amerindian peoples of Guyana is indeed a paradox. A largely coastal colonial and postcolonial agenda nurtured an attitude towards the interior that was a mix of disdain, fear and reverence. The 'bush' and its people held secrets, dangers and mysteries that were often impenetrable by or incomprehensible to the coastal intelligence. The post-independence and late twentieth-century rush to the interior, with the single objective of the pursuit of wealth through mineral extraction, implied a small paradigm shift in developmental thinking – the interior was now the theatre for a frenzied materialism. Lesley Potter notes:

Many of Guyana's development efforts in the interior over the one hundred and fifty years have been based on exploitation of extractable resources. The activities and those pursuing them, have been very often transitory in nature. It is this fact which, perhaps, has enabled the Amerindians to survive, a survival regarded by some observers as an accident of history.

(Potter, 1993: 3)

Although, as would be inevitable, the Amerindians were themselves part of this exploitation of mineral resources, their cultural traditions and practices persisted with varying degrees of integrity. Among those traditions were the culinary practices and menus that the Amerindians have now bequeathed to Guyana as part of an eclectic mix of national dishes (Bennett, 1977; Fox and Hall, 1978). Before that legacy is understood it is useful to understand the social background of the progenitors of that legacy – the Amerindians themselves.

The Amerindians of Guyana are referred to as the First Peoples of the country, attesting to their having descended from the original inhabitants of Guyana. Although the Amerindians of Guyana can boast of a natural increase in their population, the story of their survival through the ages is a complex plot of periodic devastations due to wars, exploitation and strange diseases to which they had no immunity. The fact that much of this history bears no permanent visual record has impacted our complete and comprehensive understanding of the challenges that, historically, confronted the Amerindians, and of the creative ways in which they responded to such challenges (Potter, 1993).

The Amerindian population can be grouped into three broad language systems – Arawak, Carib and Warrau, and further sub-divided into seven tribes or nations – Akawaio, Arekuna, Carib, Macusi, Patamona, Waiwai and Wapisiana. The Carib, Akawaio, Arekuna and Patamona tribes live in the river valleys of west Guyana. Two Amerindian groups live in the savannah region of Rupununi: the Macusi in the northern half and the Wapisiana in the south. The Waiwai live in the southernmost point near where the Essequibo River rises (Fox and Danna, 1993: 13).

Although significant settlement can be observed in areas or villages officially designated as Amerindian villages, the process of population diffusion has resulted in Amerindians being scattered in all parts of Guyana, pursuing a variety of occupations and educational goals no

different from any other of the six races that comprise the Guyana population; intermarrying with other races and practising cultural forms that are indistinguishable from the dominant coastal expressions. It is largely in the more settled populations of the interior that one finds the greatest persistence and retention of ancestral cultural traditions and practices. These forms are manifested in some principal ways.

Language

In Guyana English (and varieties thereof) is the official language but there also exists a rich profusion of native dialects, languages and vernaculars. Amerindian languages are spoken. To assist the process of language retention a number of dictionaries were recently handed to the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology in Guyana for distribution to Amerindian communities.

Craft

Few craft shops in Guyana would run the risk of omitting works of Amerindian weaving, basketry or woodwork from their display spaces. Many Amerindian communities produce a very wide and exquisitely crafted assortment of mats, wooden kitchen utensils, personal jewellery items, furniture, clothing, headwear and footwear, ornaments and other souvenir items for sale to both locals and tourists alike. For many craft is the medium through which the creative talent of the Amerindians finds its most visible expression. Works of Amerindian craft are often a feature of display stands at tourism fairs and other expos attended by both government and private sector representatives.

Folklore and legends

The Amerindians of Guyana, being the First People and descendants of the original inhabitants of the country, lay claim to a rich store of legends, myths and folklore (Ridgwell, 1972). Some of these legends have been put to verse or song and now form part of a national repertoire of folk songs and legends. Among the most popular of the Amerindian legends is that of Old Kaie, the Patamona chief who is believed to have gathered all his belongings and paddled to his death over the majestic Kaieteur Falls as a sacrifice to his people. Apart from this famous legend there exists a rich store of tales of mythical beings who performed mysterious feats deriving from their innate powers and gifts.

Medicinal lore

The medicinal lore of the Amerindians constitutes a substantial segment of their intellectual property that has been gaining respectability and attracting growing scientific interest in recent times. Engagement with the 'bush' for centuries has produced an orally transmitted (and now increasingly recorded) pharmacopeia of herbal remedies, potions, stimulants, suppressants and prophylactics. Through this vehicle an important strand of Amerindian culture is preserved and disseminated.

Amerindian food

As the central focus of this chapter, the theme of Amerindian food will receive much more comprehensive treatment in the ensuing sections. Amerindian cuisine and culinary practices

have now entered the Guyana culinary mainstream, enriching the national store and consolidating the strength of the Amerindian culinary component. But first, some thoughts about the positive national context in which Amerindian cultural traditions now find fertile ground.

National context

The past three decades in Guyana have seen widespread and unprecedented recognition being accorded to the rights and welfare of the indigenous people. The passage of the Amerindian Act of 2006 enshrined into law a number of measures aimed at safeguarding Amerindian rights in such issues as environmental protection, mining and forestry, intellectual property, land titles and village administration (Nokta, 2011). There is an entire month – September – designated as Amerindian Heritage Month and an increasing number of agencies, both at the local and international level, have shown willingness to make funding available for projects aimed at improving the welfare of the Amerindian Peoples of Guyana. Given this supportive national (and international) environment Amerindian cultural traditions enjoy a speciality of place that more than assures their longevity.

Food and cultural identity

Few modern consumers, hearing the terms ‘pizza’, ‘taco’, ‘lasagna’, ‘seviche’, ‘roti’, ‘chow mein’ or ‘croissant’, would be in any doubt as to the national identities associated with those foods. In reality, each of the mentioned items has long transcended its specific national or cultural context and now occupies a place in that culinary kaleidoscope we call the modern restaurant menu. Food can be a means of branding cultures and nations. According to Happel (2012: 176): ‘The production, conservation and consumption of foods were, thus, important activities that determined social identity and values of the indigenous Andean community before and after the Spanish conquest.’ Those Andean societies were predominantly agriculture-based and the Inca rulers consumed a fare that derived almost exclusively from the agricultural labours of the indigenous populations.

Perhaps nowhere is the branding power of food more noticeable than in the proliferation of ‘ethnic’ restaurants encountered in most modern cities. Such proliferation results in consumers opting to eat Mexican or Chinese, Italian or Vietnamese, Indian or Lebanese or Caribbean. Each choice or culinary preference is informed by a clear sense of menu, preparation, spicing, even ambience. These associations are possible thanks to the weight of culinary tradition that has gone into the branding of each ethnic or national or cultural variety. Such terms as ‘fine dining’ or ‘*haute cuisine*’ would of course fuse national culinary particularities into the cosmopolitan, eclectic menus of the modern restaurant, placing the world on your plate.

As is the case with any branding scenario, some brands are stronger than others; some better-known and more enticing than others. The relatively low profile that indigenous foods and preparations may enjoy, both in Guyana and internationally, is by no means any indication of the extent to which such foods reflect, and indeed reinforce, cultural identity. In the perspective of Counihan (1999) food is a window to the complex constituents of human life and culture. For many scholars (Lappé and Collins, 1986; Fischler, 1988) food cannot be confined to the domains of the nutritional or agricultural sciences and in fact is at the centre of a number of anthropological, political and sociological discourses relating to gender, power, access to power and exercise of power. Food of the Amerindians in Guyana is as much

a cultural marker and an indication of an identity brand as is the case with the more universally popular and familiar culinary varieties consumed in the developed world. The persistence of the Amerindian brand results largely from the fact that the Amerindian cultural tradition is a tradition that is autochthonous and one that evolved over centuries in relative isolation from other culinary influences.

Food in traditional Amerindian society

Indigenous people of the Americas populated the New World long before Columbus arrived. In the case of Guyana, they came first to this region about 12,000 years ago (Daniels, 2010). They were hunters and gatherers and their daily diet consisted of fish and game, nuts, roots and berries. As time went by, they practised subsistence farming and included cassava, yams, sweet potatoes, corn, plantains, bananas, pineapples, etc. in their diet (Bennett, 1977).

Traditionally, food played a significant role in the Amerindian society. It was there for *kayap* (communal work – land for a farm had to be cleared, a church needed to be built, etc. If it was a community project, each family would bring food and drink to be consumed at lunch time or after the work was done. If it was one family's plot of farm land that had to be cleared, that family would provide meals and/or drinks for those who came to help them). It was also used in religious ceremonies and it was celebrated after a harvest (Moses, interview).

Today, much as it was in years gone by, food is an integral part of religious ceremonies and community festivities (Yde, 1965). The Young Cassava Festival, also known as Young Crop, is observed annually on the first Saturday in June. Special food is prepared and it must be blessed by the priest, *Piai'chang* (pee-eye-shang), before consumption. Young cassavas are used to make bread that is much smaller than those made for everyday use. Usually, the entire cassava plant is uprooted during reaping, but for the Young Crop, the soil is parted and one or two roots are cut off (the others are left to mature and are celebrated later in the year). These are taken to a designated Young Crop cassava bread maker. This is usually a woman, a spinster, who makes bread for the entire community. *Maum* birds and *Silabey* fish are roasted and *casiri* (cassava drink), sugarcane juice and/or pineapple drink are made the day before the festival. After dances and prayers, *canapé*-sized cassava bread topped with roasted *Maum* and/or *Silabey* along with the drinks are served to the gathering much like communion in modern churches.

The other cassava festival is more of a thanksgiving for an abundant crop. This is celebrated annually on November 30. The cassavas that were left to mature after the Young Crop roots were harvested are now ready for reaping. The men of the village go out hunting and fishing sometimes for up to one week to amply supply fish and game for the celebrations. Fermented drinks are made in abundance and it is not uncommon to see drunken villagers napping against a wall or under a tree (Moses, interview).

Traditionally, the daily diet consisted of fish or meat *tuma pot* (a spicy dish made from the juice of the bitter cassava, fish or meat and hot peppers) with cassava bread or *farine* and *casiri*. Usually, men were the hunters/fishermen while women did the cooking. For celebrations, meat was caught well in advance and smoked as a way of preserving it; cassava bread and *farine* were made and stored and beverages were made and left to ferment.

Since all the groups did not dwell in the same geographical space, their daily diets differed due to the availability of ingredients. For the riverain groups, fresh fish and meat were abundant. For those further inland, smoked or dried meats and fish were consumed. Also,

myths determined what got eaten and by whom. For example, some groups believed that if a woman ate big fish while pregnant her baby would be born unusually big; due to their fast sprouting, mushrooms would make children grow quickly so parents would touch the soles of babies' feet with them, then sauté and serve; turtle would make those who consumed it move slowly and get rough, scaly skin; pregnant women should not eat crawling animals or their babies would be born with a deformity, among others.

Religious and social considerations

In traditional Amerindian society religious beliefs also determined what got eaten and what was shunned. For instance, Adventists do not eat wild hog, un-scaled fish and shellfish because in the Old Testament eating these things was forbidden since they were deemed unclean. Persons who practise the Alleluiah religion do not eat un-scaled fish because the skin is smooth like a human's, and wild cow or bush cow is not eaten because its ribs are like a man's. Eating these animals was forbidden by Makonaima (mah-koo-nye-mah) the Great Spirit who created the earth.

Regardless of group or location, cassava (cassava bread, farine, cassareep, cassava water and tapioca) and hot peppers were staples. All of the traditionally used foods are still eaten in Amerindian villages today and even though foods from the coastland are becoming increasingly popular, the myths and old wives' tales are still prevalent.

Class considerations are seldom involved in the consumption of foods in the Amerindian society, but traditionally, men are usually given their meals first or a special portion is set aside for them. The other family members eat what is left. This is so because it is mainly the men who hunt and fish so setting aside a special portion is in acknowledgement of their efforts.

Young children are given a special tuma that is made with bigger, less bony fish and small, mildly spicy peppers. They are usually seated at a different table from adults to allow the grown-ups to discuss the day's happenings in private.

It is expected that visitors should bring a gift of food for the Toshau (village leader and head of the village council). Usually, it is smoked fish or meat if the journey is on foot (these are easy to transport and would not spoil on the journey), and farm produce (fruits, plantains, yams) if it's by canoe or other mode of transport (Moses, interview).

Intoxicating drinks are used every day and for a variety of purposes, usually at meal times, during work breaks, celebrations, religious ceremonies or just to quench a thirst on a hot day. Children are given the drinks 'fresh' – in the unfermented stage, or pineapple or banana drink, but sometimes if there is nothing else, they're allowed to drink it after it has been fermented.

Popular Amerindian dishes and their preparation

The information in this section was gathered in an exclusive interview with Betty Moses, elder of the Akawaio tribe in the Mazaruni region of Guyana.

Cassareep – the juice collected from the grated cassavas during the cassava bread process – is boiled for hours until it thickens and becomes dark brown. Cassareep is the key ingredient in the absolutely indispensable Guyanese dish called 'pepper pot' (a rich, spicy kind of meat stew served at Christmas), but it can also be used year round in stews, gravies and sauces.

Pepper pot dish



Tuma or atchee – this spicy dish is made from boiled cassava juice, peppers, usually fish or if available, wild meat. The cassava juice is boiled to remove the toxins and before it thickens to form cassareep, fish or meat and hot peppers are added. It is eaten with cassava bread or farine.

Tuma in the pot



Farine – made differently depending on the region, and mainly eaten in Regions Eight (Potaro/Siparuni) and Nine (Upper Takatu/Upper Essequibo) – is made from cassava and done through a similar process to cassava bread. In Region Seven – Cuyuni/Mazaruni – the cassavas are scraped to remove the skin, washed, grated, squeezed in a matapee and sifted. The couscous is then placed in a large pan – think giant wok – and parched until light brown. The result is fine grains that can be best described as coarse cream of wheat. This is usually eaten with broth or made into porridge.

In Regions Eight (Potaro/Siparuni) and Nine (Upper Takatu/Upper Essequibo), the process is slightly different. When the cassavas are brought from the farm, they are left in the warishi (woven basket used to fetch farm produce and carried on the head and back) and soaked in water for about one week. By this time, they are quite soft. The skin is removed and the cassava is pounded with a mortar and pestle, squeezed in a matapee, sifted and toasted in a large pan. The grains are much coarser and harder than the farine from Region Seven. It is usually eaten with tasso (sun dried beef or other meat), roasted and/or smoked meats, broths and stews.

Casiri/Bashwar – this potent drink is made from a certain species of bitter cassava. The cassavas are washed, scraped and grated before being boiled on low heat for many hours, sometimes even one day to remove the naturally occurring toxins. Purple sweet potatoes are added for colour and to aid the fermentation process. This mixture is poured into a barrel or large bucket, covered and left to ferment for about three days. For religious celebrations, the drink is consumed after one or two days of fermentation.

Piwari – this intoxicating drink is made from toasted cassava bread. The specially made thin cassava bread is toasted until brown, crumbled and placed in a barrel or large bucket with water and sugarcane juice or sugar (to aid fermentation). It is covered and left to ferment for up to three days before it is strained and sweetened.

Traditionally and before sugar crystals were available, a purple variety of sweet potato or sugarcane juice was used to sweeten drinks. The potatoes were peeled, boiled and crushed before being added to the drinks. The sugarcane juice was extracted by grinding the canes with stones and collecting the juice in a gourd or other container then adding to the mix.

It is said that an older, toothless woman would chew bits of cassava bread and spit it in the piwari to aid fermentation. This myth is perpetuated among coastland dwellers, but this writer knows of no one who has ever actually seen this occur. Regardless of linguistic group or residence, the ever versatile cassava is a staple in the Amerindian diet. It is used for bread, farine, casiri, piwari, tuma pot, tapioca, porridge and cassareep (while this isn't a dish, it deserves mention because Christmas in Guyana, celebrated by all Guyanese, would not be the same without it).

Cassava bread – this is usually made within 24–72 hours of harvesting to prevent the roots from spoiling. After the cassavas are reaped from the family farm, they are washed and scraped to remove thin bark and underlying skin. They are washed again to remove any bits of skin that might be present, and then hand grated. The couscous, or grated cassava, is then placed in a matapee (not to be confused with the Zimbabwean musical instrument of the same name), which is an ingenious woven basket sieve in the shape of a cylinder with loops at each end. It is hung securely from a rafter, using the top loop. Grated cassava is placed inside the matapee from the top. A pole is placed in the lower loop and, with the aid of someone sitting on the pole, the matapee is stretched downward and the juice is squeezed out leaving the grated, almost dry couscous inside. The liquid extracted by this squeezing action is collected in a basin or bowl positioned underneath the matapee. The liquid is used to make cassareep, the remaining meal to make cassava bread.

The couscous is then put to dry for a day or two, sifted through a sieve and placed on a baking pan and shaped into circles to make the bread. Once removed from the pan, the bread is usually placed on the roof of the kitchen to dry further then stored. For a softer, more pliable bread (arasucca), the couscous is not left to dry. This kind of bread is eaten with roasted fish or meats.

Owing to the increased interest in gold-mining, some traditional farming communities no longer maintain farms and are unable to adequately supply the demands for cassava bread. As a result, they bring their cassavas from the coastland or even the ready-made cassava bread from predominantly Afro-Guyanese communities on the coast. Despite the adjustments that, in these traditional farming communities, are made necessary by twenty-first-century economic and social conditions, Amerindians in Guyana are committed to the preservation of their culinary traditions and traditional foods. Also, any of Guyana's larger hotels (for example the Pegasus, the Princess, the Opus, Brandsville hotel) offer Aboriginal food as part of their menus. In the interior resorts it is accepted that Aboriginal food would be served, or even prepared by an Amerindian. At official state lunches 'pepper pot', the Aboriginal staple, enjoys the status of an iconic Guyanese dish. The food preparations described above do not exist in some kind of culinary periphery; they are integral to Guyanese cuisine and have demonstrated their survivability and resilience even in the face of a proliferation of fast food preparations.

Conclusion

For the Amerindians of Guyana a centuries-long engagement with the land, played out in relative isolation from coastal populations, forged a symbiosis of man and nature that sustained human livelihood, nurtured their belief systems and promoted cultural continuity. Modes of dress, religious rituals, hunting and rearing practices all consolidated themselves as part of the man-nature continuum. So did culinary and medicinal practices, reflecting the Amerindian knowledge of the terrestrial world they inhabited and their mastery of its culinary and medicinal applications. The foods and culinary preparations that arose as a result of the Amerindians' centuries-old understanding of and adaptation to their environment assumed the status of cultural property, inseparable from the evolution and identity of the Amerindians themselves.

Understanding Amerindian food and culinary preparation is to understand the Amerindian relationship with, and mastery of, the environment. For example, the famous Amerindian 'pepper pot' is famous for its shelf longevity – a fact that relates directly to the need on the part of the Amerindians to make the best use of time and resources by concocting a dish that would be 'renewable' and 'sustainable' with minimum repeat cooking. This dish (pepper pot) has now passed into the culinary mainstream of Guyana, and is precious to culturally diverse palates, but its roots in Amerindian culture are known and celebrated. Such mainstreaming sustains the culinary item as a projection of a minority culture surviving amidst the pervasive fast food constructs emanating from the growing number of international fast food chains making their presence felt in Guyana. Food therefore becomes cultural resistance and a means of reinforcing and consolidating a brand and an identity.

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