

Kelley Fanto Deetz. *Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017. 192 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-7473-0.

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When I read one of the recipes in Kelley Fanto Deetz's *Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent Cuisine*, my mind wandered back to my own family. Her "Virginia classic" of fish a la crème sounded reminiscent of the oysters my great-aunt in rural Ohio and, later, my mother (and now me as well) made at Thanksgiving, even though we were neither from Virginia nor of African heritage (p. 51). Perhaps that is one of the points Deetz wants to make: enslaved cooks fundamentally altered our cuisine, and the legacy of slavery can be in every bite of food we eat, even when we think it's Aunt Tessa's oysters. Deetz promises much in this well-written slim volume, including such connections across time, space, and race between enslaved cooks and American foodways. Deetz seeks to write an interdisciplinary book that gives a greater understanding of the place of enslaved cooks in Virginia plantation households that focuses on cooks, seeking to sort out the reality from the myth presented by historic house tours, popular culture, and even the descriptions of meals and households from the period spanning from the early seventeenth century through the Civil War. It is a tall order.

Central to Deetz's argument is that the scholarship of historical foodways tends to focus on, well, food—a problem she wants to rectify. Using the Virginia planter aristocracy as a case study,

Deetz argues that this focus on the food itself ignores the central role of enslaved people in every step of the process of putting that food on the table. That bias originated in the eighteenth century with the ways white folks saw the enslaved. The food on the table was more than just the food on the table; it represented planting crops and feeding animals, milking cows and harvesting crops, processing foods from cheeses and smoking meats, starting fires and maintaining temperatures, and overseeing the kitchen and delivering food on plates. In plantation Virginia, enslaved people performed each and every one of those functions. Yet slave owners received and accepted credit for all of it. As Deetz aptly discusses in her chapter "In Dining: Black Food on White Plates," visitors complimented plantation mistresses for their culinary skills and entertaining, despite the fact that their roles were at most peripheral, with their having perhaps never actually cooked a meal in their lives. In fact, many mistresses relied on food and entertainment for their social reputations, derived from managing the household but certainly not from food preparation itself, for which they relied on enslaved cooks.

Through a series of topical chapters, Deetz strives to paint a picture of enslaved cooks and the nature of both their lives and those around them. Kitchens were hot places, of course, and

these women endured those temperatures during all seasons. However, Deetz argues convincingly, building external kitchens on plantations was not meant to mitigate the heat but to racialize the functions inside those kitchens, thus making an unattached kitchen a further outward sign of wealth and status that also kept the races more separate. As the eighteenth century marched forward, plantations increasingly reflected the wealth of owners through new public and semi-public spaces devoted to specific functions, such as dining rooms. As hospitality and entertaining took on greater importance, so too did the skill required to execute meals for owners' families and friends. Enslaved cooks became highly skilled and highly prized parts of the plantation, giving them greater agency within the household than many others; they were, after all, responsible for executing meals, parties, fetes, and everything else upon which the reputation of the planter and his wife rested. Kitchen slaves were also a unique threat to white owners, since they had access to the food white owners ate and knew of toxic substances as the people who created medicinal concoctions. By the mid-1700s, poisoning owners was more common than one might think; only theft saw more convictions than poisoning in Virginia, with poison a common weapon. Deetz links the dearth of poisoning convictions after emancipation with the notion that poisoning was clearly seen as a response to enslavement. Deetz suggests that the long-term impact of these enslaved women on plantations reaches far into the twentieth century. The affection expressed for "mammies" in early twentieth-century popular culture—think Aunt Jemima and Mrs. Butterworth (although introduced some seven decades apart)—stands as part of the legacy of these enslaved cooks.

Deetz's primary contribution is connecting the foodways and the rhetoric of entertaining and cooking to the institution of slavery. At times she is short on research, and the book does rely heavily on secondary sources; having said that, she has clearly dug deeply into the available materials

and tied together a remarkable range of resources. She has probably found most of what is extant. Her chapter dealing with "celebrity chefs," such as George Washington's slave Hercules, or those who learned French cooking for Thomas Jefferson, is interesting but seems out of place and does not contribute much to the argument, although the section on poisoning is a significant contribution. The discussions on archaeology need either expansion or less of an emphasis in the statements of purpose. Deetz promises much, and while she does not deliver everything one might have wanted, she contributes much to our understanding of the relationship between the enslaved and the plantation household. It is a short and very readable book—her style is approachable and engaging, and the organization is clear—that would be perfect in a classroom setting, even in generalized "survey" courses. And she does us a great service of expanding the literature connecting African and African American foodways with those with which we are familiar. You know—like Aunt Tesse's oysters.

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