Ethnic Hash
by Patricia J. Williams from Transition

Recently, I was invited to a book party. The book was about pluralism. “Bring an hors d’oeuvre representing your ethnic heritage,” said the hostess, innocently enough. Her request threw me into a panic. Do I even have an ethnicity? I wondered. It was like suddenly discovering you might not have a belly button. I tell you, I had to go to the dictionary. What were the flavors, accents, and linguistic trills that were passed down to me over the ages? What are the habits, customs, and common traits of the social group by which I have been guided in life—and how do I cook them?

My last name is from a presumably Welsh plantation owner. My mother chose my first name from a dictionary of girls’ names. “It didn’t sod’oeuvres in West Africa (although I have this Senegalese friend who always serves the loveliest, poufiesund like Edna or Myrtle,” she says, as though that explains anything. I have two mostly Cherokee grandparents. There’s a Scottish great-grandfather, a French-Canadian great uncle, and a bunch of other relations no one ever talks about. Not one of them left recipes. Of course the ancestors who have had the most tangible influence on my place in the world were probably the West Africans, and I can tell you right off that I haven’t the faintest idea what they do for hors t little fishot, it’s the little black core of me that moves through the brave new world of Manhattan as I hail a cab, rent an apartment, and apply for a job.

Although it’s true, I never have tried hailing a cab as an ethnic. . . .

So let me see. My father is from the state of Georgia. When he cooks, which is not often, the results are distinctly Southern. His specialties are pork chops and pies; he makes the good-luck black-eyed peas on New Year’s. His recipes are definitely bla mousse things in puff pastries that look, well, totally French).

Ethnic recipes throw me into the same sort of quandary as that proposed “interracial” box on the census form: the concept seems so historically vague, so cheerfully open-ended, as to be virtually meaningless. Everyone I know has at least three different kinds of cheese in their fondue. I suppose I could serve myself up as something like Tragic Mulatta Souffle, except that I’ve never gotten the hang of souffles. (Too much fussing, too little reward.) So as far as this world’s concerned, I’ve always thought of myself as just plain black. Let’s face it: however much my categories get jumbled when I hang out at my favorite kosher sushi spck in a regional sense, since most blacks in the United States until recently lived in the Southeast. He loves pig. He uses lard.

My mother’s family is also black, but relentlessly steeped in the New England tradition of hard-winter cuisine. One of my earliest memories is of my mother borrowing my father’s screwdriver so she could pry open a box of salt cod. In those days, cod came in wooden boxes,
nailed shut, and you really had to hack around the edges to loosen the lid. Cod-from-a-box had to be soaked overnight. The next day you mixed it with boiled potatoes and fried it in Crisco. Then you served it with baked beans in a little brown pot, with salt pork and molasses. There was usually some shredded cabbage as well, with carrots for color. And of course there was piccalilli—every good homemaker had piccalilli on hand. Oh, and hot rolls served with homemade Concord grape jelly. Or maybe just brown bread and butter. These were the staples of Saturday night supper.

We had baked chicken on Sundays, boiled chicken other days. My mother has recipes for how to boil a chicken: a whole range of them, with and without bay leaf, onions, potatoes, carrots. With boiled chicken, life can never be dull.

The truth is we liked watermelon in our family. But the only times we ate it—well, those were secret moments, private moments, guilty, even shameful moments, never unburdened by the thought of what might happen if our white neighbors saw us enjoying the primeval fruit. We were always on display when it came to things stereotypical. Fortunately, my mother was never handier in the kitchen than when under political pressure. She would take that odd, thin-necked implement known as a melon-baller and gouge out innocent pink circlets and serve them to us, like little mounds of faux sorbet, in fluted crystal goblets. The only time we used those goblets was to disguise watermelon, in case someone was peering idly through the windows, lurking about in racial judgment.

I don’t remember my parents having many dinner parties, but for those special occasions requiring actual hors d’oeuvres, there were crackers and cream cheese, small sandwiches with the crusts cut off, Red Devil deviled ham with mayonnaise and chopped dill pickles. And where there were hors d’oeuvres, there had to be dessert on the other end to balance things out. Slices of home-made cake and punch. “Will you take coffee or tea?” my mother would ask shyly, at the proud culmination of such a meal. . . .

QUADROON SURPRISE

Some have said that too much salt cod too early in life hobbles the culinary senses forever. I have faith that this is not the case, and that any disadvantage can be overcome with time and a little help from Williams-Sonoma. Having grown up and learned that you are what you eat, I have worked to broaden my horizons and cultivate my tastes. I entertain global gastronomic aspirations, and my palate knows no bounds. After all, if Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben can Just Get Over It, who am I to cling to the limitations of the past? Yes, I have learned to love my inner ethnic child. And so, I leave you with a recipe for the Twenty-first Century:

*Chicken with Spanish Rice and Not-Just-Black Beans*

- Boil the chicken
- Boil the rice
- Boil the beans
Throw in as many exotic-sounding spices and mysterious roots as you can lay your hands on—go on, use your imagination!—and garnish with those fashionable little wedges of lime that make everything look vaguely Thai. Watch those taxis screech to a halt! A guaranteed crowd-pleaser that can be reheated or rehashed generation after generation.

Coffee? Tea?

Answer the following questions and use details from the text to support your answer.

1. What does the metaphorical title suggest about Williams’s cultural identity? *RI.9-10.2*

2. What do you think the term *mulatta* means, based on the way the author uses it in paragraph 3? *RI.9-10.4*

3. How does the author use food to develop her ideas about ethnicity? *RI.9-10.5*