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A Conversation with Sallie Ann Robinson

Author of *Cooking the Gullah Way, Morning, Noon and Night*

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Q: Your childhood home on Daufuskie—one of the small Sea Islands between Savannah, Georgia, and Hilton Head, South Carolina—holds a special place in your heart. What makes this little island so meaningful to you?

A: There is something to be said when one feels that home is where the heart is, and that's Daufuskie Island for me. Growing up on Daufuskie gave me respect for the world beyond it. We had so little and went through so much, but through it all we were and still are proud people who appreciate the kind of living that is buried within our Beenya soul. Hard work was a part of our good times—just like Pop used to say, "nuttin' gets done when ya lyin' in bed."

Q: What is your favorite recipe from your latest cookbook?

A: We ate a lot of seafood year round, so most of my favorites use that. In the "Morning" section, it's *Grits and Fried Fish*. From "Noon" it's the *Fried Shrimp Sandwich with Lettuce and Tomato*, and from "Nights" it's *Flounder Full of Crabmeat*. My favorite dessert is the *Southern Sweet Tada Pie with Pecan Topping*, and the best drink is *Soothing Sassafras Tea*. *Sallie's Seafood Spaghetti* is really delicious, and all of the preserves are so good!

Q: Throughout your book, there is some incorporation of local dialect. What is a "Beenya?" A "Comeya?"

A: Beenya is a Gullah term for "been here, " and Comeya is a Gullah term for "come here. " It is said like this, the Gullah way: "I beenya when you comeya." The straight way to say it is, "I been here when you came here."

Q: How important do you feel friends, family, and fellowship are to food?

A: All my life I've known food and meals to be a connection for peace talks, a chance for sharing tastes with one another, an opportunity for breaking bread to the best of times long gone

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and the best yet to come. It's an important time to exchange memories with each other. And there's something special everyone can get when they explore another culture's cooking and can recognize it as a piece of that culture's history. When you enjoy a great dish, it's as though your brain and mouth are having a conversation all to themselves, and then you get to share that with everyone you're sharing the meal with.

Q: How did your family influence your passion for cooking?

A: At a very young age, as soon as I could put wood into the woodstove, I was given the opportunity to cook. I was the oldest at home, and our parents were gone a lot sometimes to provide for us. Meals were something that had to be prepared and ready by the time they returned home from a busy day. With us kids being left at home to do other chores around the house, certain duties were left up to the oldest. Cooking was one of those, and not burning down the house was another.

Q: Do you have children of your own? How do you pass on your love of cooking to them?

A: I lost my firstborn child, but I have four beautiful children: three boys and a daughter, aged twenty to thirty. And I can't forget my six grandchildren, who are aged from two months to eleven years. I am proud to say that all of my children are cooks. Some are better than others, because they are the ones who paid more attention to me when I was showing them how it was done. And I've always told them that they would have to leave my nest and be good cooks, so they could feed themselves if they never married.

Q: What are your favorite and least favorite parts about cooking?

A: The one and only thing I dislike is if I have to measure something from a box, which is something I mostly stay away from. My favorite thing is coming up with a menu in my head and smelling the aroma of the food before I even start to cook. I also love it when everything gets cooked, eaten, and talked about, when everything comes together as it should.

Q: Author Pat Conroy wrote an engaging foreword to your first book, *Gullah Home Cooking the Daufuskie Way*. How are you acquainted with him?

A: That relationship brings back memories of a time when things were simple and people liked others for who they were, without any fear of what other people thought. Pat Conroy came to Daufuskie Island in 1969 as part of the South Carolina school system's "teacher integration," and I was one of the students he taught for a year. I consider his story to be a timeless story of one man who didn't know what he was getting himself into. But despite that, he found joy in his discovery on a little island where the water will always be wide. Today, now that I am grown up and he is just a little older, our feelings about each other stay the same. And our moments together are shared remembering many folks who are now gone and the good old days of teaching each other.

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Q: You include a section on folk cures and home remedies in *COOKING THE GULLAH WAY, MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT*. Can you tell us a little about them?

A: Keeping us healthy was just as important as making sure that there was food on the table. Remedies can be very powerful because there is a lot of faith and belief behind them. The home remedies I shared have been passed down through many of my family's generations. And with the blessing of a mother's wit, those remedies got us through some very tight spots.

Back then, having money saved up for medicine or paying for health insurance was not at the top of most people's priorities. Knowing what herbal remedy, whether it was a broken limb from a bush or roots dug up from a certain kind of tree, was what we had to use. Making the pain go away with the kind of love that was used back then on Daufuskie Island was just something you could not pay for. I still believe in and use *some* of the home remedies I included in my book. I've shared a few with others and they found them helpful. I still love using my cold remedy: honey, lemon, garlic, and vinegar. It might sound awful, but it makes a good medicine that works.

Q: How long have you lived in Savannah, and what do you do there?

A: I have lived in Savannah close to ten years. I kind of planted myself here when my mother had her stroke and I needed to be near her with her doctors. During my time on Daufuskie I never knew about or heard of a stroke. I keep myself busy with my writing and I am a certified nursing assistant—I love helping others in need of a caring soul like me.

Q: What is it like going home to Daufuskie?

A: I get to go back to Daufuskie about two or three times a year. I would love to make many more trips back home and as the years sneak up I feel more and more strongly about the island. Most of the island is grown up and changed a bit, but it still gives me the same home feeling. My memories are strong and I have held on to many precious things in my heart—those early days and times will always be in my Beenya soul. Time has brought changes to Daufuskie many times, and even with these changes, the island will still stay the same in my heart. My body resides in Savannah—but the ways of Daufuskie will stay with me.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: An interview with Sallie Ann Robinson, author of *COOKING THE GULLAH WAY, MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT* (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2007). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/robinson.

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