



Lesson 2: GULLAH GEECHEE FOODWAYS

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Objective:

Students will explore how geographic location influences cultural practices and foodways by examining the Gullah Geechee people's preservation of West African culinary traditions.

Keywords:

Foodways, Seafood, Cast Nets, Red Rice, Perloo, Sweetgrass, Bulrush, Pine Needles, Palmetto, Hoppin John

Background:

In Lesson 1, we learned that geographic location plays a central role in culture by influencing the climate, available crops, and the overall way of life? That pertains to both the geographic location of a people's ancestors, as well as where they live now. Because the climate and landscape on the coast of West Africa is similar to that of the Gullah Geechee Corridor, it was easier for Gullah Geechee people to continue many of the same African traditions, especially regarding foodways.

Foodways are how people get their food and how they eat it. It's like a big puzzle that pieces together what people of a particular culture like to eat, how they cook it, where they get the food from, and how they enjoy it with others.

Because the Gullah Geechee people have lived near water for so many generations, including their West African ancestors, they eat a lot of seafood (fish, blue crabs, shrimp, and oysters). Traditionally and even today, the Gullah Geechee people catch their own seafood, often using handmade cast nets. These nets are circular with small weights around the edge, allowing them to sink rather than float. They are thrown into the water and then pulled back in to reveal the catch.

A popular way to enjoy seafood is through a dish called Low Country Boil. This flavorful meal features crab, shrimp, corn on the cob, sausage, and potatoes, boiled together with a blend of seasonings. Served communally, this dish is spread out on a newspaper-covered table, inviting everyone to gather around, share the meal, tell stories, and enjoy each other's company.

Another popular dish in Gullah Geechee culture is red rice. It begins as white rice that is cooked with tomatoes and spices that make it red. Smoked sausage is often added too. It's similar to jambalaya, which is cooked in Louisiana. Red rice is derived from the West African dish called jollof rice, which is prepared very similarly. Other Gullah Geechee rice dishes include chicken perloo, which is made by boiling the rice and chicken together. A simple plate of fish and rice with vegetables like okra is another one. In regions like Senegal in West Africa and coastal areas of Georgia and South Carolina, the climate and soil are ideal for growing rice. This is why rice is a staple in many dishes in both West Africa and the Gullah Geechee Corridor.

After harvesting the rice, the grains need to be separated from their husks to make them edible. To do this, West Africans developed a special round, coiled basket that helps shake off the husks, making the rice ready for cooking and eating. They brought this technology with them to the United States, where the Gullah Geechee people have continued to use it. The baskets are still made today, often from sweetgrass, bulrush, pine needles, and palmetto leaf, but are mainly used for decorative purposes.

Certain traditions and celebrations are closely linked with specific meals. For example, on New Year's Eve, the Gullah Geechee people have a tradition of preparing a dish called "Hoppin' John" and collard greens. Hoppin' John is made with small peas, traditionally field peas or red peas, though black-eyed peas are often used today, and they're cooked in rice. This meal is believed to symbolize wealth, so eating it on New Year's Eve is thought to bring prosperity in the coming year.

The foodways of the Gullah Geechee people are a rich tapestry woven from their West African heritage and the resources of their new environment. The shared traditions and culinary practices reflect a deep connection to their ancestral roots and the land they inhabit. By continuing to make baskets using traditional methods, preparing meals like Low Country Boil and red rice, and celebrating with dishes like Hoppin' John, the Gullah Geechee people honor their cultural legacy while adapting to their surroundings. These practices not only sustain their community but also preserve a unique cultural identity that bridges past and present.

Exploring Gullah Geechee Foodways: A Word Search Adventure

This activity is available on the last two pages of this lesson.

Discussion:

How does living in the Gullah Geechee Corridor impact the foods they eat?

How does your geographic location impact the foods you eat?

Why do you think communal eating is an important tradition?

What culinary traditions do the Gullah Geechee honor for New Years?

Have you ever practiced any culinary traditions around holidays?

Exploring Gullah Geechee Foodways: A Word Search Adventure

Y C R I R N H O P P I N J O H N A N
F Z R E N V L B I K R E D R I C E N
W O D E Y S N P N U O T I E C X K U
C R O S R W S W E E T G R A S S Q P
A R I D D L D P N O O M Y O R T T A
S A L K W G O X E V W Y E S O Z Q L
T V F B H A A O E Q O T B Z K T K M
N Y L E W F Y A D F S I J X Q A X E
E M U I R U B S L P Q V N O F G P T
T R B T E U V Z E S W R E H Q P V T
S E A F O O D X S G X F C T J Q M O
F J F U E B U L R U S H X W A V T X

Find the following words in the puzzle.
Words can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal.

Bulrush

Cast Nets

Foodways

Hoppin John

Palmetto

Perloo

Pine Needles

Red Rice

Seafood

Sweetgrass

Solution:

