



## Chatting With MoAD's Chef-in-Residence Bryant Terry About Food Justice

By Peter Lawrence Kane

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The 2015 James Beard Foundation Leadership Award-winning chef, author and activist **Bryant Terry** has been a free agent for awhile now, roaming the country on a mission to get people, chiefly African-Americans, to reconnect with their culinary heritage in ways that are emotionally satisfying and physically fortifying.

That has changed, now that the **Museum of the African Diaspora** (MoAD) has named him to be its Chef-in-Residence (and only a year after S.F.'s Grace Cathedral appointed him to the equivalent position.). Because we live in a time and place of almost-unimaginable bounty, but also face steep hurdles to the equal distribution of good, nutritious food, Terry's assumption of the new position could not be more

timely. Under his leadership, MOAD is hosting a (sold-out) panel discussion, **Black Women, Food & Power**, on Sunday, Nov. 15, featuring speakers such as Gail Myers and Toni Tipton Martin. Terry was slightly awed to learn that people are flying in from around the country to attend.

“Our main goal is to raise awareness surrounding food, health, farming, and the intersection of those things ... We really want to engage the community through programs that broaden people’s understanding of the role that black women have played in the production, distribution, and consumption of food history.”

Terry has been working for the last 15 years around health, food, and farming issues, and is relishing the opportunity to discuss them in ways that “move beyond the heady, intellectual way we talk about food politics and public policy issues.”

“How can we bring the culture back into agriculture?” he asked. “How can we bridge this chasm that our industrialized food system, has created, where food is on one side, commodified, and all the things that have traditionally been so integrally connected to food are way over somewhere else?”

By pairing the recipes in his book with soundtracks and emphasizing visuals created by different artists, Terry is broadening the idea of how people consume food.

“We’re trying to give people a deeper commitment to these things in a non-didactic way,” he said. “Not leading with fist-in-the-air-politics, but giving people an experience that’s visceral and will deepen their commitment to their own personal health and wellbeing and community efforts in addressing the public health crisis, particularly in communities of color.”



Attempts to address that public health crisis, such as campaigns against childhood obesity, have often contained more than a kernel of shaming. As with **movements to curb what items EBT (a.k.a. “food stamps”) can buy**, there can be a lot of upper middle-class judgment against the dietary preferences of working-class people, loaded with the presumption that poor personal choices are what make people poor in the first place.

Obesity is geographically concentrated in the South, and disproportionately affects people of color. Complicating that situation further, the James Beard Foundation has recognized Southern cookbooks written by African-American women, and Terry points out that there have been no fewer than six cookbooks by black women published this year alone. He’s thrilled that a cultural moment has arrived in which the wider culture can be educated about the roots of African cuisine.

“So often when people talk about black food, they talk about the antebellum survival food,” Terry said. “That’s true for some parts of the more repressive parts of the South that had a more paternalistic way in which the institution of slavery was, but only to argue that it’s just slave food — as people called it — or survival food doesn’t take into account the diverse ways where many enslaved African Americans had their own plot of land or a day off to hunt for animals to supplement their diet: Louisiana, the coastal Carolinas, the Caribbean. The other thing people imagine black food, they reduce it to in their imagination the comfort foods: deep-fried fatty meat, the sugary desserts, the foods that working class people often have on holidays and celebrations.”

MOAD’s mission of education extends beyond clueing white America into the virtues of pickled okra. There can be, **as Edna Lewis recently wrote** in the *New York Times Magazine*, a bias in the African-American community that chefs are essentially glorified domestics. While it’s understandable for people who worked hard to put their children through college to hold high expectations, denigrating the profession can have consequences.

“We’re peeling back the layers and moving past the vilification of the cuisine,” Terry said, “getting into the history and culture, the different food crop exchanges throughout history, painting a more complex picture about it but also helping to educate people of African descent about our food. So many of us, we don’t know, we need to be educated or re-educated about these things, so that folks can remember that this food is just like any other cuisine. As my mentor Alice Waters says — the sensual pleasures of the table to educated people about these things and literally feeding people knowledge on the plate.”

Terry is vegan, and while his social consciousness informs everything he does, he won’t necessarily be cooking all vegan food, all the time. For starters, he’s not really the one doing the cooking.

“For most events, I’m playing a more curatorial role, bringing different chefs in to present their own

food. For this event we're partnering with the People's Kitchen, based in Oakland. Part of what they do is celebrating a lot of the food from Africa, parts of Asia, in ways people haven't really imagined these cuisines. We are in the process of composing the new menu now. It's mostly vegan, but we're trying to decide if we want to have some options for people who want to have animal products."

Just because he's not sweating in the kitchen doesn't mean Bryant will be working the room, cocktail in hand, either. He simply wears another hat.

"By the time the event is actually happening, I'd like for all my work to be done. But we did an event at the museum in August, a private dinner. I deejayed from my collection of classic jazz on vinyl, sitting back and enjoying all the hard work I'd put in weeks before that."

**Bryant Terry**, *Chef-in-Residence at The Museum of the African Diaspora, 685 Mission, 415-358-7200.*

<http://www.sfweekly.com/foodie/2015/11/09/chatting-with-moads-chef-in-residence-bryant-terry-about-food-justice>