


READING

A SLAVE'S DAILY BREAD

CHAPTER 13

Once a week on most plantations, slaves lined up to receive their rations from the master. Though the allotments varied from one plantation to the next, they were predictable enough: for each adult slave about a peck of cornmeal, three or four pounds of bacon or salt pork, and some molasses for sweetener. Some masters added vegetables, fruits, or sweet potatoes in season, but only on rare occasions did slaves receive wheat flour, beef, lean meat, poultry, eggs, or milk (which was reserved for children when it was available at all, and was usually in soured form).

In terms of simple calories, this ration was ample enough to sustain life. Frederick Law Olmsted, who traveled extensively in the South in the 1850s, reported that slaves had enough to eat but that their fare was generally “coarse, crude, and wanting in variety.” A careful modern study of slave diet concludes that on the eve of the Civil War, the standard daily ration was over 3000 calories, and that adult slaves received almost 5400 calories, which exceeds today’s recommended levels of consumption. But over 80 percent of the daily calories came from corn and pork, and this monotonous fare of hog-and-hominy, while sufficient in bulk, lacked several essential nutrients as well as enough protein. Diet-related diseases such as pellagra and beriberi were often noted among the slave population. This malnutrition was due more to ignorance than miserliness or willful neglect on the part of masters. Although slave owners and their families enjoyed more variety in their food and better cuts of meat, they too lacked a balanced diet.

On some plantations, masters left all cooking to the slaves, who would make breakfast and their noon meal before going to work in the morning, taking dinner with them to eat in the fields. After the day’s labor was done, they came home to fix a light supper. Other masters established a plantation kitchen where regular cooks prepared breakfast and dinner, though supper remained the responsibility of the individual slave or family. On these plantations, a noon meal was brought to the fields. In general, the quality of food preparation was better under this system because slaves were often too exhausted after work to put much time or

care into cooking. Naturally enough, however, slaves preferred to fix meals according to their own taste and eat as a family in some privacy, even if their quarters were hardly luxurious. Fanny Kemble reported that on her husband’s Georgia plantation the slaves sat “on the earth or doorsteps, and ate out of their little cedar tubs or an iron pot, some few with broken iron spoons, more with pieces of wood, and all the children with their fingers.” The cooking itself was done in front of a large fireplace, perhaps four feet wide, using long-handled frying pans, dutch ovens that nestled in the coals, or pots that were hung from poles swung over the fire.

Slaves resorted to various means to enliven their drab diet. Wherever their masters permitted it, they tended their own vegetable gardens after work or raised chickens and other animals. Not only did this practice provide eggs and other items not included in the weekly rations, but it also enabled slaves to sell their surplus to the master or in town and use their earnings to buy small quantities of luxuries such as coffee, sugar, and tobacco. Slaves also raided the master’s smokehouse, secretly slaughtered his stock and killed his poultry, and stole from neighboring plantations. Richard Carruthers, a former slave, recalled, “If they didn’t provision you enough, you just had to slip round and get a chicken.” Even slaves who received relatively large rations resorted to midnight forays to obtain higher-quality food and to trade stolen goods for tobacco and whiskey.

Hunting and fishing provided fresh meat as well as variety. Slaves who worked all day still had plenty of incentive to stir out at night to hunt raccoon or opossum. “The flesh of the coon is palatable,” admitted Solomon Northup, a black who had tasted both southern and northern cooking, “but verily there is nothing in all butcherdom so delicious as a roasted ‘possum.” Possum was parboiled to soften it up and then roasted with lard over the fire, along with sweet potatoes. As one slave song put it:

*De way ter cook de ‘possum nice,
Carve ‘im to de heart,
First parbile ‘im, stir ‘im twice,
Carve ‘im to de heart.*

*Den lay sweet taters in de pan,
Carve 'im to de heart;
Nuthin' beats dat in de Ian'.
Carve 'im to de heart.*

Squirrel meat, though tougher, could be boiled long enough to soften it up for squirrel pie served with dumplings. Rabbits, especially young ones, were tender enough to fry. Along with such meat might come "hoecakes," a popular dish made by slapping a bit of cornmeal dough on the blade of a hoe and holding it over the coals. Vegetables were boiled in a pot with a bit of hog jowl, each new vegetable thrown in at the appropriate cooking time: beans first, then cabbage when the beans were half done, then squash, and finally okra. Whenever they could get them, slave cooks used

spices to flavor their dishes. Some spices, such as sesame seeds, had come from Africa with the slaves. Red pepper, native to the Americas, added zing to innumerable dishes.

Holidays on the plantation, when the master would provide a banquet for the hands, provided a welcome break from the usual daily fare. On these occasions, slaves could fill up on beef, mutton, roast pig, coffee, wheat bread, pies, and other dishes only rarely tasted. Although masters generally tried to keep whiskey away from their slaves, some slave owners made an exception at Christmas. Feasting was one of the slaves' "principle sources of comfort," one ex-slave testified. "Only the slave who has lived all the year on his scanty allowance of meal and bacon, can appreciate such suppers."