



# AFRO-VEGAN

FARM-FRESH  
AFRICAN, CARIBBEAN  
& SOUTHERN  
FLAVORS REMIXED

BRYANT TERRY





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bryant terry

# AFRO-VEGAN

**FARM-FRESH AFRICAN, CARIBBEAN  
& SOUTHERN FLAVORS REMIXED**

photography by Paige Green

  
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Berkeley



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# Permission to Speak

BY JESSICA B. HARRIS

I smiled a lot as I read through the pages of *Afro-Vegan*, for in many ways it is a trip down memory lane. Reading it, I was taken back to the early days of my own work when I began to discover the culinary connections of the African Atlantic world as travel editor of *Essence* magazine in the 1970s. I recalled the first tastes of dishes sampled on the African continent that reminded me of those eaten in my grandmothers' kitchens and the ingredients that I saw in markets, which were also in my mother's larder.

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As I paged through the manuscript, reading the text for what has become this beautiful book, it became a journey of recollections, much like the one that I indulge in monthly in my online radio show. Faces passed through my mind's eye. I recalled eating *tagine de légumes* in a *caïdal* tent in Marrakech, Morocco, and discovering that that country's *dada* was in many ways the equivalent of the South's mammys, a grand custodian of culinary traditions. I thought of my first Senegalese *thiebou dienn* and the connections it made to jollof rice, the Low Country's red rice and even southern Louisiana's jambalaya. I time-traveled to Brazil and the Caribbean and was transformed once again into the awkward young woman who spoke French and Spanish and Portuguese and liked to talk to old people in markets and taste what they had in their pots. My nostrils flared with the musty smell of old bookstores I'd visited and dusty archives where I'd researched. My mouth watered as I recalled the tastes of okra, black-eyed peas, and watermelon that were totems that marked the journey and all of the lessons learned. As I read Bryant Terry's proposed soundtracks, I heard the background music of my own journey: Maria Bethânia, Ornette Coleman, Zezé Motta, Celia Cruz, Gilberto Gil, Bembeya Jazz, Youssou N'Dour were amplified and complemented by other newer, younger voices. As I read the names of writers and artists mentioned, I mentally poured rum on the ground for the repose of those friends who are gathered at the table in the sky, and I raised a glass high in tribute to all those who are still creating the universe in which I am honored to live. In all of his work, Bryant Terry shows that he is certainly one of those by his commitment and dedication. In *Afro-Vegan*, he amply and ably demonstrates that he knows that food and culture are inseparable and that history is always there on the plate.

Bryant Terry named this "Permission to Speak," and I am delighted that he gave me the opportunity to do so. May his work continue to move us all closer, make us all healthier, and connect us all on the plate.



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# Introduction

Around the time I started writing this book, as a part of my research, I typed “African-American beans” into a search engine. I was expecting to view results about green beans, which often show up in traditional African-American cookery; red kidney beans, an emblematic legume of Louisiana Creole cuisine; and black-eyed peas, native to Africa and thought to bring prosperity throughout the year when eaten on New Year’s Day. Instead, the first search result was for *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*, a film about Vietnamese siblings raised by African-American parents. The second result was for “black (turtle) beans,” and the next? Also “black beans.” Not one of the ten results on that page was about the variety of beans and legumes historically grown and eaten by African-Americans. In many ways, that comically sad moment on the Internet symbolizes the invisibility and marginalization of food from the African diaspora that was a major impetus for writing this book.

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A large part of my mission in writing *Afro-Vegan* is to move Afro-diasporic food from the margins closer to the center of our collective culinary consciousness and to put its ingredients, cooking techniques, and flavor profiles into wider circulation. But there is more to the story than that. Because these riches have been hardearned, underacknowledged, and even exploited, using them wisely means coming to terms with the problematic narratives that surround them. There is a notable failure to (1) acknowledge that the modern world is indebted to ancient Africans for basic farming techniques and agricultural production methods; (2) appreciate the agricultural expertise (rice production), cooking techniques (roasting, deep-frying, steaming in leaves), and ingredients (black-eyed peas, okra, sesame, watermelon) that Africans contributed to new world cuisine; and (3) recognize the centrality of African-diasporic people in helping define the tastes, ingredients, and classic dishes of the original modern global fusion cuisine—Southern food. You see, it is not enough to celebrate the food of the African diaspora without appreciating the *people* who gave birth to this rich culinary heritage.



More than anyone else, people of African descent should honor, cultivate, and consume food from the African diaspora. Afro-diasporic foodways (that is, the shape and development of food traditions) carry our history, memories, and stories. They connect us to our ancestors and bring the past into the present day. They also have the potential to save our lives. As Afro-diasporic people have strayed from our traditional foods and adopted a Western diet, our health has suffered. Combined with the economic, physical, and geographic barriers that make it difficult to access *any* type of fresh food in many communities, the health of these populations across the globe has been devastated. In the United States, where I live and work, African-Americans suffer from some of the highest rates of preventable diet-related illnesses, such as heart disease, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes. Many factors contribute to the increase in chronic illnesses affecting African-American communities, and I would argue that the disconnect from our historical foods is a significant contributing force. While we continue to work for food justice—the basic human right to fresh, safe, affordable, and culturally appropriate food in all communities—we must also work to reclaim our ancestral knowledge and embrace our culinary roots.

Culturally appropriate food is an important criterion for determining what is “healthy,” and people of African descent need not look any further than our own historical foodways for better well-being. It is vital that we incorporate African and Afro-diasporic vegetables, grains, legumes, fruits, nuts, seeds, and cooking techniques into our kitchens. The nonprofit group Oldways: Health Through Heritage took a major step in illuminating the importance of eating African ancestral foods when they created the African Heritage Diet Food Pyramid in 2011. This revision of the antiquated, one-size-fits-all food guide pyramid (which was finally abandoned by the United States Department of Agriculture in 2011 and replaced with the My Plate food guide) encourages us to consume lots of culturally appropriate leafy green vegetables, tubers, fruits, whole grains, legumes, seeds, and nuts. While this new guide is a great start, we still have much work to do.

*Afro-Vegan* is another tool for addressing the public health crisis among African-Americans that is directly related to what we eat. More and more, mainstream medical institutions have been acknowledging that the overconsumption of animal protein puts people at increased risk of preventable diet-related illnesses, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension, and an increasing number of medical professionals are endorsing plant-centered diets for optimal health. This book continues in the tradition of my previous work by keeping one eye on contemporary health concerns while



presenting food that honors the flavors, ingredients, and heritage of the African diaspora. *Afro-Vegan* will further empower people to choose wholesome foods to improve the physical and spiritual health of their families and communities.



**“The artist has to be something like a whale swimming with his mouth wide open, absorbing everything until he has what he really needs.”**

**—Romare Bearden**

African-American visual artist Romare Bearden once said, “The artist has to be something like a whale swimming with his mouth wide open, absorbing everything until he has what he really needs.” In many ways, that quote has guided me through the process of writing this book over the past year. It should go without saying that what people of African descent have eaten for breakfast, lunch, and dinner since antiquity is complex and diverse. For this book, I devised a means of presenting the breadth and richness of Afro-diasporic food by creating culinary combinations inspired by home-cooked meals, cookbooks, restaurants, websites, narrative histories, scholarly monographs, and travel. While there is some emphasis on foods that are indigenous to Africa, ultimately, this book is about the fusion of food that resulted from food-crop exchanges between Africa and other parts of the globe that go back thousands of years.

Bearden’s stunning collages are a major inspiration for *Afro-Vegan*. Just as he fused paint, magazine clippings, old paper, and fabric to visually reflect the African-American experience, I have blended vegetables, grains, legumes, fruits, nuts, and seeds to delve into the food history of the African diaspora. Imagine if you removed the animal products from African, Caribbean, Southern, and other Afro-influenced cuisines, then meticulously cut, pasted, and remixed the food to produce recipes with farm-fresh ingredients as their heart and soul: that is *Afro-Vegan*.

In these pages, you will find imaginative vegan recipes that highlight the interconnection, change, and

growth of Afro-diasporic food over centuries. Quench your thirst with tart, sweet, and floral [Roselle-Rooibos Drink](#), which combines tea made from Rooibos (the needlelike leaves of the South African Rooibos bush) with tangy-sour roselle leaves, which are used throughout West Africa and the Caribbean. Snack on [Blackened Okra](#), which brings the *kingombo* (the Mbundu word for okra) of Central Africa across the ocean to Louisiana for a coating of piquant, smoky spices. Fill up with [Savor Grits with Slow-Cooked Collard Greens](#), which combines the American South and East Africa in one warm bowl, topped with a dollop of [Spicy Mustard Greens](#), a Southern-inspired version of harissa, the hot-pepper paste popular throughout North Africa. Satisfy your sweet tooth with [Cocoa-Spice Cake with Crystallized Ginger and Coconut-Chocolate Ganache](#) while enjoying flavors of the Caribbean—nutmeg, cayenne, coconut, avocado, rum, and ginger—with every bite. For each recipe, I've highlighted a few of the prominent ingredients to give you a sense of the dish's flavor profile.

Delicious as they are, these dishes do not stand alone—they are supported by culture, tradition, and memories. In fact, even the African Heritage Diet Food Pyramid emphasizes gardening, spending time with family, and building community around the table. When I reflect on my childhood (I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and spent summers in rural Mississippi) during the late 1970s and 1980s, I think fondly of gardening with my family, growing collards, mustards, turnips, butter beans, black-eyed peas, and green beans. I treasure my grandparents' home-cooked meals and preserves: pickled pears, peaches, green tomatoes, carrots, green beans, apples, figs, sauerkraut, blackberry jam, and chow-chow. And I maintain the core values that came from harvesting, sharing, preparing, and cooking meals with community. With all that in mind, I invited Michael W. Twitty, a renowned culinary historian of African-American foodways, to enrich my recipes with some gems about garden-to-table cooking. I also offer suggestions—with some help from my friends—for music, books, and films that complement the Afro-vegan eating experience.

I see this book naming and solidifying a new genre of cooking and eating, if you will—extending farm-fresh, compassionate food to include foods of the African diaspora. When you consider that for thousands of years traditional West and Central African diets were predominantly vegetarian—centered around staples like millet, rice, field peas, okra, hot peppers, and yams—and that many precolonial African diets heavily emphasized plant-based foods, a vegan cookbook celebrating the food of the African diaspora is perfectly fitting.

To be clear, *Afro-Vegan* is for everyone. I love feeding my diverse circle of family, friends, and fans vibrant and yummy home-cooked food that reflects my values around health, sustainability, compassion, and community building. This book's guiding philosophy is simple: lovingly prepared food with fresh, high-quality ingredients will always make a wholesome and delicious meal. Although broad in geographic scope, this book is in no way comprehensive. Rather, these pages are a collection of more than one hundred fun and delicious recipes designed to nourish you—but also to inspire you. This is just a start. My hope is that you continue along this path to take the freshest, tastiest ingredients that you can find and create your own Afro-vegan dishes.

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## A FEW TIPS FOR ENJOYING THIS BOOK

Use good-quality sea salt, freshly ground white and black pepper, whole spices that you toast and grind as needed, fresh herbs, and seasonal produce (when possible) to get the most out of these recipes. This book honors the tradition of from-scratch cooking of our ancestors, and I invite you to



make time to take your time. That said, I do understand if you need to use store-bought almond milk or vegetable stock in place of homemade.

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Also, I firmly believe that recipes should be used as guides, and that spontaneity is one of the true pleasures of cooking. However, I ask that you make the recipes as written at least once before modifying them, so you get a sense of my desired flavors, textures, and spirit of the dish.





# SPICES. SAUCES. HEAT.

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING that fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables provide the foundation for delicious, nourishing dishes. Oftentimes when I am cooking with food from a local farm, community plot, or my home garden, I like to keep it simple and let the natural flavors of the food shine through—olive oil, salt, fresh herbs, and pepper are all I need. However, when I really want to deepen and expand flavors, I use whole spices that I toast and pulverize in my mortar right before cooking.

The unique combination of herbs and spices in this chapter will take you on a culinary journey that will connect you with cuisines and cultures around the globe. Because cooking practices throughout Africa have traditionally been passed down orally, the ingredients, rituals around making food, and special ways of cooking can be as diverse as the local cultures across the continent. With this in mind, I offer my singular versions of spice blends, such as berbere, Jamaican curry powder, and za'atar, and I re-create popular sauces, such as North African chermoula and Memphis barbecue sauce. I also offer recipes for hot sauces that will refine the flavors of a dish and bring all of its elements together.

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# BERBERE

PAPRIKA, FENUGREEK, RED PEPPER FLAKES, CAYENNE, CHIPOTLE CHILE, BLACK PEPPER

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**SOUNDTRACK** “Hedetch Alu” by Mulugèn Mèllèssè from *Éthiopiennes, Volume 10: Ethiopian Blues and Ballads*

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BERBERE, a key spice blend in Ethiopian and Eritrean cooking, is used to season everything from vegetables to stews. As with most mixtures of spices, berbere has many variations and recipes depending on whom you ask, but its key ingredients include paprika, fenugreek, and dried chiles. The word “berbere” literally means “hot” in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, so there should be palpable heat in your mixture. But you can always tone down the amount of chile peppers to suit your needs. Although I initially created this particular blend for the purpose of seasoning [Berbere-Spiced Black-Eyed Pea Sliders](#), I find myself using it to flavor stews, coat baked tofu, and punch up sautéed vegetable dishes. Sometimes I keep a tiny bowl of it near my sea salt and pepper grinder and use it as an all-purpose condiment. Two words: berbere popcorn. (Pictured [here](#).)

**YIELD** about 1/3 cup

- 2 cardamom pods
- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 1/2 tablespoon coarse sea salt
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin seeds, [toasted](#)
- 1/2 teaspoon fenugreek seeds, [toasted](#)
- 1/2 teaspoon allspice berries, [toasted](#)
- 1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/2 whole cloves
- 1/2 dried chipotle chile, stemmed, and broken into pieces
- 1/2 teaspoon black peppercorns
- 1/2 teaspoon coriander seeds, [toasted](#)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Put the cardamom pods in a medium, dry skillet over medium-low heat. Toast until fragrant, shaking the pan occasionally to prevent burning, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer the pods to a small plate, and set aside.

to cool. Once cooled, crack open the cardamom pods with your fingers and add their seeds to a mortar or spice grinder, then add the paprika, salt, cumin seeds, fenugreek seeds, allspice berries, red pepper flakes, thyme, cloves, chipotle, peppercorns, coriander seeds, ginger, nutmeg, and cayenne. Grind into fine powder. Transfer to a jar and seal tightly. Stored at room temperature, it will keep for 6 months.

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# BLACKENED SEASONING

PAPRIKA, CUMIN, CORIANDER, BLACK PEPPER, WHITE PEPPER, GARLIC POWDER,  
ONION POWDER

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**SOUNDTRACK** “Let Your Yeah Be Yeah” by Buckwheat Zydeco from *Lay Your Burden Down*

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BLACKENING is a Cajun cooking technique (that spread throughout the South) in which food is coated with medley of spices and cooked over very high heat, usually in a cast-iron skillet. This is a recipe for a spice mixture that I typically use for such purposes. The piquant, smoky blend adds a mouthwatering layer of flavor to blank-canvas foods like tofu, potatoes, and cauliflower, as in [Blackened Cauliflower with Plum Tomato Sauce](#). If you like fiery heat, add more cayenne to your blend. (Pictured [here](#).)

**YIELD** about 1/3 cup

2 tablespoons paprika  
1 tablespoon cumin seeds, toasted (see [sidebar](#))  
1 tablespoon coriander seeds, toasted (see [sidebar](#))  
1/2 teaspoon black peppercorns  
1/2 teaspoon coarse sea salt  
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder  
1/2 teaspoon white peppercorns  
1/2 teaspoon onion powder  
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme  
1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste

Combine the paprika, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, black peppercorns, salt, garlic powder, white peppercorns, onion powder, thyme, and cayenne in a mortar or spice grinder and grind into a fine powder. Transfer to a jar and seal tightly. Stored at room temperature, it will keep for 6 months.

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## TOASTING WHOLE SPICES

When working with farm- and garden-fresh produce, sometimes it's best to do as little as possible to the foods in order to let their natural flavors shine—lightly cooking and seasoning with a little salt and pepper often does the trick. But if you desire to add more complex flavors to your dishes, seek out commonly used spices like cayenne pepper,



cinnamon, cumin, nutmeg, paprika, and red pepper flakes. If possible, use organic spices and look for them in the bulk section. They will be cheaper and this allows you to buy small amounts at a time, which ensures that you will use them up before they lose their intensity.

Although it might be convenient to use preground spices, toasting whole spices and grinding them right before using them will give you bolder and more complex flavors. The easiest way to toast spices is to heat a dry skillet over medium heat and add the spices after the pan is warm. Shake the pan to move the spices around and toast until they smell nutty and fragrant, usually 2 to 5 minutes. If toasting several spices for a recipe, do them in separate batches, since cooking times vary. Once the spices have cooled, pulverize them in a mortar or grind them in a spice grinder and use right away or store in an airtight container for up to 6 months.



*Clockwise, from top left: Basil Salt, Jamaican Curry Powder, Berbere*



*Clockwise, from top right: Za'atar, Creole Spice Blend, Blackened Seasoning*

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# CREOLE SPICE BLEND

GARLIC POWDER, PAPRIKA, ONION POWDER, CHILI POWDER, RED PEPPER FLAKES

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**SOUNDTRACK** “Creole” by Charlie Hunter Quartet (featuring Mos Def) from *Songs from the Analog Playground*

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A COMBINATION OF *African, Caribbean, and Native American flavors, this spice blend serves as a metaphor for the melding of cultures during the seventeenth century when the French and Spanish occupied New Orleans. It pops up in classic dishes like étouffée, gumbo, and boiled shrimp and can also be used to season grains, vegetables, and stews. I use it to enhance the flavor of my [Stewed Tomatoes and Black-Eyed Peas with Cornbread Croutons](#). (Pictured [here](#).)*

**YIELD** about 1/3 cup

2 tablespoons garlic powder  
2 tablespoons paprika  
1/2 teaspoons coarse sea salt  
1/2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper  
1/2 teaspoons onion powder  
1/2 teaspoons chili powder  
1/2 teaspoons red pepper flakes  
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme  
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano  
1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Combine all the ingredients in a mortar or spice grinder and grind into a fine powder. Transfer to a jar and seal tightly. Stored at room temperature, it will keep for 6 months.

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## RECIPES FOR THE REVOLUTION

*Afro-Vegan* is an extension of the food activism that I began in 2001. Since then, my guiding mantra has been, “start with the visceral, move to the cerebral, and end at the political.” My cookbooks aim to challenge the way we compartmentalize the fight for a healthier food system. I see enjoying home-cooked meals with families and friends as a way to nourish

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