out of africa

FEAST ON KWANZAA’S FRUITS OF THE HARVEST

By Carla Davis

Photography by Renée Comet

Styling by Lisa Cherasky
menu
Granny's Icebox Rolls
Tofu Gumbo
White Corn Grits Soufflé
Black-Eyed Pea Croquettes
Sugared Sweet Potatoes, Plantains and Apples
Mixed Greens
Macaroni and Cheese
Five-Flavor Pound Cake with Caramel Drizzle
Kwanzaa—you'll find it on any December calendar, inked between Christmas and New Year's, a holiday so novel that 40 years ago it didn't exist. Yet 15 million people worldwide now circle the dates for Kwanzaa, the creation of a California college professor and African-American activist named Maulana Karenga.

Kwanzaa, Swahili for "first fruits of the harvest," is a 7-day celebration of life, family, community and culture. From December 26 through January 1, African Americans give thanks for past accomplishments—the "fruits" of their labor—pay homage to their ancestors and reaffirm the values of their African heritage. A cultural rather than a religious observance, Kwanzaa is a time of fasting, feasting and self-examination.

Based on traditional harvest festivals, Kwanzaa was established in 1966 at the height of the Black Freedom Movement. Desiring Pan-African solidarity, Karenga, a Black Studies professor at California State University, Long Beach, created Kwanzaa with three purposes: to restore rootedness in African culture; to reaffirm a common identity and direction as a world community; and to introduce and reinforce the Seven Principles of unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.

During Kwanzaa, family members gather each night to light red, green and black candles corresponding to the Seven Principles. As each candle is lit, the family discusses the principle of the day and makes a commitment to practice that principle throughout the year.

The rituals of Kwanzaa also include eating—and lots of it. The sixth day of Kwanzaa, December 31, is marked by a lavish feast. "The Kwanzaa Karuma, in keeping with the theme of black unity, draws on the cuisines of Africa, the Caribbean and southern America, wherever Africans were taken," says classically trained chef Carla Hall, a native of Nashville, Tennessee, and a proponent of showcasing African-American cooking minus the meat. "The way I contribute, as the cook in the family, is to take a few of my grandmother's old traditions and my food memories, add a new twist to some of them and create new traditions."

The following recipes are some of Hall's favorites. Whether or not you celebrate Kwanzaa, you're sure to find any of these dishes welcome at your holiday table.

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Washington, DC, resident Carla Hall graduated from the cooking school L'Academie de Cuisine in Maryland. She runs Alchemy Caterers and teaches cooking classes.

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Granny's Icebox Rolls

MAKES ABOUT 3 DOZEN ROLLS

When I was growing up, Sunday dinner was always at my grandmother’s house 30 miles away. I always wanted my mom to pull over and call ahead to let Granny know we were just 10 minutes away. She would never start the cornbread or bake the rolls until we were in the house.

¾ cup lukewarm water
1 pkg. dried yeast
1 tsp. plus ¼ cup granulated sugar
1 cup whole milk
¼ tsp. salt
1 stick plus 4 Tbs. melted butter
1 large egg, beaten
3 cups all-purpose flour

1. Combine lukewarm water, yeast and 1 teaspoon sugar. Let yeast bubble and double in size, about 15 minutes.
2. Mix milk, remaining ¼ cup sugar, salt, butter and beaten egg together. Slowly stir in flour. Add yeast mixture to flour mixture, stirring well—dough should be very sticky. Cover flour mixture with wax paper and towel, and place in warm area. Let rise until it doubles in bulk, about 1 hour.
3. Divide dough into two sections. Knead each section about 4 minutes, and on floured surface, roll out dough to about ¼-inch thick.
4. Use 2-inch round cookie cutter to cut dough into circles. Brush dough cutouts with remaining melted butter. Fold dough cutouts in half, spray baking sheet with nonstick cooking spray and place dough on sheet about ½ inches apart. Let rise about 1 hour, or until doubled in bulk.
5. Preheat oven to 400F.
6. Bake for 20 minutes, or until golden brown on top. Remove from oven, and serve hot.

PER SERVING: 80 CAL; 2G PROT; 4.5G TOTAL FAT (2.5G SAT FAT); 10G CARB; 15MG CHOL; 75MG SOD; 0G FIBER; 2G SUGARS

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Tofu Gumbo

SERVES 8

Gumbo may be made with a number of main ingredients, so why not tofu! Marinated tofu is a modern addition to this old Cajun favorite—along with the distinctive texture of okra. It's served over a White Corn Grits Soufflé, which is fluffed with eggs and served golden brown and piping hot right out of the oven. Leftover grits may be sliced and fried like polenta for breakfast the next morning or eaten as a snack later in the day.

1 Tbs. minced garlic
½ onion, diced
¼ cup Dijon mustard
¼ tsp. cayenne pepper
¼ cup peanut oil
¼ cup cider vinegar
1 Tbs. brown sugar
1 lb. extra-firm tofu, cut in ¼-inch cubes
3 Tbs. plus ¼ cup canola oil
½ onion, diced
2 ribs celery, diced
1 green pepper, diced
½ red pepper, diced
1 Tbs. minced garlic
1 cup diced canned tomatoes
1 tsp. dried thyme leaves
1 tsp dried oregano
1 tsp dried basil
2 bay leaves
2 cups vegetable stock
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 lb okra, cut in 1/2-inch pieces
1/2 cup all-purpose flour

1. Combine garlic, onion, mustard, cayenne pepper, peanut oil, vinegar and brown sugar in large bowl. Place tofu cubes in mixture, and marinate 2 to 24 hours.
2. Heat 1 tablespoon canola oil in large pot over medium heat. Sauté onions, celery, peppers and garlic until onions are translucent and vegetables are soft, about 10 minutes. Add tomatoes, thyme, oregano, basil, bay leaves, stock, salt and pepper. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook 15 to 20 minutes.
3. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in large skillet, and sauté okra until light brown. Remove from skillet, and add to tomato mixture.
4. Drain tofu, keeping diced onion. Reheat skillet, and sauté tofu until lightly browned. Remove from skillet, and add to tomato mixture.
5. Heat remaining 1/4 cup oil in skillet, and whisk in flour. Continue whisking mixture, or roux, until it is light brown and smells slightly nutty, for 3 to 4 minutes.
6. Reheat tomato mixture over medium heat, and stir in roux 1 tablespoon at a time. Continue to stir until gumbo is consistency of gravy. Remove from heat, and serve over White Corn Grits Soufflé.

White Corn Grits Soufflé

SERVES 8

4 cups water
1 tsp. kosher salt
2 cups white corn grits
3 Tbs. butter
1 Tbs. minced garlic
2 cups soymilk, unsweetened
3 large eggs, lightly beaten

1. Preheat oven to 350F.
2. Bring water and salt to a rolling boil. Slowly add grits while constantly whisking to prevent lumps. Reduce heat to low, and continue cooking and stirring until grits thicken. Add butter, garlic, and soymilk. Continue cooking over low heat for about 5 minutes. Add eggs. Pour mixture into 1 1/2-quart ovenproof dish.
3. Bake for 40 to 50 minutes, or until puffed and golden brown. Remove from oven, and serve with Tofu Gumbo.

Wine Suggestions
A Kendall Jackson or Sterling Chardonnay, both bold enough to stand up to the rich, nutty gumbo, is one way to go with the dish. And if you prefer Chardonnays on the lighter side, pair this dish with a Jacobs Creek South Eastern Australian.
Black-Eyed Pea Croquettes

SERVES 8

The myth in the African-American community is that black-eyed peas should be eaten on New Year's Day for good luck. The traditional dish is called Hoppin' John, which is a mix of black-eyed peas, rice and pork sausage. There are several theories on how this dish got its name, but here is a new twist on this old favorite. The mix may be made 1 day ahead, but add the breadcrumbs when you make the patties.

6 cups water
2 cups uncooked black-eyed peas
1 tsp. salt
1 Tbs. canola oil
1 small onion, diced
1 Tbs. minced garlic
1 ½ cups canned fire-roasted tomatoes, diced
½ tsp. chili paste, or more to taste

1 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
3 scallions, thinly sliced
2 large eggs, lightly beaten
4 cups fresh breadcrumbs
Flour for dusting

4. Heat oil in large skillet over medium-high heat. Dust each patty with flour, and gently place in skillet. Cook for about 2 minutes on each side, and repeat process until all mixture is used, adding more oil if needed. Remove from heat, drain on paper towels and serve hot.

PER SERVING: 90 CAL; 2G PROT; 6G TOTAL FAT (0G SAT; FAT); 6G CARB; 20MG CHOL; 110MG SOD; <1G FIBER; 0G SUGARS

Wine Suggestions

What better way to enjoy these tasty New Year's treats than with Champagne? An icy flute of Korbel Brut, a Freixenet Cordon Negro Brut or a Veuve Clicquot is the perfect companion to these crispy yet hearty patties. Be festive—open the bottle while you're preparing them.

Sugared Sweet Potatoes, Plantains and Apples

SERVES 8

While candied yams are a typical side dish in soul food cooking, combining them with plantains, a Caribbean and African favorite, and seasonal apples, which are plentiful at this time of year, makes for a delicious side dish or dessert. Black-ripe plantains are very soft and sweet and are generally used in desserts.

2 very ripe, blackened plantains
1 large sweet potato, peeled
3 Granny Smith apples, diced
3 Tbs. soy margarine, melted
½ cup firmly packed brown sugar
½ tsp. ground cinnamon
½ tsp. ground ginger
½ tsp. salt
½ cup water

1. Preheat oven to 350F.
2. Cut ends off plantains, and halve lengthwise. Remove peel by putting thumb between fruit and peel, and pulling thumb down length of fruit. Cut plantain on bias into ½-inch pieces.
3. Quarter sweet potato lengthwise. Cut each quarter into ¼-inch pieces.
4. Mix apples, plantains and sweet potatoes in large bowl. In separate bowl,
combine melted margarine, brown sugar, cinnamon, ginger, salt and water. Toss sweet potato mixture with brown sugar mixture, and place into ovenproof dish.

5. Bake for 20 minutes covered. Uncover, and bake 20 minutes more.

PER SERVING: 200 CAL; 1G PROT; 4.5G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 42G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 200MG SOD; 4G FIBER; 24G SUGARS

Wine Suggestions
With all that's going on in this dish, keep the wine simple. A not-too-sweet Riesling would work well, something light but not overpowering such as a Columbia Valley Riesling. For a little more adventure and for flavors of fruits and spices to complement this dish, try a German Sparr Gewurztraminer Reserve.

Mixed Greens
SERVES 8

You can find a mix of hearty greens in just about any typical African, Caribbean and southern American meal. Being from the South, I became accustomed to seeing the bottle of vinegar with chile peppers settled at the bottom on the table next to the salt and pepper and a condiment called chow chow pickle. These condiments were used to "fix up" your greens. You will find these add punch.

1 Tbs. canola oil
1 medium-sized onion, sliced
1 Tbs. minced garlic
1 tsp. chili paste
3 cups water
1 tsp. salt, or to taste
1 Tbs. white vinegar
1 bunch collard greens, cleaned and cut into 1½-inch-thick strips, 3 inches long
½ head green cabbage, cored and cut into 1¼-inch-thick strips
1 bunch mustard greens, cleaned and cut into 1½-inch-thick strips, 3 inches long

1. Heat oil in large pot over medium heat. Sauté onions until translucent, for about 7 minutes. Add garlic, chili paste, water, salt and vinegar, and let seasoned water cook for 15 to 20 minutes.

2. Add greens, and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, for about 30 minutes. Remove from heat, adjust salt and serve.

PER SERVING: 80 CAL; 4G PROT; 2G TOTAL FAT (0G SAT. FAT); 12G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 340MG SOD; 5G FIBER; 4G SUGARS

Macaroni and Cheese
SERVES 8

The ultimate comfort food!

8 oz. elbow noodles, cooked
1 lb. shredded low-fat Cheddar cheese
8 oz. soft silken tofu
2 cups unsweetened soymilk
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. minced garlic
2 Tbs. soy margarine

1. Preheat oven to 350F.
2. Mix drained noodles with 2 cups grated cheese, tofu, soymilk, salt, garlic and margarine. Place in 2-quart ovenproof dish, and top with remaining cheese.
3. Bake about 40 minutes, or until cheese is bubbly. Remove from oven, and serve.

PER SERVING: 390 CAL; 21G PROT; 24G TOTAL FAT (13G SAT. FAT); 22G CARB; 60MG CHOL; 690MG SOD; 2G FIBER; 2G SUGARS

Five-Flavor Pound Cake

SERVES 10 TO 12

Five-Flavor Pound Cake was so excited that I called my grandmother to tell her that "Granny's Five-Flavor Pound Cake" was in print on the dinner menu. This was the cake that all the grandchildren would beg Granny to send after we moved away. At Christmas, it was served with boiled custard. The Caramel Drizzle makes an intense icing, and a decorative sugar adds glamour to this festive cake.

Five-Flavor Pound Cake
3 cups all-purpose flour
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. baking soda
2 sticks butter
2 1/2 cups granulated sugar
6 large eggs
1 cup low-fat sour cream

1 tsp. vanilla extract
1 tsp. rum extract
1 tsp. coconut flavoring
1 tsp. lemon extract
1 tsp. almond extract

1. Preheat oven to 350F. Spray decorative or regular 10-inch tube pan or Bundt pan with nonstick cooking spray.
3. Cream butter and sugar with electric mixer. Add eggs, one at a time, incorporating each well after adding.
4. Add flour alternately with sour cream, beginning and ending with flour. Mix for at least 2 minutes on medium speed.
5. Add extracts one at a time, incorporating each in mixture before next addition. Continue mixing batter until it is shiny, about 3 to 5 minutes. Pour batter into tube pan, and place pan in center of oven.
6. Bake for 1 hour, or until cake is golden and toothpick inserted in center comes out clean. Remove from oven, and cool cake slightly on wire rack before turning it out onto serving plate. Cool cake completely before drizzling with caramel.

Caramel Drizzle
1 cup firmly packed brown sugar
1/2 cup low-fat milk or vanilla soymilk
2 Tbs. butter or margarine
1/2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. vanilla extract
1 1/2 cups confectioners' sugar

1. Combine brown sugar, milk, butter and salt in saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring constantly. Reduce heat to low, and cook until mixture is slightly thick, about 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.
2. Remove from heat, stir in vanilla and gradually beat in confectioners' sugar. Stir until smooth and creamy. Let icing cool slightly, and pour over cake. Icing hardens as it cools.

PER SERVING: 630 CAL; 7G PROT; 23G TOTAL FAT (13G SAT. FAT); 100G CARB; 160MG CHOL; 770MG SOD; <1G FIBER; 73G SUGARS