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12.02.2010

Adding Caribbean flavour to Black History Month - Judy Creighton

February 10, 2010
 Judy Creighton
 The Canadian Press
 (Feb 10, 2010)

Chef La-toya Fagon loves to prepare Italian cuisine, but Caribbean food is a close second. Born in Canada of Jamaican descent, the 30-year-old grew up eating "island foods," so she didn't truly appreciate that cuisine until recently.

"Now I do because it is just so simple," she says. "The ingredients are very basic and it is extremely flavourful and quite healthy if cooked properly – it's peasant food."

A graduate of George Brown College, Fagon began her career teaching culinary skills at an on-site supermarket cooking school.

Then 10 years ago, she opened Twist, a Scarborough catering firm. It offers all types of catering, including for private and corporate functions, and includes cooking classes.

Fagon is taking her food demonstration skills to Kuumba, a Black History Month festival that runs this weekend at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, with events from 1 to 6 p.m. both Saturday and Sunday. Kuumba is the Swahili word for creativity and has become synonymous with showcasing the best local and international artists from the African and Caribbean diaspora.

Besides food demonstrations, there will be dance workshops, film screenings, music, comedy and family activities.

In Canada, Black History Month has its roots in the 1970s. Originally it was a weeklong celebration, but it expanded into a month-long tribute in 1995 when the House of Commons officially recognized February as Black History Month.

"It means a lot," says Fagon. "Any time that a culture can really represent itself and get back into its heritage and history and bring that forth to other communities is a great thing."

She says by demonstrating food from the islands at the festival, she'll show her audience how pure and inexpensive it is.

"We go back to the basics because the problem these days is that Canadians are developing allergies and other health issues from the preservatives and additives in processed foods," she says.

"Also, I want to get people cooking again," she adds. "No matter how rich or poor you are, everyone can cook this affordable food."

Caribbean food is a mixture of cooking techniques, flavours, spices and influences from Africans, British, Spanish, Indians and Chinese, all cultures that have inhabited the islands.

Now in many cities across Canada, grocery stores have popped up stocking ingredients for immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere. These ingredients, which are also available in some supermarkets, include ackee, a tropical fruit, and oxtail, a very bony but flavourful beef or veal tail used in stews and soups.

Some popular Caribbean dishes include corned beef and cabbage, jerk chicken, curried goat and curried mutton.

Fagon says for her demonstration, she will cook Jamaica's national dish of ackee and saltfish, as well as stew chicken with peas and rice.

Besides her catering business, Fagon is also working in high schools with black youth at risk. "I am teaching them basic cooking skills and how to budget," she says. "They learn how to take \$30 and make a meal for five to six people and then make another from the leftovers."

THE NEW FOOD LOVER'S COMPANION

Here is a sampling of special foods to try during February's Black History Month:

*Ham hocks: In the market, ham hocks are often cured, smoked or both and are used to flavour dishes such as soups, beans and stews that require lengthy slow cooking.

*Collard greens: Long a staple of soul food, collard is a variety of cabbage that doesn't form a head, but grows instead as a loose rosette at the top of a tall stem.

*Red velvet cake: A popular cake within the African-North American culture. Some say the dark reddish colour of the cake symbolizes the struggles of black people.

*Saltfish: A popular ingredient in Caribbean cuisine, saltfish is simply that – salted, dried fish, usually cod, although other fish (such as mackerel) can be used.

This is one of Jamaica's national dishes. It is usually served for breakfast. Ackee is a bright red tropical fruit that, when ripe, bursts open to reveal three large black seeds and a soft, creamy white flesh. You will find it in Caribbean markets and canned in many supermarkets.

ACKEE AND SALT FISH

Makes 4 servings

- *1 lb (450 g) boneless saltfish (such as salt cod)
- *1 1/3 cup (80 mL) vegetable OR canola oil
- *1 large white onion, sliced
- *1 scotch bonnet pepper, sliced, stems and seeds removed
- *6 sprigs fresh thyme
- *1 tomato, chopped
- *Black pepper, to taste
- *19-oz (540-mL) can ackee

Place saltfish in a pot of boiling water and boil for 8 to 10 minutes. Drain off water, add fresh water to pot, return to a boil and boil saltfish again for another 8 to 10 minutes.

In a saucepan, heat oil. Flake saltfish, add to pan and cook for 5 minutes. Add onion, scotch bonnet pepper, thyme and tomato. Fry for another 5 minutes or until pepper is softened. Sprinkle with black pepper.

Place ackee in a strainer, pour boiling water over it and add to pan. Toss lightly as you don't want to mash the ackee too much.

Serve with Johnny Cake (recipe follows).

Approximate nutrition per serving: 710 calories, 41 g fat, 76 g protein, 10 g carbohydrates, 5 g fibre

JOHNNY CAKE

Makes 8 cakes

- *1/2 cup (125 mL) oil
- *2 cups (500 mL) flour
- *1/2 cup (125 mL) water
- *1/2 tsp (2 mL) non-ionized sea salt
- *2 tsp (10 mL) baking powder
- *1 tbsp (15 mL) butter

In a skillet, heat oil on high until smoking level, then reduce heat to medium-low. Meanwhile, in a bowl, combine remaining ingredients and mix together with hands to create a dough. Break dough in pieces and shape into balls and flatten. Fry for 3 minutes on each side.