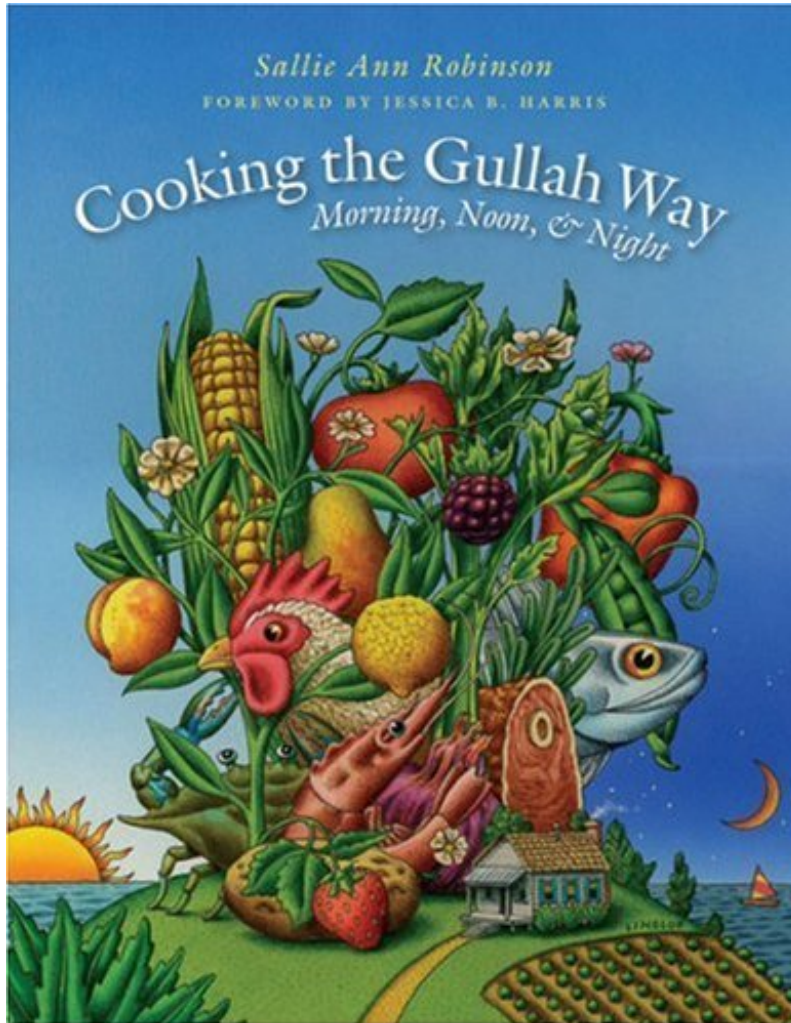


## Gullah Cooking

by Nan Bauer, *Ann Arbor News* Special Writer

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Sallie Ann Robinson doesn't shake hands. She hugs. I almost get one when I first meet her in the kitchen at Zingerman's Roadhouse, but she and chef Alex Young are up to their elbows in cornbread stuffing for thick, rosy pork chops. "I'll hug ya later, darlin'," she tells me.

Later is at the "Rhythm of Gullah Cooking" dinner hosted at the Roadhouse that night, one of an ongoing series of dinners held there about once a month, sometimes more often. One reasonable price (in this case, \$39) gets you four delectable courses centered around a particular theme. It takes place in a room where you can sit at your own table or share a larger table

with other participants. (For the current schedule, go to [zingermansroadhouse.com](http://zingermansroadhouse.com).)

What makes Robinson's food unique from other Southern food is her background; She's Gullah, and a native of Daufuskie Island, S.C. There is no Gullah Gullah Island, by the way, in case your kids watched the PBS series popular several years back. Instead, the Gullahs live on a group of small islands off the southern coast of South Carolina and the northern coast of Georgia. The area is the featured location in Pat Conroy's book, *The Water Is Wide*, about his year teaching there. Robinson's in the book, as "Ethel."

Gullah culture blends African, European and Native American influences, and has its own language ("Take two words and smash 'em together, and you got Gullah," says Robinson), art, and cooking style. A natural storyteller, Robinson introduces the meal with a highly personal history lesson. No electricity, no cars, and no plumbing meant a childhood where everyone worked pretty much from dawn to sunset. Additionally, without a single store on Daufuskie, everything, from the meat to the herbs to the fruit, was home-grown.

Robinson cherishes her heritage, and writes eloquently about it in her second cookbook, *Cooking the Gullah Way Morning, Noon and Night*: "Our soil was rich and natural, and we grew many fresh organic vegetables in our gardens. The woods were filled with adventure and a variety of wild game, berries, nuts, and herbs. We learned of both their goodness and danger. God gave us the stars, the moon, the sun, the tides, as well as our changing seasons... I have memories of many moments of joy, pain, spirituality and love, but, most of all, memories of blessing. It is the blessings that have guided me this far." Her two books aren't cookbooks so much as memoirs with recipes.

Those recipes are outstanding despite, or perhaps because of their simplicity, as my sister, Becky, and I find out when the first of four courses appears. The appetizer place has a Daufuskie-Way Deviled Egg, a roasted oyster, deviled crab cake and sweet potato fries. It's just enough to whet our appetites for the soups; I get 'Fuskie Seafood Gumbo, thick with okra and perfectly spiced, while Becky gets an incredibly rich lima bean soup. I can't place the flavor, which is smoky, sweet and deep. The next day I learn from Robinson that the soup only has four ingredients: lima beans, broth, cracklings (crispy pig skin), and pig tails, "but a turkey wing will work fine

if you don't eat pork." (Kroger sells smoked turkey wings that do indeed make an excellent stand-in for ham bones in traditional Southern dishes.)

Next up is the entree; Becky gets one of the pork chops that I saw being prepped that afternoon, and I go for Country-Fried Fish with Grits. They are surrounded by spicy Crab Rice, grilled corn on the cob, and the best yams I've ever eaten in my life, melt-in-your-mouth sweet yet with exactly the right texture. We nibble at our desserts, sweet potato pie and blackberry dumplings, both just sweet enough to leave us utterly satisfied and a little stuffed.

Mid-meal, Robinson makes the rounds to make sure everyone's happy with the food. It's kind of like having Michelangelo ask you if you like his color combinations. "This is the way we ate, every day," she tells me the next day over a cup of tea. "Nobody got fat; we were all working too hard. Mama would always cook like this, especially on Sundays. You never knew who would stop in, so you wanted to make sure there was plenty of food." Sadly, Daufuskie has modernized along with the rest of the world, and is now home to a golf course; many families who have lived there for generations now have to rent out their land in order to pay taxes on it. Robinson herself currently lives in Savannah. But through her books, she helps keep the culture alive. The unique organization of her book, where recipes are featured based on the time of day they were served, impresses that Gullah is an entire way of life, not just a way to cook.

The final section of the book is one you won't find in any trendy cookbook by some young whippersnapper fresh out of culinary school. Home Remedies offers a primer of island beliefs, as well as cures for warts, hiccups, high blood pressure, and, naturally enough given the location, choking on a fish bone. It's a book you can take from the kitchen to your bedroom nightstand without missing a beat. "No one ever left the table without a bellyful," Robinson tells me. Spend some time with her yourself through one of her books (the other is "Gullah Home Cooking the Daufuskie Way") and you'll feel marvelously satisfied in both your belly and your heart.

Country Candied Yams with Raisins From "Cooking the Gullah Way Morning, Noon, and Night" by Sallie Ann Robinson, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2007.

6-8 medium-sized sweet potatoes or yams, peeled and sliced 1/2 cup whole

milk, warmed 1 teaspoon vanilla 1 cup pineapple juice 2/3 cup sugar 1/3 stick butter, softened 2/3 teaspoon cinnamon 1/2 teaspoon allspice 2/3 cup raisins 1/2 lemon, thinly sliced

1. Put the sweet potatoes in a medium bowl and set aside. In a bowl, mix together the milk, vanilla extract, pineapple juice, and sugar. Pour this liquid mixture over the sweet potatoes. Add the butter, cinnamon, allspice, and raisins and stir to combine. Transfer to a baking pan and smooth out the top. Place the lemon slices over the sweet potato mixture. Bake in a preheated 375-degree oven about 45-60 minutes. Remove from the oven and enjoy hot or cold.