



KOSHER SOUL
-PREFACE-

WHY IS THIS BOOK DIFFERENT
FROM ALL OTHER BOOKS?

When I first started talking about developing this book, a fellow African American food writer asked what it was about, saying, “So you’re not writing about Black [food], you’re writing about Jewish [food].” My response was reflexive: “No, this is a book about a part of Black food that’s also Jewish food; this is a book about Jewish food that’s also Black food because it’s a book about Black people who are Jewish and Jewish people who are Black.”

What you’re holding is the second in a three-book trilogy about the intersections (thank you for the language to describe this, Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw!) between food and identity. I never set out to write tomes of recipes that we could quickly lose among the many. I want to document the way food transforms the lives of people as people transform food. I meant my first book, *The Cooking Gene*, to be an early birthday gift to America, but especially the African American people on the verge of the solemn birthday of (Anglo-mainland) Black America, four hundred years past the arrival of the White Lion at Jamestown.

In the text were laid the seeds to talk about being Black, Jewish, of Southern heritage, and gay, while focusing on the journey to find out how the story of food shaped my family tree and how the food we produced, prepared, and consumed along the way defined us, soul by soul, down to me. The vulnerability was the gamble of putting myself under the microscope to ask readers to understand my American journey through a culinary lens. I didn’t want to leave anything behind. It’s my conviction that our plates are constantly shaped by everything we encounter and everything in us.

We were swallowed by four years of attempted repudiation of messages of change and hope carried in on an era of swift and distinct change. Despite an outrageously different eight years from anything we have known in our collective narrative, we never really have had a national recognition of the particular four-hundred-year commemoration we needed to have. The year 2019 was followed by a year that can only be described as a postmodern nadir of Black existence, one completely in need of the wisdom from the past few centuries that exposed all the underlying challenges from before and beyond us. However, I was quite chuffed that no matter what else my inaugural book meant, it stood proudly in defiance at the opening of the dark ages. We were here

not only before the Mayflower; we were here before the Drumpfs, and that was not to be forgotten or overlooked.

That same era also helped to stall this project. To talk about The Cooking Gene was to remind people of the Black experience's harrowing journey, bring back an awareness of our accomplishments, and assert a distinctly ethnic branding to our food story over the oft-assumed racial gloss. Meanwhile, all hell was breaking loose, and the growing loss of sleep spoke to our unease. Political scandals came and went like a battery of storms, and many hoped to see the pillars come down. They didn't.

Every day was a new flashpoint in the story of Culture Wars III. Each twenty-four-hour media cycle saw an uptick of red-meat policies to punish marginalized, oppressed, and outlier communities. The rising hate crimes and suspicions and anger from one group to another were painful and exhausting. Worse yet, the cloud above us, the knowledge that only a disaster that would affect us all could loosen the grip, loomed, and indeed on poisoned breaths and invisible biological bombs came the nasty release of a promiscuous plague. At last, something was present that was crueler to us than we were to one another.

I had to absorb some of this energy and motion to render this book honestly without condemning it to the times. This book is not a prisoner of the discourse of the forty-fifth president's rages, or of his minions, and at the same time, it is not possible to be liberated entirely from that stain. Even in this reflective moment, the West's original sins of anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism, as well as other forms of white supremacy, used to stir up resentment and anger and fuel conspiracy theories, have merged with continuing impulses toward misogyny, the suppression of the rights of the disabled and mentally ill, the continued struggle of sexual minorities, and the undisguised contempt for those struggling financially and for the working poor. In that nexus, Blacks and Jews and their Venn diagram have seen considerable turmoil and pain, and this too is a fundamental ingredient.

No matter the national sociopolitical climate, we humans are condemned as long as we breathe to the urge to eat and, when we eat, to find pleasure in the act and define our personal foundation. The Jewish people of the West and the African Atlantic Diaspora did not start their journey with exhausting shared pains or weaponized joy in their days; millennia and centuries have gone by with ample practice. That they, and we, have all survived yet again is another testimony to whatever magic lies in our traditions. Even when we were starving, our imaginations and hopes for redemption formed a feast in our minds that kept us going. We, the outsiders, have time-honored practice at seeking refuge in our pots and peering inside to see ourselves in the days when the outside world erases us.

We, the children of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, the children of Mother Africa, are ever finding meaning in our kitchens and our plates to overcome the next chapter of They tried to kill us, we won? Let's eat. I guess. If The Cooking Gene was a present to African America on the pulse of its birthday, Koshersoul is recovery food. Koshersoul is chicken soup for the soul of Jews of

African descent, the American and global Jewish peoplehood, and the folks in between in a spirit of celebration of our endurance and as a motivation for our healing in the raw and tender moment in which we find ourselves. There are other works about the existence and practice of Jews of African descent, but this is not an academic journey, and it's purposely not a cookbook. Koshersoul is an eclectic recipe file of diverse and complex peoplehood.

My goal is to go beyond the strict borders of what Black Jews eat or how Black Jews cook, or even how "mainstream" Jews (with "mainstream" being nothing more than a polite term for white) have absorbed Black food traditions not usually seen as "Jewish." It is the border-crossing story of how the ups and downs of daily existence as a Jew of color affect us from kop to kishkes as we sit down to partake in the soul-warming solace of our meals. Much like the people within these pages who have shared something of their lives, Koshersoul is not to be taken at face value. It's not just the food traditions of Jews of color that matter—it's the people and their lives and the legacy they want to leave in two peoplehoods where tradition and the power of heritage loom large even when the choice is to cast off or change directions.

The net is vast—from the experiences of Black non-Jews who cooked in Jewish households to the foodways of Black frum Jews and those in African and Western communities of some antiquity. It includes Jews who identify as white but Southern who are heirs to an Afri-Creole food tradition in Southern cuisine and the cousin traditions held by Black Muslims in America and traditions in Black Jewish congregations and communities that have been separate from the mainstream. Between these tabs are many border-crossers and combinations, a rainbow of people challenging our notion of not only the false antipodes of Black versus Jewish but American and human living beyond the bubbles and boxes we've assigned to assuage what we apprehend as normal and socially digestible.

Koshersoul is a chapter in the biography of a people and a food memoir with side journeys into what it means to be a person with multiple families. When I go into the kitchen to make my unique brand of koshersoul food, all of it goes with me: "race," as practiced in America and the West; Jewish learning and folk culture; Black cultural expression; the spiritual spectrum of both communities; and the spirit of queerness and impetus of gay liberation. Food has been my primary lens for navigating my citizenship within the Jewish people and my birthright as a Black man in America. Flashpoints amplifying conflict in Black-Jewish relationships, significant and attractive to our appetite for pain and argument, cannot take the place of individual narratives and authentic lives and the way people create themselves.

These recipes for each human experience—which Talmudic rabbis poetically and metaphorically expressed as not only "worlds," but "the entire world"—are not replaceable and negotiable as sources. Between the flashpoints and controversies are people living their lives, including going into the kitchen and cooking and then sitting down and breaking bread. Before and after historical calamities are human beings creating themselves and contributing to the larger flow of civilizations.

Moments trickle into memories into trends into customs into traditions and flow in streams to become the sea of narrative and the mists of myth and lore. No matter our fantasies, all is not recorded; many stories get lost, many remarkable lives and communities disappear. Silence and extinction are real horrors. And yet, the antidote is the record of the recipes of human lives as celebrations of cultures often oppressed and marginalized, taking absolute joy in being ourselves as members of worlds built on top of worlds. In food, we are more authentic than we know, more self-revelatory than we let on. This is why even though our food journey can reveal our weaknesses and our plagues, it feels so good here. Food is an unbelievably clear path to truth, and its best performance relies on hope as a critical ingredient—sharing, acknowledging other lives, offering up ourselves, revealing our boundaries. Koshersoul will, I do hope, join another deep and solemn moment of reflection that morning after when we rebuild and reimagine and share our tables again.

My greatest hope comes from the ingredients that Blacks and Jews bring to the table. I am the first to admit we are an incredibly exhausting set of people. We talk about the food we had before and the food we're going to eat next while eating the meal at hand. We beg of our loved ones to partake in food as if we actually need to eat our oppression.

Our stereotypical foods have become shorthand for inside jokes we tell almost definitely at the deepest hatreds facing us. We sprinkle on our food traditions, sarcasm, and irony. Still, there is a lot of memory in our heads, and on our tables, lots of love from parent to child sighs of security when we realize our menus translate our means of survival across millennia. We love to complain, and then we complain about that. We Blacks and Jews don't always speak the same language, but our spirits are mutually intelligible. Black shame and Jewish guilt—our collective mullings over the Maafa (the disaster of slavery and its global aftermaths and colonialism/Jim Crow/apartheid/systemic racism and mass incarceration) and Shoah (the Holocaust and the recurring themes of genocide and suspicious finger-pointing at Jews), rabbis who fancy themselves Borscht Belt comedians and Black comedians who preach a thunderous sermon, the Four Questions and Go Down Moses—sit side by side and have done so for a long enough time to tell a story.

We have made cultural history and food history together, but nobody knows where that story really begins. All the while, we are surrounded by the miracle of why we are still here despite the many attempts to annihilate our annoying stubbornness, itself a consequence of courage married to humor. I promise you: all of this background stuff matters for the next couple of hundred pages. This book is about how our food makes us, but it's also about the other stuff that gives the food meaning, the most Black-Jewish word of all. Sit down at my welcome table and eat and be satisfied; this is just the *mise en place*. Trust me, it's such "nourishmul," as my best friend Andrew's *bubbe* would say, or (as my late mom would put it), it will make you wanna slap somebody, but not that hard. B'Shalom, Michael.