
Food of the Scattered People



Jessica B. Harris

Jessica Harris is the author of twelve cookbooks documenting the foods and foodways of the African diaspora. She has written extensively about the culture of Africa in the Americas, lectured widely, and made numerous television appearances. Jessica is an English professor at Queens College, CUNY, and consults at Dillard University in New Orleans, where she founded the Institute for the Study of Culinary Cultures. She is a founding member of the Southern Foodways Alliance, and a member of the IACP and Les Dames d'Escoffier.

From time immemorial, the world's peoples have been in movement. Groups have been scattered, resulting in communities in regions and parts of the world with which they have no historic connection. In the 21st century, with more access to travel and the relaxing of immigration laws, the movement continues. Increasingly, those leaving their traditional homelands for other destinations are said to be in diaspora. This is the reason that *tikka masala* is now considered the national dish of the United Kingdom; that *chop suey* is found throughout the United States, but not in the same style as in China; and that variants of West African fritters are found throughout the New World.

While the word 'diaspora' is now ubiquitous, and is used in relation to the patterns of movement of almost any people on an enforced or voluntary basis, its origins are more focused. It is derived from the Greek *dia*, meaning 'across', and *speirein*, meaning 'scattered'. As noted by Kenny (2013), its earliest use is

commonly held to be in relation to the migration of Jews, as referred to in the books of Genesis and Exodus from the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish people were led ‘...from Babylonia (in present-day Iraq) to Canaan, which they named *Eretz Israel*. Famine soon drove Abraham’s descendents out of Canaan to Egypt...’ (p. 3). Applied to ancient Jewish history, the term has come to mean imposed exile and suffering, and subsequent efforts to return.

Despite its meaning now embracing many more groups, it is still most commonly applied to those who have been moved on an involuntary basis, as a result of negative forces such as slavery, famine or war. The assumption is that those who have not chosen to be dispersed have a stronger emotional attachment with and sense of longing for their place of origin, and that their need to find cultural legitimacy may be greater than of those who have moved of their own free will. The study of diaspora often centres on how cultural assets are used, consciously or otherwise, to help individuals or groups maintain a sense of identity.

Chaliand and Rageau (1995) recognise that a strict definition of diaspora allows the inclusion of very few groups commonly said to be in diaspora, and therefore add to the definition, ‘the role played by collective memory, which transmits both the historical facts that precipitated the dispersion and a cultural heritage (broadly understood) – the latter often being religious.’ (p. xv).

In this discussion, the aspect of diaspora studies on which we will focus is the role of food and foodways in helping scattered communities maintain a sense connection with their places of origin. We will also explore the means by which culinary traditions are used, consciously or otherwise, to influence the culture of the ‘host’ destination of those who have moved from their homelands. The complexities involved in maintaining a culinary culture in alien lands are legion. Nevertheless, three of the world’s diasporas have had a massive and transformational effect on the way the Western World eats: those of China, the Indian subcontinent, and the African Continent (especially its western coast). This chapter will look at selected examples from the Indian and Chinese diasporas and then offer a more in-depth study of the food of the African diaspora.