

[C] COMMUNITY
CINEMA
DISCUSSION GUIDE



Soul Food Junkies

[i]NDEPENDENTLENS 
PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/SOUL-FOOD-JUNKIES

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Using this Guide



Community Cinema is a rare public forum: a space for people to gather who are connected by a love of stories, and a belief in their power to change the world. This discussion guide is designed as a tool to facilitate dialogue, and deepen understanding of the complex issues in the film **Soul Food Junkies**. It is also an invitation to not only sit back and enjoy the show—but to step up and take action. This guide is not meant to be a comprehensive primer on a given topic. Rather, it provides important context, and raises thought provoking questions to encourage viewers to think more deeply. We provide suggestions for areas to explore in panel discussions, in the classroom, in communities, and online. We also provide valuable resources, and connections to organizations on the ground that are fighting to make a difference.

For information about the program, visit www.communitycinema.org



The Film

Food nourishes us and keeps us alive. It's pleasurable and it's comforting. It signifies home and family. And soul food, which occupies a special place in African American culture, enjoys all of those positive attributes. But can too much of it make you sick and even kill you? **Soul Food Junkies** asks this question and others as it explores the history of soul food, its place in African American culture, and its effects on the health of African Americans.

Framing the film around his father's love of eating and subsequent illness and death, filmmaker Byron Hurt tells the story of soul food, from its origins during the days of slavery to present-day modifications in traditional cooking. Many of the items that are considered soul food staples, such as yams, corn, and the lowest-quality pork, were once the sustenance of slaves. Over time, dishes made with these items morphed into Southern cuisine, as survival food became a delicacy enjoyed by others.

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, *soul* became a descriptor applied to numerous aspects of African American culture. There were soul singers, soul brothers (and sisters), soul music, and, of course, soul food. The civil rights era was also a time when food activism came to the fore, as figures such as comedian Dick Gregory and Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad began advocating healthy eating and healthy lifestyles as ways for African Americans to take more control over their lives.

Interspersed with soul food's history are personal vignettes that describe Jackie Hurt (Byron's father), his relationship with food, and his development of pancreatic cancer. His father's illness made Byron wonder if soul food was to blame for his father's condition, and he began a search for more information. The film delves into health problems associated with bad eating habits – not just of soul food, with its high fat and salt content, but also of highly processed foods that contain potentially harmful ingredients. For low-income African Americans, the lack of good, quality food in their neighborhoods supports unhealthy eating. These areas, referred to as *food deserts*, are usually a good distance away from a mainstream supermarket. At the same time, they contain an array of fast-food restaurants, which offer high-calorie, low-quality food.

Today, a growing emphasis on healthful living has given rise to numerous efforts across the country to change the eating habits of African Americans. With a push from First Lady Michelle Obama, communities are lobbying for supermarkets to locate in low-income urban neighborhoods, and groups have launched initiatives to make fresh, wholesome food available through farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture associations (CSAs). Some of these groups teach people about good nutrition,

and schools such as St. Philip's Academy in Newark, New Jersey, make nutrition an integral part of the school day.

Hurt concludes at film's end that "we are a nation of soul food junkies," but it's not necessary to give up eating soul food altogether. Finding ways to make soul food healthy and eating it in moderation allows us to continue to enjoy the food we love and live a healthy life at the same time.

Selected Individuals Featured in *Soul Food Junkies*

Jackie Hurt – The filmmaker's father

Sonia Sanchez – Author; Poet; Activist

Jessica B. Harris – Food historian; Author

Dr. Frederick Douglass Opie – Professor of history and foodways; Author, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America*

Willora Craft Ephram – Restaurant owner known as "Ms. Peaches"

Bryant Terry – Food justice advocate; Author, *Vegan Soul Kitchen: Fresh, Healthy, and Creative African-American Cuisine*

Lolis Eric Elie – Author, *Smokestack Lightning: Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country*

Chokwe Lumumba – Attorney and city councilman, Jackson, Mississippi

Dr. Marc Lamont Hill – Professor; Author; Activist

Dick Gregory – Comedian; Activist

Minister Abdul Hafeez Muhammad – Member, Nation of Islam

Dr. Rani Whitfield – "Tha Hip Hop Doc"



Background Information

Soul Food: A Brief History

What is known today as 'soul food' dates back to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Enslaved Africans in the U.S. and the generations that followed were forced to do hard labor, burning more than 3000 calories per day. The necessity to eat economically and abundantly was essential to survival. Yet slave owners provided little more than the kitchen throwaways such as pig's feet, chitlins, hog jowl, broken rice, and re-used lard to feed the laborers. African-American women, typically in charge of cooking the meals for the community, used West African cooking techniques, such as stewing or frying, and generous doses of ingenuity to transform throwaways into food high in the starch, fat, sodium, cholesterol, and calories that would sustain their fellow slaves during long days of labor.

Slavery was officially abolished in 1865, but poverty and social segregation continued to further the cuisine's evolution. In the South, Jim Crow segregation laws prohibited African Americans from eating out at many restaurants. Coming together over home-cooked meals, especially in churches, became an important part of community and belonging, as well as political organizing. Those who migrated north to find factory work brought recipes with them to the jazz clubs and eateries that served as gathering places. By the time the Black Power Movement gained popularity in the 1960s, the culinary tradition had established itself as part of African-American cultural identity. Leaders reclaimed and renamed it as 'soul food' giving it new life that would carry it into mainstream American culture over the next fifty years.

Source

Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

Soul Food Basics

- **Greens** – leafy vegetables similar to spinach, such as collard greens or mustard greens
- **Grits** – coarsely ground corn, available as either untreated corn grits or hominy grits (alkali-treated corn), usually prepared by boiling to make a porridge; can also be fried in vegetable oil, butter, or bacon grease
- **Black-eyed peas** – small beige beans with a prominent black spot, usually cooked with a pork product for flavoring, served with hot sauce and vinegar; an essential ingredient in "hoppin' john," a traditional New Year's dish
- **"Chitlins," or chitterlings** – hog intestines, which can be battered and fried; pigs' feet can be cooked in similar fashion and eaten with vinegar and hot sauce
- **Pork varieties and flavorings** – ham hocks, from the bottom end of a smoked ham, used for flavoring vegetables and soups; *fatback*, the salty pork derived from the fat layer of a pig's back, for seasoning black-eyed peas and meat dishes; *pork rinds*, or "cracklins" (made from pig skin), can be served hot or cold or used in making cornbread
- **Sweet potato pie** – a dessert made from cut and boiled sweet potatoes or yams
- **Breads** – cornbread; hush puppies, deep fried cornmeal batter; johnnycakes, pancakes made from cornmeal



Is Soul Food Bad for You?

Soul foods prepared in the traditional manner are generally very high in starch, fat, sodium, cholesterol, and calories. In fact, traditional-style soul foods have been blamed for the abnormally high rates of high blood pressure (hypertension), diabetes, atherosclerosis (clogged arteries), stroke, and heart attack suffered by African Americans, especially those living in the southern and central United States.

By themselves, certain items in a soul-food diet are healthy. *Collard and other greens* are rich sources of fiber; vitamins A, B6, and C; and minerals, including iron, calcium, manganese, and folic acid, and also contain small amounts of omega-3 fatty acids. However, the traditional style of cooking soul food vegetables at high temperatures or for long periods of time destroys the water-soluble vitamins (A and C) or causes them to leach into the cooking water. *Peas, rice, and legumes* are excellent, inexpensive sources of protein and also contain important vitamins, minerals, and fiber. *Sweet potatoes* are a very good source of beta-carotene and trace minerals. Some studies have shown that if consumed plain and in modest amounts (the opposite of how they are served in traditional soul-food dishes), sweet potatoes can stabilize blood sugar levels and lower insulin resistance.

So, whether soul food is bad for you depends on how it is consumed. As part of a varied and generally balanced diet, taken in modest portions, soul food is not a cause of health problems. And, with certain modifications in the preparation and cooking process, soul food can be turned into something that's good for you (see sidebar).

Soul Food That's Good **for** You (and Good **to** You)

Adopting a healthy diet doesn't have to mean giving up soul food. Substituting certain ingredients and making adjustments in cooking methods can result in soul food that's both healthy and tasty:

- Find substitutes for flavor. Instead of lard or pork, try seasoning greens with garlic powder, lemon pepper, and a sprinkling of imitation bacon bits.
- In recipes that call for butter, use a low-fat butter substitute or margarine.
- Bake chicken instead of frying it. If you want to fry meat, avoid using lard or oil that's high in saturated fat. Instead, use a vegetable oil that is low in saturated fat.
- Lower the amount of salt you add to a dish. In most cases, salt can be eliminated and combinations of herbs and spices can be used along with lemon or lime juice.

More ideas on making delicious and nutritious soul food are at

- » www.mademan.com/mm/5-healthy-soul-food-options.html
- » www.soulfoodandsoutherncooking.com/healthy-soul-food-recipes.html
- » www.soulfoodandsoutherncooking.com/healthy-soul-food.html



Soul Food and Obesity

Soul food has been blamed for the high rates of obesity among African Americans, but soul food is not the only culprit when it comes to obesity. Body weight is a function of caloric intake, activity level, genes, metabolism, environment, culture, and socioeconomic status.

It is important to understand the difference between being overweight and being obese. Body mass index (BMI) is a measure used to define both conditions, using the following formula: Divide weight in kilograms by height in meters, squared; alternatively, multiply weight in pounds by 705, then divide by height in inches twice.* According to the Weight-control Information Network, *overweight* refers to an excessive amount of body weight that may come from muscles, bone, adipose (fat) tissue, and water; *obesity* refers to an excessive amount of adipose tissue. A person whose BMI is 30 or more is obese; a person whose BMI is in the 25-29.9 range is overweight.

Obesity is strongly associated with an unhealthy diet, and soul food, which is high in fat, increases the risk for obesity. The same is true for fast foods and many of the food options found at convenience stores.

*

» men.webmd.com/weight-loss-bmi

» For an online calculator, go to nhlbisupport.com/bmi

Health Risks and Weight

Among the health risks associated with overweight and obesity are

- type 2 diabetes;
- coronary heart disease;
- stroke;
- hypertension;
- nonalcoholic fatty liver disease;
- gallbladder disease;
- osteoarthritis (degeneration of the cartilage and bone of joints);
- sleep apnea and other breathing problems;
- some forms of cancer (breast, colorectal, endometrial, and kidney);
- complications during pregnancy.

The Weight-control Information Network estimates that overweight and obese conditions cost a total of \$117 billion per year in medical expenses. Because of its association with the adverse health conditions listed above, obesity increases the risk of premature death, with over one hundred and twelve thousand deaths due to cardiovascular disease, over fifteen thousand deaths due to cancer, and over thirty-five thousand deaths due to noncancer, noncardiovascular disease causes per year in the U.S. population.

Source

» win.niddk.nih.gov/statistics/index.htm

Overweight and Obesity Facts

The following statistics provide an overview of the issue of overweight and obesity in the United States:

- In 1960, the rate of obesity among adults (aged 20 and above) was 13.3 percent; by 2004, it had increased to 32.1 percent.
- Over two-thirds of U.S. adults are overweight or obese: all adults – 68 percent; women – 64.1 percent; men – 72.3 percent.
- Roughly one-third of U.S. adults are obese: all adults – 33.8 percent; women – 35.5 percent; men – 32.2 percent.
- Rates of obesity among women: African American – 49.6 percent; Hispanic – 43 percent; white – 33 percent.
- Rates of obesity among men: African American – 37.3 percent; Hispanic – 34.3 percent; white – 31.9 percent.
- Among all children aged 2 to 19, about one-third are overweight or obese: girls – 31.3 percent; boys – 32.1 percent; about one in six are obese: girls – 15.9 percent; boys – 17.8 percent.
- Rates of obesity among girls: African American – 12.6 percent; Hispanic – 11.1 percent; white – 6.2 percent.
- Rates of obesity among boys: African American – 17.5 percent; Hispanic – 18.9 percent; white – 13.8 percent.
- Overweight adolescents have a 70 percent chance of becoming overweight adults.

Sources

- » win.niddk.nih.gov/statistics/index.htm
- » www.cdc.gov/obesity/index.html
- » www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@sop/@smd/documents/downloadable/ucm_319588.pdf
- » www.ehow.com/about_5479162_obesity-america.html



Food Deserts and Obesity

As the U.S. population has moved to the suburbs, supermarkets have followed, relocating in areas where they can remain profitable. The result: urban *food deserts*. The term food desert refers to a low-income area that lacks supermarkets or other sources of fresh food. Much of the food available in these areas is found at fast-food chains, convenience stores, and small markets with limited offerings. People living in a food desert are generally thought to suffer from obesity and poor nutrition due to the lack of access to fresh, healthy food. To be sure, the availability of good food can make it easier to eat healthy meals, but some recent studies have found that simply having a supermarket in the neighborhood does not necessarily result in good eating habits. Affordability is also a major factor. A Seattle study found that food shoppers who have access to a nearby supermarket often choose a store that's farther away because the prices are lower. And within a store, food choices are also based on price. Even when a lower-priced supermarket offers fresh, wholesome food, deciding to purchase those healthy options depends on how they are priced relative to less-healthy foods. A study of middle school children by the Rand Corporation found no consistent relationship between what the students weighed and the type of food available in their neighborhoods.

What both of these studies suggest is that the quality of a person's diet is determined by more than just the proximity of a supermarket that sells fruits, vegetables, and other healthy items. Diet is also influenced by factors such as income, ethnicity, and education. And the food industry itself bears a good deal of responsibility in shaping the food preferences of Americans, as it spends over a billion dollars a year on the marketing of snack foods and fast-food restaurants.

Source

- » depts.washington.edu/uwcphn/reports/cphnbrf051910.pdf
- » www.nytimes.com/2012/04/18/health/research/pairing-of-food-deserts-and-obesity-challenged-in-studies.html?_r=0

Education for Good Nutrition

Because eating habits are the result of multiple influences, changing those habits requires a multipronged effort. Making good food available and affordable in a neighborhood or locality is an important first step. But access needs to be accompanied by education at several levels. Food stores and farmers' markets can provide information to parents about the benefits of healthy eating, both for themselves and for their children, along with recipes for making healthy meals. These enterprises can also offer demonstrations and classes on how to choose and prepare nutritious foods.

Schools have many opportunities to teach about good nutrition, not only in formal classes but in other ways as well. Making sure the cafeteria menu offers healthy selections based on the updated U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) dietary guidelines is one way; school gardens are another. Growing their own food gives children a direct connection to the sources of good nutrition and helps them make healthy choices when they eat. Schools that serve as community centers can make parents partners in learning by offering healthy-cooking classes and organizing healthy community potluck meals.

Food justice refers to a fair distribution of food regardless of the recipients' ability to pay for it.

Food security refers to a household's physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food.

Food sovereignty is primarily an issue that applies to developing countries where multinational corporations and Western technologies have changed agricultural resources by encouraging the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and improved seeds. Food sovereignty holds that communities should be able to define their own means of production and that local farmers should be allowed to cultivate their own land to produce the type of food preferred by the community.

Topics and Issues Relevant to *Soul Food Junkies*

A screening of *Soul Food Junkies* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

African American food culture

Soul-food cooking

Diet-related disease

Diet and obesity

Food justice

Health and nutrition education

Government regulation of health and nutrition

School lunch programs

Community gardens

Organic gardening

Thinking More Deeply

1. What are some of your memories, feelings, or other associations with food? How do they compare with those expressed in the film?
2. Why are eating habits so hard to break? Do you think it's possible to be addicted to a specific food or to food in general? Explain.
3. Some people feel that using healthy substitutes in soul food (e.g., smoked turkey instead of pork fat to flavor greens, or herbs instead of salt) changes the nature of soul food, making it less authentic, even robbing African American culture of one of its defining characteristics. How would you respond to this criticism?
4. Is eating just a matter of personal behavior and preference? When do eating habits—or the effects of eating habits and food choices—step over into the public realm?
5. Do governmental or other public agencies have a role in guiding or responsibility to guide what or how people choose to eat? Defend your position. What about public figures, such as Dick Gregory (who appears in the film) or Michelle Obama? How influential can they be in promoting a healthy lifestyle?
6. The film talks about the intersections of food and politics, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Do you feel that there are connections between food and politics today? How are they connected?
7. Do you feel that food deserts, that is, areas that lack markets selling healthy foods, are responsible for the poor nutrition found among many low-income African Americans? What are some other reasons for their poor nutrition?
8. What can local governments do to create better access to healthy foods for low-income populations? What can residents of a locality do to obtain better food options in their community?
9. How much of a role should schools play in establishing good eating habits?
10. Does your community provide ways for people to learn about good nutrition? If not, how could the community create opportunities for this kind of learning?

Suggestions for Action

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Examine your family's eating habits and nutrition. Keep a "food diary" for each family member for a week, then sit down together to evaluate your food consumption. Get input from each person and make a plan to address any imbalances in your family's diet.
2. Host a viewing party potluck. Invite friends over to share family and cultural recipes while watching Soul Food Junkies. Challenge your guests to revise unhealthy recipes by using healthier cooking methods and ingredients.
3. Become familiar with the ingredients of processed foods. Take the time to read food labels when you shop, and choose products with lower salt and fat content. Whenever possible, buy foods that are minimally processed.
4. Evaluate the lunch program at your local school. Most schools make their menus available online or as printed hard copy. Work with the parent-teacher association (PTA) to request that healthy choices be included in the school's lunch program. Find ideas and organizations focused on improving school lunches at environment.about.com/od/healthandchildren/a/cafeteria_food.htm, and a practical step-by-step guide at www.greatschools.org/improvement/slideshows/3852-How-to-improve-your-schools-lunch-program.gs.
5. One way to ensure the quality of the produce your family eats is to grow it yourself. Create a small plot in your yard or obtain a plot in a community garden. If there is no nearby garden, start one! Join with a group of like-minded individuals to survey the community for a good garden spot and petition local authorities for the necessary permits.
6. If gardening is not your thing, join a CSA. Community-supported agriculture provides fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the growing season. To find a CSA near you, go to www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml.
7. Work with your place of worship or a community group to organize a gleaning project. Gleaning is the act of gathering crops left over in the fields after harvest, and these are usually quite plentiful. This produce can then be offered free or at low cost to people who otherwise have no access to fresh produce. Two sources of information on gleaning are the Society of St. Andrew (www.endhunger.org/gleaning_network.htm) and the Mid-Atlantic Gleaning Network (midatlanticgleaningnetwork.org/index.html).
8. Improve the "health environment" you live in. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides numerous suggestions for changing eating habits, creating more areas for physical activity, and encouraging the opening of supermarkets in neighborhoods lacking them. Find details at www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/AdultObesity/WhatCanBeDone.html and www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/solutions.html.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.itvs.org, the website of the Independent Television Service (ITVS). For local information, check the website of your PBS station.



Resources

www.pbs.org/independentlens/soul-food-junkies – This is the website for the film.

americanfood.about.com/od/resourcesadditionalinfo/a/Soul-Food-History-And-Definition.htm – This website provides a description and brief history of soul food.

Obesity Information

www.obesity.org – The Obesity Society is the leading scientific society dedicated to the study of obesity. It is committed to encouraging research on the causes and treatment of obesity and to keeping the medical community and public informed of new advances.

Note: The American Obesity Association (AOA) joined the Obesity Society in 2006 but retains its separate legal status.

www.americanobesity.org – The American Obesity Treatment Association (AOTA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to education and prevention and the treatment of those affected by obesity. The AOTA was formed to build a nationwide coalition of those affected so that they could become active advocates and spread the important message of the need for obesity education.

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/obesity.html – MedlinePlus, a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine at the National Institutes of Health, provides comprehensive information on obesity and related issues.

www.cdc.gov/obesity/index.html – The CDC website contains a wide range of information on obesity: its causes and effects; ways to control it; and actions that can be taken by governments, communities, and individuals.

Food Justice / Food Deserts

ngfn.org – The National Good Food Network brings together people from all parts of the rapidly emerging good-food system – producers, buyers, distributors, advocates, investors, and funders – to create a community dedicated to scaling up good-food sourcing and access.

www.justfood.org/food-justice – Just Food is a nonprofit New York City-based organization that connects communities and local farms with the resources and support they need to make fresh, locally grown food accessible to all. Its programs and partnerships can serve as a model for other communities trying to improve the health and nutrition of their residents.

www.foodfirst.org/en/node/3185 – The Institute for Food and Development Policy, also known as Food First, is sometimes referred to as a “people’s think tank.” Their mission is to end the injustices that cause hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation throughout the world through research, analysis, advocacy, and education with communities and social movements for informed citizen engagement with the institutions and policies that control production, distribution, and access to food.

fairfoodfight.com – Fair Food Fight is an activist site containing behind-the-scenes information about big food companies and corporate agriculture, along with an interactive food desert map.

www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-desert-locator/go-to-the-locator.aspx – The USDA's Food Desert Locator presents a spatial overview of where food-desert census tracts are located and other data for community planning and research purposes.

www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2012/04/food-deserts-obesity-nutrition and www.motherjones.com/tom-philpott/2012/04/supermarkets-dont-solve-food-deserts –

These two articles challenge the notion that food deserts are responsible for obesity among low-income populations.

Healthy Eating Initiatives

www.fns.usda.gov/fns/nutrition.htm – The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service provides children and adults with nutrition education materials and information on how to improve their diets and their lives.

www.letsmove.gov – The website for First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign offers tips for parents, kids, and schools on healthy eating and healthy exercise.

www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/healthierschoolday/pdf/HHFKA_080112.pdf – This document provides a bullet-point summary of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, part of the Let's Move! campaign.

frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program – The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) is the leading national nonprofit organization working to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and undernutrition in the United States by addressing food security and poverty. The website provides information on the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and other federal food and nutrition programs.

School Gardens

schoolgardenwizard.org – Created by a partnership between the U.S. Botanic Garden and the Chicago Botanic Garden, the School Garden Wizard contains practical advice for establishing a school garden, along with teaching activities.

healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/resource-library/school-gardens – This section of the USDA's Healthy Meals Resource System (HMRS) website lists a wide variety of resources pertaining to school gardens, including how to get started, science lessons and other teaching activities, and examples of successful school gardens throughout the United States.



[C] COMMUNITY CINEMA DISCUSSION GUIDE

Credits

Karen Zill

Writer

Jocelyn Truitt

Copy Editor

ITVS Engagement & Education Team

Sara Brissenden-Smith

National Community Engagement Manager

Chi Do

Director of Engagement & Education

Renee Gasch

Engagement & Education Coordinator

Nallaly Jimenez

National Community Engagement Assistant

Annelise Wunderlich

Education Manager

Michael Silva

Senior Designer

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