



Joyce White

Brown Sugar
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Q: How did you get your start cooking and writing about food?

A: In the late 1960s, I landed a job at *Ladies Home Journal* in the test kitchen, right out of college. I was working under Poppy Cannon, the food editor. I had always been interested in food, I grew up cooking, and I grew up in a family that loved to cook. My mother cooked, my sister was a cook at a cafe in Choctaw County, Alabama: I loved to cook so much that I would go with her to work, when I was 12 or 13. So, I majored in food administration in college. I came to New York City with the notion of finding a job in a test kitchen. I worked at *Ladies Home Journal* for six years, and eventually I was named Associate Food Editor. But I decided at that point that I wanted to work at a newspaper, so I became a journalist for the next 20 years.

Q: How did your training at the Cordon Bleu in Paris influence or impact your approach to your traditions and, your culinary background, in American soul food?

A: As I've traveled, and I've been everywhere, I have decided that basic cooking techniques are the same the world over. If you are going to fry chicken, it's not too much different from making tempura, or frying a beignet. Making a gravy in Alabama is not much different from making a brown sauce in France. The difference comes in individual flavoring and accents. Some cuisines are heavy with milk and (cream, others lean toward spices, garlic and onions. When it comes to desserts, there's not a lot of difference in even the flavoring. There's not much difference between a chocolate cake that my sister used to make and a *gâteau au chocolat* in Paris, or between an apple pie and an apple tort. The names change.

Q: What inspired you to focus on desserts this time around?

A: I have always loved making desserts. They're pretty, they scent the house with wonderful aromas, and they taste good. There's a lot of precision, but you can get creative. If a recipe (calls for buttermilk, you can use sour cream, just by watering it down a little. Also, desserts have traditionally been a very important part of African-American life. A sweet would take the edge off the harsh reality of our experience. For the holidays, the women in my family started making desserts right after Thanksgiving. By the time Christmas came, there were six or seven kinds of cakes. They were a little sweetness in our life.

Q: Many of the recipes in *Brown Sugar* are accompanied by sweet memories from your childhood in Alabama: Do you have any favorite food moments from your life here in New York?

A: My child's birthdays from the time he was about 3, until the time he was about 12 or so, until girls got into the picture. His birthday is July 3, and I used to always have a picnic in Central Park. We'd invite close friends and I'd always make a cake. His favorite cake was a plain, yellow cake. I'd make a filling of sugared strawberries, and frost the cake with sweetened whipped cream. That was his favorite cake, and it was my favorite because it's so simple to do and to make pretty. That's my favorite sweet memory of New York, the strawberry filled whipped cream cake in the park.

Q: Manhattan is a world away from the rural South. How do you so vividly maintain your ties?

A: I come from a very loving family, and I've always gone home every year since I came to New York City. My mother passed away in 1993, and one of her pleas was that we always stay connected. I think the reason she stressed this is that my father's family members were separated from each other in the early 1900s. They went in different directions and never reunited. I've always made an effort to stay connected because I love my family, and they are wonderful people.

Q: Have you observed an increased interest in or respect for traditional, homegrown American food over the years?

A: Over the past five years or so, it seems to me that more and more we are thinking about food that represents this great, big, vast, diverse country. We are no longer looking toward the continent, and I mean Europe, as the primary inspiration for good food. The cooking techniques and quality of ingredients we use get better every year. I do think there's confidence that we can go in the kitchen and use local ingredients and come out with a sophisticated meal that pleases everybody. I have friends from Europe that lick their fingers when they eat at my table.