

## Rant with Collards

VERTAMAE'S RADICAL CULINARY BELIEF SYSTEM.

“Walls can't talk, but chambermaids can,” Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor wrote in *Thursdays and Every Other Sunday Off: A Domestic Rap*, published in 1972. That slim book was a follow-up to *Vibration Cooking: Or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, a groundbreaking memoir-meets-cookbook, released two years prior. Chambermaids, wrote Vertamae, tell stories like this:

A friend of mine told me that she called her mother's employer to tell her that her mother had died over the weekend and would not be able to come in. The employer said, “Oh dear, that is too bad. Could you recommend someone else? The house is a wreck after the weekend.”

And like this:

One cousin of mine who lives in a small town in Tennessee was a cook for a Mr. & Mrs. Brooks for over twenty years. My cousin lived in a little house in back of the big house. She had six children, all of whom were fathered by Mr. Brooks. Mr. Brooks never had any white children although he was married to three sisters in one white family. When my cousin passed Mr. Brooks on the street she was not allowed to speak. She was obliged to step aside for him. And he never acknowledged her. The mother fucker.

*Thursdays* vented a collective black spleen. The same central character—Vertamae, born in the Lowcountry village of Fairfax, South Carolina, educated in the cafés of Paris and the jazz clubs of New York City—drove the conversation in *Thursdays* and in its predecessor. But in the years that elapsed between the two books, she moved from the kitchen to the broader domestic scene. And she went radical.

Over the last decade, I've read and reread both books, marking them with marginalia. Early this spring, knowing that a new edition of *Vibration Cooking* was planned, I dug back in. *Thursdays* now reads like a bricolage of complaints, collected by a harried woman with an ear for the umbrage of others. I like its vigor and buoyant pissed-offedness. But *Vibration Cooking* hoes a kindred row, only in a more agreeable and assured fashion, with sometimes subtler effect.

Published at the height of America's fascination with soul power, soul music, and soul food, *Vibration Cooking* plays like a conversation with a sophisticated-but-scattered aunt, who is both a woman of the world and a daughter of her place. Vertamae is the sort of person who, while struggling to find work in the broad creative world, came to know James Baldwin as “Jimmy,” played the part of Big Pearl in the infamous Broadway play *Mandingo*, catered a record-release party for David Bowie, danced and chanted with Sun Ra & his Solar-Myth Arkestra, and inspired her daughter, who was nine at the time, to publish a volume of poems with Doubleday.

Long before *Like Water for Chocolate* and the stream of culinary imaginings that followed, *Vibration Cooking* showcased how reportage, recipes, and personal revelations could be combined to plot identity. Read Vertamae and you want to book a trip to the Lowcountry or cook a dinner of Mrs. Estella Smart's liver-and-lights stew, cow peas, and red rice. Ditto that chicken with groundnut sauce dish, inspired by her time at a New York City bar derisively called Pee Wee's Slave Trade Kitchen. Or the fried chicken and waffles she first ate at Wells Supper Club in Harlem.

*Vibration Cooking* opens with a bold observation:

In reading lots and lots of cookbooks written by white folks it occurred to me that people very casually say Spanish rice, Swedish meatballs, Danish pastry, English muffins, and Swiss cheese. And with the exception of black bottom pie and niggertoes, there is no reference to black people's contribution to the culinary arts. White folks act like they invented food and like there is some weird mystique surrounding it—something that only Julia and Jim can get to.

She combats those sins of omission by telling stories born of both fact and elaboration, shared in kitchens and at back doors. In the foreword to the recent reissue of *Vibration Cooking* by University of Georgia Press, the scholar Psyche Williams-Forsen likens Vertamae to Zora Neale Hurston, another chronicler of working-class folk



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who express themselves through their labors and their pleasures, including cookery. “She mines black folklore and its tales to wage her personal war for expanding black space and place,” writes Williams-Forsen.

Vertamae was one of the first black female writers to argue that soul food—the vernacular dishes and traditions of African Americans—was a cultural, social, and political creation worthy of respect. Remarkably, she did some of her best work during the ascendant years of the Black Power movement, with its Dick Gregory–espoused dictates against eating swine, and its framing of soul food as slave food.

**T**oday, after a long peregrination, Vertamae is back in the Lowcountry, recovering from a serious medical malady. I got a chance to see her in March of this year, at a Charleston event where the writer John Simpkins delivered a “Praise Song for Vertamae.” She stood tall, her head wrapped in a turban, beaming for all to see, as Simpkins celebrated her ability to swing from haute to *bas* expressions of self. At the close of his remarks, I joined a crowd of admirers that gathered around Vertamae. One asked me if I recalled the letter she wrote to the editors of *Time*, back in 1969, when that magazine dismissed soul food as a fad and declared that it was born of nothing more than antebellum throwaways.

I did not. So I went flipping back through this new edition of *Vibration Cooking*, in which Williams-Forsen included Vertamae’s seething response. Before farm-to-table became a buzzword for earnest folk who aim to reinvent our food systems, she sought inspiration from agrarian Africa and its American descendants.

“So you white folks just keep on eating that white foam rubber bread that sticks to the roof of your mouth, and keep on eating Minute Rice and instant potatoes, instant cereals, and drinking instant milk and stick to your instant culture,” she wrote, in a shit-stirring but lyrical valedictory that presaged current arguments against cultural erosion and industrial agriculture. “And I will stick to the short-lived fad that brought my ancestors through four hundred years of oppression.”

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