

FOOD & DRINK MARCH 7, 2017 6:30 AM

Black chefs in the White House – from Washington to Obama – have their stories told



Adrian Miller is an award-winning author. His new book, "The President's Kitchen Cabinet: The Story of the African Americans Who Have Fed Our First Families, from the Washingtons to the Obamas" (UNC Press), was released Feb. 20. COURTESY OF ADRIAN MILLER

BY BRIDGETTE A. LACY
Correspondent

In culinary historian Adrian Miller's new book, he brings the men and women who have worked in the White House kitchen to the forefront. He tells stories of some of the 150 people who have worked in the presidential food service as chefs, personal cooks, butlers, stewards and servers for every president.

His new book, "The President's Kitchen Cabinet: The Story of the African Americans Who Have Fed Our First Families, from the Washingtons to the Obamas" (UNC Press), was released Feb. 20, and couldn't be more timely.

"These cooks gave white presidents a window on black life," Miller said in an interview. "And for those who chose to open the window, I think our country is better for it."

He will talk about those stories March 16 at The Fearington Granary in Pittsboro as part of Fearington's Cooks & Books series, which also includes a meal inspired by the book.

Miller is an award-winning author, having won the James Beard Foundation Book Award for Reference and Scholarship in 2014 for his book, "Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time."

In "The President's Kitchen Cabinet," Miller starts with George Washington's slave Hercules, who is described as highly accomplished and proficient in the culinary arts. Hercules prepared lavish spreads of roast beef, veal, ducks, fowls, hams along with pudding, jellies, figs, raisins and a variety of punches and wine.

We hear of the feisty Zephyr Wright, the longtime cook of President Lyndon Johnson. Miller explains her experiences motivated Johnson to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Wright once told Johnson she was tired of squatting in the bushes to use the bathroom and eating out of a brown bag when she traveled with Johnson.

"Johnson would actually use her life experiences to pressure members of Congress to support the bill," Miller said. "And when he signed the legislation, he gave her one of the pens that he used and said, 'You deserve this as much as anyone.'"

The president's kitchen cabinet is a combination of civil service workers and military cooks on loan from the Navy. The 19th century cooks were self-taught. In the 20th and 21st century, the chefs were trained in restaurants and hotels. White House chefs and cooking staff are not paid as well as those working for restaurants.

What they have in common is a sense of loyalty and professionalism to serve the commander in chief and his family, Miller said.

In addition to Miller's anecdotes of how cooks played instrumental roles in professionalizing food-related work, the book includes 20 recipes that were served at one of the White House dining tables.

There are three dining rooms in the White House. There's the president's dining room on the first floor, where VIP guests often are entertained.

There's a family dining room, which is a smaller, more intimate space located in the private quarters of the first family. This is where the Obamas ate, Miller said. For large gatherings, the president uses the State Dining Room. That one holds the most people.

The book has received praise, not just for how the stories are told, but for sharing an often untold part of history.

Miller's "latest is a broad-sweeping history of American culinary culture as interpreted through a long line of presidential chefs and food workers," according to Kirkus Review.

"That lineage is primarily African-American, and so it has always been. ... More substantial are Miller's notes, sometimes between the lines, on how exposure to African-American persons, their foodways, and their 'professional excellence' played a part in lessening the prejudices of the nation's chief officeholders."

Marcie Cohen Ferris is a professor in UNC-Chapel Hill's Department of American Studies who focuses on teaching foodways and material culture of the American South. She said Miller's book sheds light on a critical part of American history.

"We know so little about the whole labor force there to feed the White House and feed the president," Ferris said. "They take care of those people, providing comfort and nutrition."

Miller, a self-described recovering attorney who lives in Denver, got an up-close perspective to the White House as a special assistant to President Bill Clinton. He was the deputy director of the president's Initiative for One America, which examined and focused on closing the opportunity gaps that exist for minorities in this country.

The book stops with the Obama administration. Asked about his knowledge of President Donald Trump's eating habits, Miller says Trump is known for consuming fast food and enjoying comfort food such as meatloaf. For now, the Obama cooking staff is serving Trump.

Bridgette A. Lacy is a freelance writer and the author of "Sunday Dinner, a Savor the South cookbook" by UNC Press of Chapel Hill. Reach her at bridgettelacy@att.net.

WANT TO GO?

What: Adrian Miller discusses his new book, "The President's Kitchen Cabinet: The Story of the African Americans Who Have Fed Our First Families, from the Washingtons to the Obamas."

When: 6 p.m. Thursday, March 16, at The Fearington Granary, 210 Market St., located in Fearington Village in Pittsboro.

Cost: \$110. Go to fearington.myshopify.com and click on "Ticketed events" or call McIntyre's Books at 919-542-3030. Tickets include a signed copy of the new book, a three-course dinner and a craft beer served with every course. The menu was mainly inspired by the recipes of presidential chefs. Fearington's Executive Chef Colin Bedford will prepare the meal. Fullsteam Brewery's Sean Lily Wilson worked with Miller and Bedford to create a Spring Dry Hopped Rye Saison beer for the dinner.

MINTED GREEN PEA SOUP

Recipe by White House Executive Chef Walter Scheib for President George W. Bush. "This is a culinary shout-out to one of George Washington's favorite foods, sans arsenic," Adrian Miller writes. "White House executive chef Walter Scheib developed this recipe, and it quickly became a favorite for First Lady Laura Bush. The soup is regularly served at the George W. Bush Presidential Library's restaurant in Dallas, Texas, where I first savored it."

- 1 1/2 cups freshly shucked or frozen peas
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1/3 cup julienned leek whites
- 1/4 cup diced onions
- 4 cups chicken or vegetable stock
- 1/4 cup chopped mint
- 1/2 cup heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 4 mint sprigs

Blanch and cool the peas; reserve 2 to 3 tablespoons for garnish. In a soup pot over medium heat, cook the leeks and onions in the butter until tender, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the stock and simmer for 4 minutes. Add the peas and mint and cook for 2 to 3 minutes, or until the peas are tender.

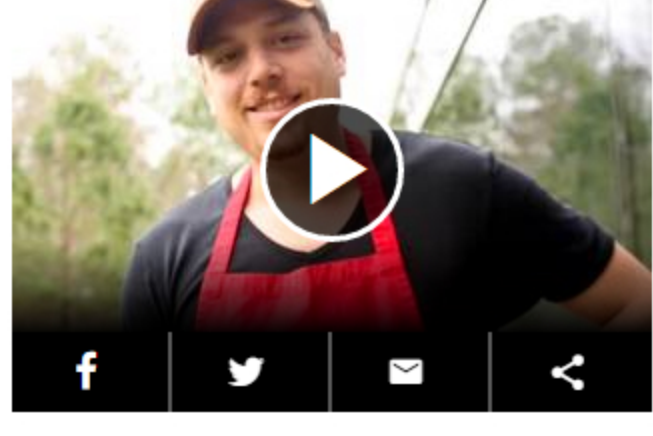
In blender or with an immersion blender, purée the soup until very smooth; strain the soup into a bowl through a fine-mesh sieve and discard the solids. If the soup is to be served hot, return the soup to the soup pot and add the cream and lemon juice and reheat gently. If the soup is to be served chilled, cool it quickly by placing the bowl in an ice bath and then add the cream and lemon juice.

Garnish with reserved peas and the mint sprigs.
Yield: 4 servings

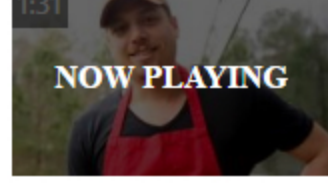
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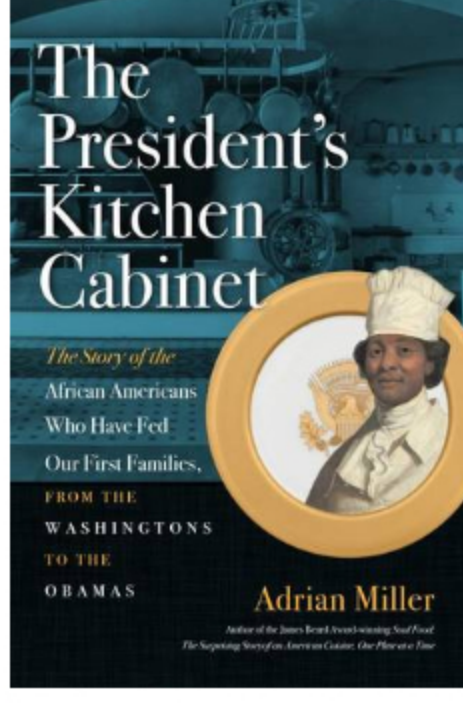


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