

Kosher Soul Food Brings Together African-American and Jewish Cuisine

Michael Twitty's complex identity—and a deeper understanding of culinary history—comes through in his cooking

BY

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(Hugh Forte)

When Michael Twitty was growing up outside Washington, D.C., the treat in his house every weekend was challah—a taste his Lutheran mother developed during her childhood in Cincinnati, where the only baker open on Sundays was Jewish. When Twitty was 7, after seeing the film adaptation of Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, he informed his mother that he was Jewish. She humored him for a week, before warning him that he'd need another circumcision if he really wanted to be Jewish. Twitty backed down, for the time being.

But his attraction to Judaism, and Jewish food, remained. At his Jewish friends' homes, he would seek out the grandmothers, because they were the ones feeding him. Watching their hands, he would learn their recipes—and the differences between various Jewish communities. As Twitty grew older, he wanted to connect more deeply with Judaism.

After college, Twitty was working as an intern at the Smithsonian, and he was tasked with developing "Jewish foodways" programming for the [Smithsonian Folklife Festival](#). He approached Jewish cooking expert (and Tablet contributor) [Joan Nathan](#) for help. One day, she sent Twitty to a Sephardic synagogue—[Magen David](#) in suburban Maryland—in search of a recipe. The first person he saw there was a young African-American man like himself. "That was an *ot*, a sign," Twitty told me recently. He didn't initially intend to convert, but slowly became part of the synagogue's community, which was particularly welcoming to people of color. About two years later, when he was 25, he went to the mikveh and completed an Orthodox conversion.

At 37, Twitty wears a yarmulke and *tzitzit*, and he's taught at Hebrew schools across the religious spectrum. And he has carved out an idiosyncratic culinary niche for himself, concocting fresh fusions that bring together elements of African-American and Jewish cuisine, and sharing his ideas around the world. "I am so glad that Michael has had the strength to pursue his passion," Nathan said in an email. "I am glad that he found his own voice."

When I met Twitty in Israel last month, he was a guest of the Jerusalem Cinematheque's [Delicatessen Culinary Festival](#), where he gave a talk about "Afro-Sephardkenazi" cuisine and led a master class on kosher soul food. (This was before his widely reported, infuriating and humiliating [experience](#) at Ben-Gurion Airport security, when he was trying to board his flight back to the States.) This weekend, in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, he'll prepare a Shabbat dinner of BBQ chicken and matzo ball gumbo for some 200 attendees at [Congregation Beth Emeth](#) in Northern Virginia, to be followed by Shabbat services featuring music by Joshua Nelson, the "prince of kosher gospel music," who'll give a full concert the next day. And in March, Twitty will give a lecture on "[Kosher/Soul](#)" at the San Francisco JCC. He also writes the blog [Afroculinaria](#) and has a book forthcoming from HarperCollins next year.

In addition, Twitty regularly holds cooking events at historical plantations in the South where, in full period dress, he recreates the food his enslaved ancestors once ate, demonstrating the huge debt Southern cuisine owes to African Americans. In Jerusalem, he told me about the unexpected Jewish parallels: "There's not a thing that the Southern white folk did that black men and women did not touch, influence, revolutionize to the point that they did not know where they began and we ended," he said. "And it's the same thing with *Yehudim*. You can't throw a stone in Europe without finding the Jewish influence, or Jewish genes. It's funny how people that are oppressed tend to end up being everywhere and everything. You can't get rid of us, you can't put us down. We use our food to empower ourselves. What I do with kosher soul food is combine the survival gene in the Jews with the survival gene in black folk, and I make it work."

Combining Jewish cuisine with African-American cooking yields some unexpected recipes. “I just mix it all up,” said Twitty. “The Jewish and African diasporas are all around the world, so you have this amazing access to almost every cuisine the human race has to offer. I make Senegalese chicken soup with peanut butter and matzo balls. The spices give it the context of Shabbos or Yom Tov.” He rattled off more combinations: roast chicken with the Nigerian spice suya, fried chicken with matzo meal, black-eyed peas and kishke. For a larger meal, he makes a kosher spin on *feijoada*, the Afro-Brazilian stew. For dessert, he’ll bake sweet potato rugelach, or hamantaschen with teacake dough; instead of poppy seeds and apricots, he uses sesame candy, peach preserves, and blackberry preserves all mashed together.

“People will say, ‘I don’t understand you—you’re black and you’re Jewish, I don’t get it,’” Twitty said. “And then, when you feed them, they get you immediately. They understand you.”

Ronit Vered, food writer for *Haaretz* and artistic director of the Delicatessen festival in Jerusalem, attended Twitty’s presentation at the Oxford Symposium of Food and Cookery in 2010. As soon as she heard his opening line—“My name is Michael Twitty, and I’m a nice Jewish boy”—she was hooked. “I’ve been keeping tabs on him ever since,” Vered told me. When the Cinematheque approached Vered with the idea of a culinary festival, she thought of Twitty. “The topics he deals with—culinary justice, multiculturalism—are very relevant here,” she said. “He’s a very complex man: African American, Jewish by choice, gay. Certainly, the issues he raises in his talks are not easy to for many audiences to digest. In a world that has a clear preference for the easy-to-digest, his complexities are very interesting. People who meet Michael end up asking themselves hard questions about how identity and community come into play in the kitchen, questions that aren’t usually raised. So if people were left with more questions than answers, then I got what I wanted.”

The centerpiece of Twitty’s master class at the Jerusalem festival was hummus made from black-eyed peas, a staple of his kosher soul food. Volunteers helped him mash the West African peas into the quintessential Middle Eastern street food. But this wasn’t the first time black-eyed peas connected African-American and Jewish traditions. Sephardi Jews traditionally eat *lobia*—another name for the peas—on Rosh Hashanah, while in the American South, black-eyed peas are prepared on New Year’s Day, for good luck. “When I was a little boy,” Twitty said, “my grandmother gave me the job of placing dry black-eyed peas in everyone’s wallet or purse just before midnight on New Year’s, so that they would always have money. This little plant has both Jewish and African-American symbolism.”

At the Jerusalem master class, he explained to the Israeli audience the reasoning behind the events he holds on American plantations, stressing the importance of celebrating a people’s heritage on the site of the greatest crime committed against them. He drew audible gasps, however, when he drew a parallel to Jewish history, saying that, similarly, he thought the best place for a bar mitzvah was Auschwitz. After the festival, he told me that the audience reaction surprised him. I replied that the Holocaust is a fresher reality than slavery, particularly in Israel; we all know survivors here, while the horrors of the plantations seem so distant. In response, he showed me a picture of his great-great-grandfather, who was

born in 1839. "My great-grandfather died when my father was 12 years old," he said. "He had been enslaved for 25 years in Virginia. He was over 100 when he died. My father walked with him down to the creek one day, and he was hot so he lifted his shirt up to splash water on his back. My father saw the whip marks on his back. As a child, my father did not understand what that was all about. Just like people who survived the Shoah, people who had been enslaved did not speak about it with their children and grandchildren, with the exception of little, innocuous stories."

"Now we are slaves, next year we will be free," the quotation from the Passover haggadah, was an inspiration, Twitty said. "That influenced how I thought about slavery, how to own it and encounter it. You go to these places and relive it. Now we are slaves, in the act of living through it without the whips, the sexual assault, the violence—just by being in those places."

Getting difficult reactions from audiences is nothing new to Twitty; his plantation events often require dealing with difficult history. "It's in the dead quiet after the laughter than I know I've made the dent," he said. "Food is lovely and nice, it gets us to a new place of understanding, but then you must deal with the serious stuff. I guess my model, again, is Passover. It's a riot, right? Kids doing little plays, wine, and songs. But the best Seders are when, in-between, you get a lofty discussion of freedom and slavery and what they mean, what oppression does and how self-liberation takes place. That's what I try to capture in how I teach and how I cook."

At Twitty's own Seders, he uses two Seder plates. "I have a traditional plate, and an African-American plate," he said. On the latter, a chicken bone takes the place of the lamb's bone; in lieu of *maror*, there is a collard green; a red pepper instead of horseradish. Saltwater symbolizes the Middle Passage, while a hoecake signifies slavery. (The egg remains, he explained, as it shares similar symbolism in West Africa.)

"Yes, I want you to enjoy yourself and have a good time," he said, "but I want you to think and be challenged. If you're not, then all I've been is a butler."

Tal Kra-Oz is a writer based in Tel Aviv.

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