

3.14 The Untold Story of Fried Chicken

📅 Thu, 7/28 7:59AM ⌚ 31:05

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

fried chicken, people, black, reconstruction, episode, eat, movie, film, white, chicken, articles, food, history, power, carriers, explain, waiter, recipe, stereotype, enslaved

SPEAKERS

Ken Clark, Jasmine Bradshaw

- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:00
You're listening to the First Name Basis podcast, Season Three, Episode 14:"The Untold Story of Fried Chicken."
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:14
Teaching our children to be inclusive and anti-racist starts with us within the sacred walls of our home. First Name Basis is designed to empower you with the confidence you need to be a leader in your family and a change maker in your community. Together, we will wrestle with hard questions and use the answers to create the world we want, a world that reflects our values of inclusion, compassion, and courage. I'm your host, Jasmine Bradshaw, and I am so excited to be on this journey with you.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:49
Hello, First Name Basis fam. I am so glad you are here. Okay. Are you laughing with me at this episode title? "The Untold Story of Fried Chicken"? So here's what happened: as you know, I've been trying really hard to embrace the Black joy this Black History Month. And one of the things that I've been trying to do to connect with my Black culture is to learn more recipes. So I asked my dad to teach me how to make fried chicken. I've never made it before. I've made it out of like a cookbook, but nothing like the top secret, amazing family recipe, right? So I asked my dad if he would teach me how to make fried chicken. And he walked me through all the steps. And while we were doing it, he was telling me about what it meant to him and the importance of this recipe and our family and for our posterity. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, Dad. Wait, wait, wait. I have to get my recording equipment because I need to record this for the future generations."
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 01:49

So as we were recording, I was asking him about why fried chicken is such a staple in Black households. And he was explaining kind of the history behind the food. And it got me thinking, "Where does that stereotype come from?" I'm sure you've heard that stereotype that Black people have fried chicken and it really has a negative connotation. When you say something about fried chicken and Black people and somebody makes a joke, it feels really gross and really racist. And I was reading an article about Tiger Woods and some other golfer and inviting him over to his house and saying, "I'll serve fried chicken" in a very, like, rude way, in a way that was very clearly supposed to take him down a notch. And I thought, "Where does the stereotype come from? There's got to be a story behind this."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 02:39

So you know me, I went on a deep dive, a little hunt for us to figure out where in the world does this fried chicken stereotype come from and why did they pick fried chicken as the food. So I have so much to share with you. And I want to tell you that at the end of the episode I'm going to play a little clip from the recording that I did with my dad, where he talks about really what making fried chicken means to him and what he wants his great-great-great grandchildren to think and feel when they're eating the Clark fried chicken family recipe.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:14

Of course, before we start, I have to tell you about Bite-Sized Black History. I have heard from so many of you who are loving it, and the pictures are giving me life. I love to see it in action in your homes. So if you haven't heard yet, Bite-Sized Black History is your key to a meaningful Black History celebration. It's 12 bite-sized podcast episodes that are for your children. So I turned on my teacher voice and I did awesome research to make all of these episodes really jam-packed eight minutes or less. And they each focus on an amazing Black American from history. And I really tried to embrace the depth of what it means to be Black in America. So I focus on inventors and nurses and dancers and physical therapists. It is so fantastic. And it comes with 12 coloring pages that go along with each episode. So the person who is profiled in the episode gets their very own coloring page, and then afterwards, there are some reflection questions that you can use to spark meaningful conversations. So I'm gonna put the link for Bite-Sized Black History in the show notes. Or you can of course find it on our website, firstnamebasis.org.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 04:30

And one other thing I want to remind you is that it's never too late to start learning about Black history. I know that February is about halfway through, or if you're listening to this later, it might not even be February. But we need to learn about Black history all year round. Black history is American history. And it's something that we need to be learning about, celebrating and embracing all the time.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 04:53

Okay, the other thing I need to mention before we start is a trigger warning. So I mentioned that I'm really trying to focus on joy, and food is joy to me. Those connections that you can

and I'm really trying to focus on joy, and food is joy to me. Those connections that you can make with your family or your friends around the dinner table, that is the definition of joy. But as we talked about before, so many things in Black history or Black culture, are really intertwined with joy and suffering and hardship. So in this episode, we are diving into the untold story of fried chicken, but that means that we have to talk about racism, and we have to talk about enslavement. So if you are a Black person and you are embracing and celebrating your heritage, and you don't even want to think about these things right now, that is okay. You can step away. You can take a break. You can come back whenever you need to, or not at all. The other trigger warning that I need to give is about sexual violence. There are mentions of sexual assault and sexual violence in this episode.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 05:52

All right, are we finally ready? Buckle up, y'all; this story is bananas. So where did the stereotype of fried chicken come from? I found an article on "Code Switch." You know I love "Code Switch." It's a fantastic podcast and they also will put out articles once in a while. And they had a whole article about where did the fried chicken stereotype come from. So they talked to a professor at the University of Missouri, her name is Claire Schmidt. And what she explained is that enslaved people ate fried chicken a lot because it was cheap and because it has a good deal of meat on it. So Black people who were enslaved were eating a lot of chicken because of the cost, but also, because chicken was usually the only animal that enslaved people were allowed to raise on their own. So if they're working on the farm, or the plantation, for the most part, they are raising animals for the enslavers, the white people, but they were actually allowed to own their own chickens. So they got really good at making chicken.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 06:53

Okay, so let's get our historical bearings here. The Civil War ended in 1865, and then we entered a period of reconstruction until 1877. And if you remember from the episode that we did called "Cancel Culture, Part Three: Removing Statues" [" and I'll put that link in the show notes if you haven't heard that one " we talked a lot about enslavement and the Civil War and Reconstruction.](#)

J Jasmine Bradshaw 07:07

So Reconstruction was the period after the Civil War where we were trying to figure out what does it look like to move forward as a country where everyone is free. And during Reconstruction, Black men were able to vote, so there were a handful of Black senators and Black representatives that were elected to Congress. Now, this didn't go over well because when you are a representative in Congress that means that you have some say. You have some power in our country and the white community did not like that. And there was a very violent pushback to reconstruction, especially in the south where they moved away from Reconstruction and into a period of segregation and Black codes and all of these different oppressive laws.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 07:07

So Reconstruction ends in 1877. It was a very tiny blip in our country's history where Black people were really making progress and the Black community was gaining a lot of access to resources and power. And that was squashed pretty quickly and we entered a period of really bad oppression. So after that, after Reconstruction and the Civil War, there was a movie that came out, and I know you're like, "A movie? What does that have to do with anything?" but this is a huge deal. So there is a movie that comes out in 1915 called "The Birth of a Nation." It was directed by a man named DW Griffith and it's considered like the first feature film. So "The Birth of a Nation" is about the Civil War, and it's about the founding of the Ku Klux Klan, the KKK. So in the movie, KKK members are depicted as heroes and as martyrs.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 09:00

There were a handful of articles written really recently about this movie, because in 2015 it was the 100-year anniversary. I hate to even call it an anniversary because this movie is so despicable, but this movie had been out for 100 years. So there are a lot of articles written about how this movie has affected our country. And in one of the articles it says, quote, "White actors in blackface portray members of a barbaric, sex-crazed militia of freedmen that terrorizes and disenfranchises cowering whites. After the blackface character Gus attempts to rape a white woman, the protagonists don their hoods and apprehend him, lynching him after their version of a fair trial. The film is ostensibly about white national reconciliation at the expense of emancipated black Americans. A title card punctuates the action toward the end of the silent film to declare, quote, 'the former enemies of North and South are united again in a sense of their Aryan birthright.'" End quote. Basically, this film is saying that Black people are extremely dangerous, and that white people from the north and white people from the South need to come together to stand up against the rights of Black people because they are too dangerous to have any rights or any power in our country.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 10:19

Another article explains that even though this film was made in 1915, it was still being used as late as the 1970s to recruit for the KKK. So the KKK would get together to recruit new people, and they would show "The Birth of a Nation" to them in order to convince them to join. As I mentioned before, there were Black representatives and Black senators in Congress. And one of the things that the film was trying to do was convince people that these elections were rigged. In the article it said, quote, "The producers assert the electoral victory was due to the rigging and disenfranchising of whites. As the film concluded, the Klan is shown mapping out how to take control of the town. On the next election day, the Klan formed a line to intimidate Black voters." End quote. And this to me was so eerily similar to what we have been hearing today. I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, election rigging and voter intimidation. It's just exhausting that we're reliving all of these things over again."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 11:19

So here's what's bananas. This film, it was the first feature film. It's made in 1915. It was the highest grossing film of all time. For 25 years there was not another movie that could kick it out of that number one spot in terms of the money that it earned for 25 years, That should show you how far-reaching this film really was. It was shown in the White House. President Woodrow

Wilson hosted a viewing of "The Birth of a Nation" in the White House. This is the second film ever shown on the White House grounds, and it was the first film to ever be shown actually inside the White House. And President Wilson loved it even though it was disgusting and so racist. He loved it. He gave it high praise. And he said quote, "It was like writing history with lightning."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 12:11

Okay, you are thinking, "What does any of this have to do with fried chicken?" Well, let me tell you. So there's a scene in the movie where Black legislators which â€” they're not actually Black, remember. They're white actors who are in blackface â€” they've been elected after Reconstruction and they're in the statehouse and they're making laws. Well, instead of acting like a legislator should, they are depicted drinking whiskey with their feet up on the desks, and they are eating fried chicken. So while they're eating fried chicken, taking off their shoes, putting them on the desk and drinking on the job, they are passing a law that would allow interracial marriage.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 12:50

Now, this part kind of blew my mind and almost made me laugh, because this entire movie is meant to scare people, right? They're trying to scare white people about what could happen if Black people had representation and input when it comes to the laws of our country, and the scariest thing they could think of was interracial marriage. I just was like, "Really? Okay, that's terrifying, guys. So, so scary." Anyway, back to Claire Schmidt, the professor from the University of Missouri. She says, quote, "That image really solidified the way white people thought of Black people and fried chicken." So the image of these Black legislators putting their feet up on the desk and eating the fried chicken, that was kind of burned into everyone's brains as, "Yuck. That is something that's gross. That is something that is despicable. That is beneath me." And so that's where this stereotype comes from.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 13:45

She goes on to explain that the way that you eat fried chicken made it an easy target as well. If you've ever eaten fried chicken, you don't eat it with a fork. You eat it with your hands. It's greasy, it's messy. You usually need a little cleanup action afterwards. So Professor Schmidt explains that table manners have always been a way of perpetuating supremacy. She said, "Table manners are a way of determining who is worthy of respect or not." So this movie from 1915 that is an explosion of a movie, it's shown in the White House. That is really where the stereotype about Black people and fried chicken comes from.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 14:24

Now I have more to say about it. That's not the end of the story. But I wanted to pause and tell you a tiny bit about the research behind our perceptions when it comes to the choices that people make when they are eating food. In one of the articles about fried chicken they referenced this study out of the University of Scranton. So they did this study where they asked

about 200 college students to evaluate a person who was named Pat. And one group of students was told that Pat ate oatmeal and fresh fruit and nuts for breakfast, and another group of students was told that Pat ate pie for breakfast. And just based on what she ate for breakfast, these students were asked if they could describe her character. And of course, the students who were told that Pat ate pie, they said that she was aggressive, lazy, selfish, and immoral.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 15:17

Now, this was a relatively small study. And I'm sure there's more research out there. But I was thinking, "Do we really need a study to tell us that people judge each other based on what they choose to eat? People are always judging each other for their food choices, which is something we need to be done with, can we just stop that? Let's just be done with that." But can you imagine the judgment that is passed when there's a food like fried chicken that has such a deep connection to a race and racism? So yes, we judge people when they eat pie for breakfast, or when they eat nuts for breakfast. But when we see someone eating a food that has a connection with racism, or even has an implicit bias attached to it, the judgement is even deeper and even more harsh. But you know, it's funny to me. White people love fried chicken. I mean, I don't know very many white people who don't like fried chicken. I don't know very many people in general who don't like fried chicken because it's delicious. So it's not just a Black thing or white thing. People love fried chicken because it's good.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 16:24

Okay, so let's move on to why fried chicken. So we know where the stereotype came from, but why did they choose fried chicken? So aside from the fact that it was a common food for enslaved people to eat, it's more important to understand that it was a common food for enslaved people or formerly enslaved people to sell. When I was doing research for this episode, I broke out my "Jubilee Cookbook." Now, this is a cookbook full of recipes from Black culture, and it's by a woman named Toni Tipton Martin. And what she did was she took really old cookbooks, way back, some even from the 1800s, that were written by Black people, or even formerly enslaved people. And she compiled a ton of amazing recipes and put them into a cookbook. And of course, she put her own spin on some of them as well. So I thought, "I wonder what she has to say about fried chicken?" because a lot of the time with the recipe, she'll kind of put the history behind where the recipe came from. So I turned to the section about fried chicken. And lo and behold, she gave me just the clue I needed to finish the untold story for us.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 16:50

So in this section, she talks about waiter carriers. And these are Black women who would sell homemade food near the railroad to travelers. When people were traveling by train, they would go for miles and miles and miles without having access to any food. This was before they had dining cars on the trains. And so at the train stations, these Black women realized that the people on the trains were hungry. So what they would do is they would make a bunch of food, and they would haul it all the way from their homes to the train station to sell to the travelers. These waiter carriers would walk for miles to get to the train station carrying the food. That's why they're called waiter carriers. And then they would hold the food up to the window of the

train. So the window of the train is open. If you can imagine it kind of opens from the bottom and the people are sticking their hands out in their head out. And the women are holding it up above their head so that the people can get the food off of their trays. And one of the main things that they sold was fried chicken. In the "Jubilee Cookbook," Toni Tipton Martin describes their menu as fried chicken, biscuits and breads, hard boiled eggs, fruit pies, and their famous hot coffee, which was sold in old fashioned pots.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 18:37

One of the busiest train stations was a train station that was in Gordonsville, Virginia. And because of the waiter carriers, Gordonsville, Virginia became known as the fried chicken capital of the world. There's a professor named Dr. Psyche Williams-Forsen. And she wrote a book called "Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power." And she says quote, "Some people would deliberately chart their way through Gordonsville because they knew they would encounter these women and those particular foodstuffs." So people are loving this fried chicken; it's a big deal. People are changing their travel arrangements just so they can go through Gordonsville and get some of this fried chicken from the waiter carriers. Well, because of this, these amazing entrepreneurial Black women were able to build a pathway to economic freedom for themselves. So all of this is happening either during the Civil War or right after, and some of them were formerly enslaved people, but some of them were still enslaved, and they were able to sell so much chicken and make so much money as waiter carriers that some of them were able to pay for their own freedom.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 20:11

In the "Jubilee Cookbook" she says, quote, "These were enterprising pioneering women who had families own land and use chicken to break down economic barriers and build lives for themselves and who would influence future generations." End quote. In Dr. Psyche Williams-Forsen's book, she interviews one of the descendants of the waiter carriers and they say, quote, "My mother paid for this place with chicken legs." They explain how their mom built their house using the money that she earned from being a waiter carrier and selling fried chicken.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 20:47

So do you remember when I told you that racism is more about money and power than it is about race? If you don't remember that go a few episodes back to the one that's called "The One Thing I Wish You Knew About Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." In that episode, I describe how racism is more about economic injustice than it is about the color of anyone's skin. White supremacy is about maintaining power, privilege, and wealth for white people who are already wealthy. So why did they choose fried chicken as the food to build a stereotype around? Well, because it was an opportunity for economic advancement for Black people. Black women especially were getting wealthy off of fried chicken. They were advancing themselves. They were advancing their families, they were purchasing land, all things that make people with the power and the privilege and the wealth very anxious. So in order to squash their advancement, they decided to take fried chicken and attack it.



J Jasmine Bradshaw 21:54

Anytime. If you look in history, anytime the Black community has made economic or political gain, the white community has attacked the source of their advancement. If you know the story of Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the community of Black people who were thriving and very wealthy, well that was burnt to the ground, because Black people were having economic advancement and the white people couldn't handle it. Black Wall Street needs its own untold story episode, so I will definitely get working on that. But I just want you to see how anytime we start to make progress, there is a whitelash. And that's 100% what happened after President Obama.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 22:42

So President Obama gets political power and then we have President Trump who is extremely racist. And that is no accident. That is because of the whitelash. That is the white community saying, "No, you cannot have this privilege. You cannot have this power, you cannot have this political gain. We need to squash it, we need to stop it." And that's why they put someone like Donald Trump in office. And the sad thing is, I fully expect this whitelash to continue after having vice president Kamala Harris in office.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 23:15

In her book "So You Want to Talk About Race," Ijeoma Oluo explains white supremacy. And she says it this way, quote, "This promise that you will get more because they exist to get less is woven throughout our entire society, our politics, our education system, our infrastructure, anywhere there is a finite amount of power, influence, visibility, wealth or opportunity, anywhere in which someone might miss out there. The law of that promise sustains racism." End quote.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 23:47

So if you believe whether consciously or subconsciously that Black people exist to get less than you because of white supremacy, of course you are going to take one of their sources of economic gain — fried chicken. Pair it with their political gain — the Black men who were elected to the legislature after Reconstruction. You're going to pair those two things together and then you're going to use it to sink them. So the creators of "The Birth of a Nation," that movie from 1915, they were very intentional and strategic when they chose fried chicken. They created a stereotype about fried chicken that said the thing that brings Black people, economic advancement is actually something barbaric. It's actually something that makes them lesser than us.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 24:38

I know y'all — who would have thought that we could talk for 20 minutes about the history of fried chicken? But I'm not surprised because I've told you so many times that all of these things work together to maintain a system of power that disenfranchises Black people. And as we

learn these stories, as we come to understand this history, that is us taking the power back so that we can reclaim these things and step away from white supremacy and embrace racial equity.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 25:10

So in the name of reclaiming fried chicken, here is a little snippet of my dad, Ken Clark, explaining to his great-great grandchildren what he'd like them to know about their Caribbean roots and our family's fried chicken recipe. Now, just a reminder: we are cooking, we've got kiddos running around in the background. So the quality of audio is not the very best. But this is the sound of home for me. So I'm really excited to share it with you.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 25:43

Okay, welcome to the first installment of Ken's Kitchen. What are we making today?

K Ken Clark 25:54

Fried chicken.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 25:56

Okay, we're making fried chicken, Caribbean-style fried chicken. And what does this meal remind you of?

K Ken Clark 26:03

Oh, reminds me of home. Growing up, my mom showed me how to cook this. I've seen my father do it many times. But you know him. Work and everything...he didn't explain so much, he just did it. And he was a great cook. But my mom would sit there and she would cook. You know, an African American or Caribbean American household. Your, you know, people have pride about certain things, and they boast about certain things. So some people have, you know, young guys have cars, and this one has this and this and that. But older people have recipes, you know: "So-and-so's pie's off the chain. So-and-so's chicken is this..." My mom was known for three things. Her potato salad, her Caribbean peas and rice, you know, and her fried chicken. If people come in the house with family and we have a big potluck, they go to my mother and they said, "Len? Where's Len's this? Where's Len's that?" This is what they went for, because everybody else thought they can cook but my mother could dance. And she had five of us!

J Jasmine Bradshaw 27:13

What do you want your great-great-great-great grandchildren to feel and think and experience when they eat fried chicken?

K

Ken Clark 27:25

Have a sense of where they come from. This is where-you-come-from cooking. This is what it's about. This is what, you know, to know that it's something that's not the best for you, but it's really good. And it's a certain amount of pride that goes with being able to just do this and pass it on like any other recipe. You know, you hear people talk about, "Well, this whiskey was brewed for whatever and generations and all that," well this chicken was made, you know generations of this, and people with limited resources, limited supplies found ways to take a, you know, the cheapest meat that was available to them or whatever, and do something with it that is absolutely spectacular.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 28:12

You heard him: "This is where-you-come-from cooking." And I think whenever you eat fried chicken, especially fried chicken that is made by a Black family from a really sacred family recipe, you'll be able to taste the love and the joy and the pride in that chicken. So I encourage you, I challenge you this week to go and get yourself some delicious fried chicken. Find a Black-owned fried chicken restaurant and enjoy celebrating Black History Month with us by eating some fried chicken.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 28:49

And of course, I have to remind you of Bite-Sized Black History. I really hope that you will invest in your Black history celebration in your home or in your classroom and really take the time to teach your students or your children what it looks like to be Black and to be excellent. To be Black and to be joyful. To be Black and to be innovative. So that link is in the show notes or, of course, on our website at firstnamebasis.org.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 29:20

My friends, thank you for being here. I hope you can feel how much I believe in you and how deeply I know that when we work together we can make real change in our communities. Any of the books, podcasts or articles that I reference will be linked in the show notes. If you are looking for more detailed notes, be sure to head over to our Patreon community. On our Patreon site I provide all of the outlines that I use to make the episodes, and everything is linked there so you don't have to take furious notes while you are listening. And don't forget to join us over on Instagram [@firstname.basis](https://www.instagram.com/firstname.basis). If you're interested in partnering with First Name Basis or doing some kind of collaboration, please email us at hello@firstnamebasis.org. All right, have a great week my friends, and I will talk to you again soon