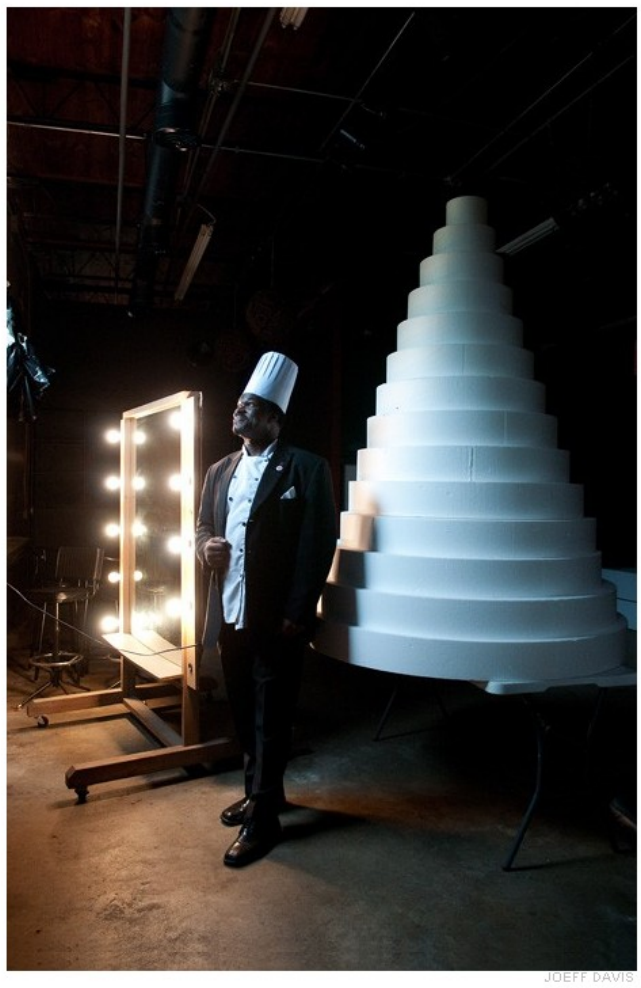
Soul-Saving Mission

One extra spicy chef's divinely inspired recipe to make Atlanta the soul food capital of the world

by **Rodney Carmichael**

Santa Claus himself couldn't have made a merrier entrance.

It was last Christmas Eve and I was sitting alone in a Subway sandwich shop waiting to meet Chef Kenneth Willhoite for the first time. The founder and president of the World Soul Food Museum had given me a call at work a couple of days earlier to heap thanks upon me for a story I'd written about *Soul Food* — the Goodie Mob album not the cuisine. But that was a minor distinction, Willhoite told me. We needed to meet, he said, to discuss my being an honoree at his next annual awards banquet.



JOEFF DAVIS

I was somewhat flattered and more than a little skeptical, but mostly curious to meet this guy lavishing praise and down-home charm on me over the phone. He sounded like a rare bird, the kind nearing extinction in Atlanta.

So there I was the night before Christmas, sitting in a sandwich shop on Edgewood Avenue where he suggested we meet, when in walks Willhoite, a tall smiling black man wearing a double-breasted suit and a nine-inch chef's hat that made him even taller. He came bearing gifts. In one hand he carried a five-foot trophy and in the other a boxed-up Patti LaBelle Sweet Potato Pie. The pies, a hot commodity at the time, were sold-out at Walmart. When he learned over the phone that I'd yet to taste it, he promised to bring one from his freezer. I'd tried protesting nicely, but he'd refused me like any good Southerner. And now here he was standing in front of me with the frozen pie, the five-foot-tall trophy, and the five-foot-wide grin.

For the next two hours, he pitched his elaborate plan to make Atlanta the soul food capital of the world. He pulled out pamphlets, press clippings, and pictures of him posed beside all kinds of black celebrities, always with him wearing the same smile and the same paper chef's hat. He had an obvious gift for turning strangers into allies. Before long, he'd taken out his cellphone and ribbed me into posing for pictures, too, with the life-size trophy in my right hand and the Patti pie in my left. I even smiled. But I'd already made up my mind to decline his trophy. This was a guy whose story had to be told.

Willhoite, 56, likes to do things big. A traveling caterer and chef, he's prepared food for big events ranging from the 1995 Million Man March to the 2016 Masters Golf Tournament. By day, he chefs at Prime Meridian, the Omni Hotel restaurant at CNN Center with the big Downtown view. Each year, he gives big-name honorees one of his huge trophies on the floor of the Georgia State Capitol. He's cooked for big-timers from Gladys Knight to Jesse Jackson. Last year, his museum broke ground on a little garden in East Point with a name so big it reads like a run-on sentence. It's called the World Soul Food Museum Michelle Obama White House Community Garden. The name of his former culinary association is pretty big, too: The National African-American Culinary Arts and Hospitality Association. That's NAACAHA for short.

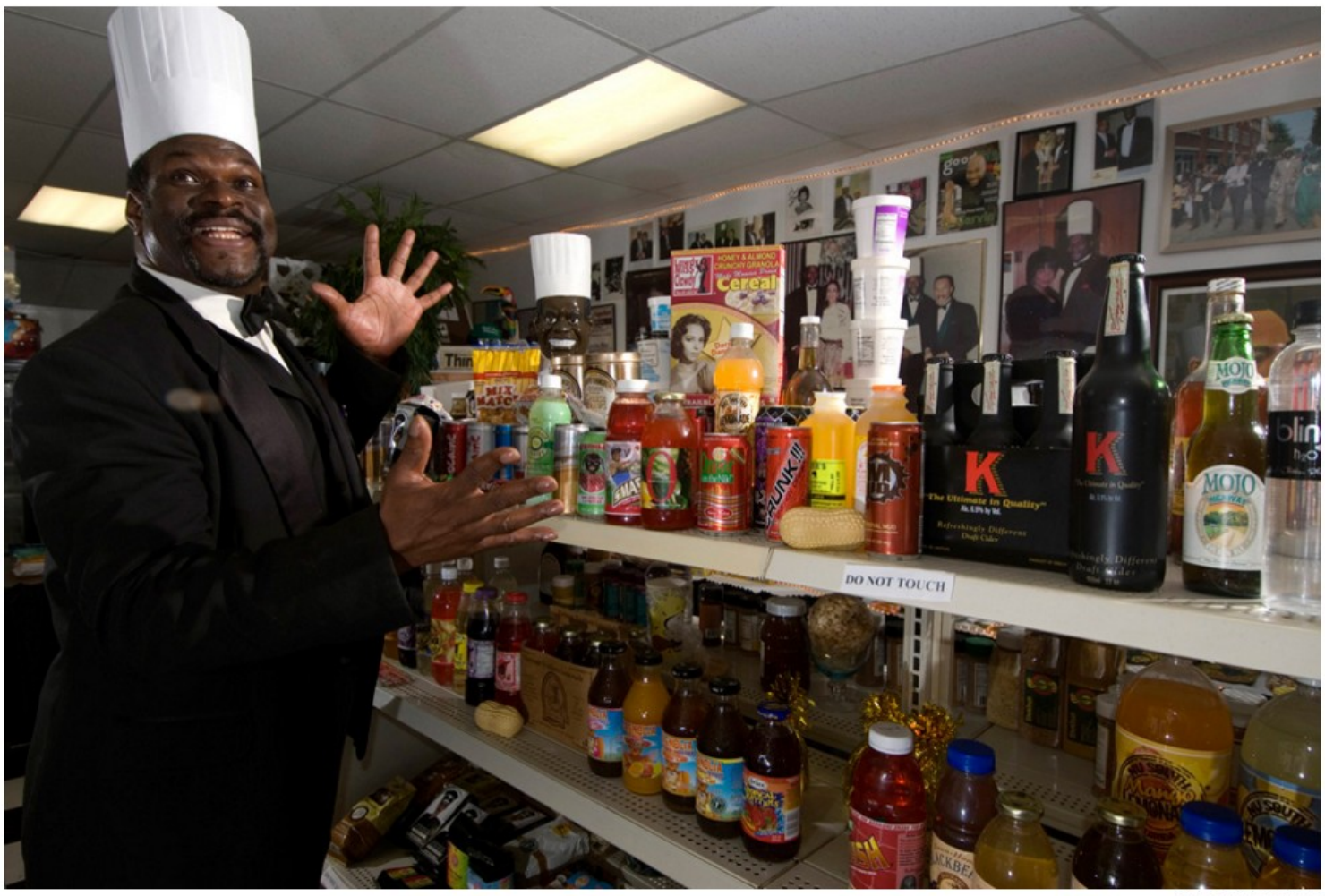
He's even received recognition from Gov. Nathan Deal for the Soul Food Museum's "colorful collection of nostalgic Soul Food history."

Yet none of that compares to his outsize vision for the future home of the World Soul Food Museum. It encompasses four centuries of contributions by African-Americans to culinary arts, hospitality, and agriculture. To complete the museum, he wants to raise $100 million over the next three years. That's nearly twice the cost of Downtown's National Center for Civil and Human Rights.

But there's no comparison in Willhoite's eyes.

"Its [focus is] just civil rights. So that's understandable. We're culinary arts, hospitality, and agriculture. We're three entities," he says. "That's vast, that's humongous, and a hundred million dollars is not enough, truly, to do what we want to do."

To understand the significance of Willhoite's leap of faith, it helps to know the meager beginnings of his Soul Food Museum. After founding and opening it in the annex of Big Bethel AME Church 16 years ago, he expanded the museum to a small Auburn Avenue storefront. His 45-minute tours showcased a hodge-podge of hundreds of artifacts, photos of Willhoite with VIPs, and culinary creations made by or marketed to African-Americans. Such classic brands as Famous Amos Cookies shared shelf space with newer items like Lawdy Miss Clawdy's Sweet Potato Hoe Cake Cinnamon Flat Bread. Major celeb-endorsed offerings, such as Teavana's line of Oprah Chai Tea, earned the same praise as Rap Snacks, the convenience-store brand of chips acquired by Master P's son Romeo Miller in 2007.



JAMES CAMP/*CL* FILE

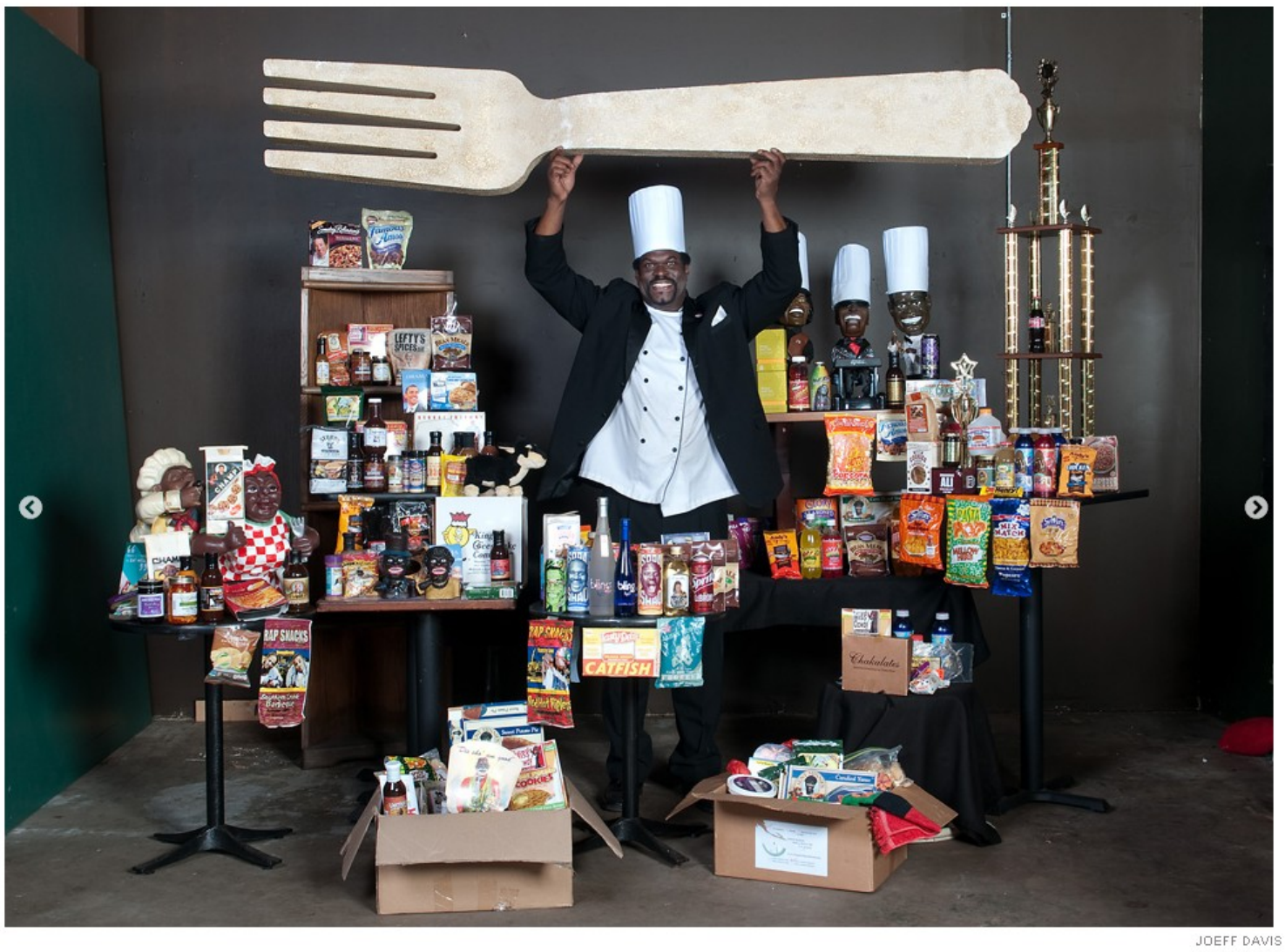
MODEST BEGINNINGS: Chef Kenneth Willhoite shows off the goods at his original Soul Food Museum storefront on Auburn Avenue in 2008.

Forced to close the museum when the recession hit, Willhoite packed up his goods and placed them in storage, aside from mobile tours. Now he's cooked up an ambitious plan to take his soul food exhibition from storefront curiosity to institutional legitimacy.

A modern-day soul food missionary, he wants to honor it with the respect he feels it deserves as the bedrock of the South's culinary traditions. Yet his mission may face a similar battle for respect. His credibility's been publicly questioned in the past and some supporters of his current campaign suggest he's in over his head. On its face, Willhoite's passion project seems to share the same struggle as his beloved soul food: It's slightly overcooked, wholly undervalued, and unapologetically black.

Yet Willhoite remains upbeat, seasoned with country charisma and dogged persistence that's hard to resist. "I haven't had a bad day in 16 years," he says with a smile. "I don't have bad days, because when I moved here to Atlanta to walk in the footsteps of Dr. King I decided at that time that I was not going to have anymore bad days. And I haven't."

He might be given to hyperbole, but Willhoite's faith leaves zero room for doubt. Anyway, who wants to read a story about how realistic a goal one man has set for himself? This is a testament to the power of a dreamer striving to celebrate a history bigger than his own.



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HOMECOMING: Chef Willhoite's Soul Food Museum memorabilia stays in storage when not on tour. But the permanent home he envisions will be "Atlanta's next great multicultural tourist attraction," he says.

RAISED IN SMALL-TOWN OKLAHOMA, Willhoite's first cooking lessons came from his grandmother. He still remembers making his first dish around age 6 or 7. It was a fried egg sandwich cooked in a black cast iron skillet. "I'll never forget it cause it sho did taste good," he says with a laugh. "I was so proud." He was a sucker for Thanksgiving, too. "The aroma that was in the kitchen on Thanksgiving morning, it stimulated my brain cells," Willhoite says, recalling how the smell of cornbread stuffing lingered all day. He wanted to learn how to make that kind of magic.

At an early age, he began fashioning his own universe. "I had a good support system growing up, but I created my own world so I could be happy," he says, calling himself a natural born leader. "I didn't have to follow anybody else. I would create and people would follow me."

Food wound up being his calling. Confirmation came at age 16 when he got the urge to have a little talk with God one morning at 3 a.m. "I didn't want nobody to hear what I had to say. And if I wanted to cry or if I wanted to jump up and down for joy, I didn't want nobody to see me," he says. So he went to the football field across the street from his home, stood smack-dab in the middle of it, and threw his hands up to God.

"I said, 'God, I don't want to see you. But I do want to hear you. And I want to know what my destiny, my purpose, and my mission is — those three things — on Earth. I didn't have to pop out of my momma's belly, but I did and I'm here. So what am I supposed to do?' That was my question to God at 3 o'clock in the morning."

It took Moses 40 days and 40 nights of prayer and fasting on top of Mount Sinai before the Lord gave him the Ten Commandments. Willhoite's answer came with the quickness.

"God said two things to me. He said, 'My son, you are to document a people's history.' [Then] He said, 'You are to cook *gooood* food and witness for me through the food when given the opportunity. I stood there and cried because my prayer was answered. I no longer had to worry about what I was supposed to do. I knew."

Willhoite eventually left home, beginning what would become a 20-year soul food sojourn. His travels took him to cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, and D.C., where he received culinary training while working at Marriott's corporate headquarters in nearby Bethesda, Maryland. In each city, he'd find work in restaurants and kitchens and soak up the local flavor. The longer he lived among locals, the more he grew to understand why they eat what they eat — whether it was deep dish pizza in Chicago or crawfish in New Orleans. Each city had "their own swing on food," he says.

His résumé expanded to include celebrity clientele. Radio One founder Cathy Hughes became an early client. He'd cater meals for her and many of the high-profile visitors to her first radio station, D.C.'s WOL-AM. But the man whose footsteps he truly sought to walk in were those of Martin Luther King Jr. "So I loaded up my van like the Beverly Hillbillies and came to Atlanta, Georgia, because if there was to be a World Soul Food museum there is no better place on planet Earth than the gateway to the South."

WHEN MAYOR KASIM REED speaks of making Atlanta a world-class city, a World Soul Food Museum is likely the last thing that comes to mind. Downtown is already home to a growing cadre of tourist attractions. Willhoite envisions adding a 100,000-square-foot World Soul Food Museum that includes 400 years of black contributions to the culinary arts, hospitality, and agriculture and celebrates foods of cultures from around the world. He imagines a layout that appeals to all five senses, with tasting stations throughout. The museum's mission would include collecting, preserving, and promoting the rich cultural heritage of ethnic cuisines, health and wellness initiatives, and job creation. He'd love to have a marquis on Peachtree Street, ideally near Five Points.

COURTESY CHEF KENNETH WILLHOITE

RUBBING SHOULDERS: Willhoite poses with Mayor Kasim Reed (left) and honors Gov. Nathan Deal at his annual Soul Food Museum Awards of Excellence at the state Capitol.

The idea of a major museum dedicated to the comprehensive history of soul food sounds plenty plausible to Adrian Miller. The "soul food scholar," as he calls himself on social media, also went on a nationwide sojourn to chronicle the culture's culinary roots for his 2013 book *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine One Plate at a Time*. A board member of the Southern Foodways Alliance and former special assistant to President Bill Clinton, Miller sought "to give soul food a very public makeover," he writes in the first chapter of his book.

Despite the renaissance Southern cuisine has enjoyed in recent years, the love for soul food is lacking. Much of that has to do with stigmas as old as the cuisine itself. "I think that people are hating on soul food far too much and it's not fair," Miller says. Instead, he sees it as the South's "celebration food."

Part of soul food's love/hate paradox is a reflection of the legacy from whence it came. There's no way to talk about the rich heritage of collard greens and candied yams without talking about the painful history of transatlantic slavery. In *Soul Food*, Miller goes deep and wide on the hybridization that took place as the culinary traditions of Native Americans, Europeans, and West Africans got thrown in the New World's melting pot. From the earliest documented arrival of enslaved Africans to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, Miller notes, the proverbial stirring of the pot began and it hasn't stopped.

Still, it took a few hundred years for soul food to enter the mainstream lexicon. According to Miller, it started in the 1940s, when disgruntled black jazz musicians began to grow tired of white jazz musicians getting the best paying gigs and notoriety. "So they said we're gonna take this musical genre that we created to a place that we don't think white musicians can mimic," Miller says. "And that was the sound of the black church and the rural South. That sound, that gospel sound, they started calling 'soul' and 'funky.'"

With the rise of the Black Power Movement in the '60s, "soul" got applied to everything from hairstyles to clothing to express cultural pride, hence soul *food*. Despite the cultural comingling of American culinary history, "soul became black and Southern became white," Miller says. "And we're living with the legacy of that today."

The distinction is especially evident on the palate. "Soul food tends to be spicier, more intense [in] flavor, and [includes] more usage of the variety meats and funky ingredients," Miller says. Even with the rise in whole animal cooking, "there's just some stuff that you're gonna find on a soul food menu that you won't find on a Southern menu," he says. "Like chitlins. That's probably the clearest example."

In his book, Miller focuses on certain dishes that typify a classic meal: fried chicken, catfish, chitlins; greens, black-eyed peas, mac 'n' cheese, sweet potatoes; cornbread and common condiments (hot sauce, anyone?), and desserts such as peach cobbler and sweet potato pie.

Willhoite's definition, on the other hand, is almost profound in its simplicity.

"Soul food is everyday common food that's prepared by a human utilizing their heart, mind, and soul to show one love," he says. "That's my definition. Love is so important. That's what's missing."

Though they differ in word, their definitions share the same spirit. Their individual prognoses for soul food's future are equally dire as well.

The decline in soul food's popularity is layered. For one, Miller cites the shame attached to cooking as a reason for the decline in family-owned soul food restaurants because, for so long, African-Americans "were forced to" work in kitchens. The growing visibility of celebrity chefs is challenging that perception, he says, but there are also plenty of black chefs who've made a point to distance themselves from the cuisine to keep from being pigeonholed. That speaks directly to the long-held stigma shared by those who associate soul food with "slave food," as Miller puts it.

The racial politics cut deep. Consider how derogatory images were used both to mass market food products and belittle black Americans. That ugly history is also part of soul food's story, says Willhoite.

> In an age where the American diet is blamed for obesity and unparalleled health risks, soul food's popularity has suffered due to its heavy reliance on pork, overcooked vegetables, and rich desserts. But Willhoite argues that we shouldn't "throw the baby out with the bathwater," even as healthier cooking options gain acceptance.
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> Meanwhile, African-American foodways may be crossing over without their African-American creators. Miller notes the popularity of kale, collards, or the more recent exporting of the Nashville Hot Chicken craze. Now offered by the likes of KFC, its point of origin, Prince's Hot Chicken Shack, gets less and less recognition.
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> Willhoite sees it all as part of an insidious plot to strip a people of their cultural cachet and self-reliance with the intent to make us dependent on fast food.
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> "You don't tell a whole people that all of their food is bad for them. And that's what they were doing," he says. "They turned us against our food as well as our music. Now you go to the family reunion, sit around and look at each other 'cause the music is so bad you don't want to hear it. And if you listen to what they say about the food, you wouldn't want to eat it. Lord have mercy, we've been bamboozled and don't even know it."

Conspiracy theories may be as elemental to African-American cuisine as collard greens and black-eyed peas on New Year's Day. But the latest trend, healthy and vegan soul food, could be the cure for what ails tradition. While Willhoite wants to preserve the classic means of preparation, he also advocates for the growing trend of healthy and vegan soul food.

In some ways, soul food's status serves as a metaphor for the transitional state of black America. "If you think about it, almost every aspect of black culture has gone global except our food," Miller says. "Even when you go to black museums that expose all various kinds of black lives and culture, food is a very minimal part."

A growing number of family-owned restaurants face serious jeopardy, says Miller, who counts such structural reasons as lack of access to capital and increased gentrification for the closure of legendary soul food spots in major cities across America over the last five years. "Unfortunately, you don't find many soul food restaurants that thrive outside of a traditional black neighborhood or an urban center where there are a lot of African-Americans who work in that area," he says.

Willhoite views that as part of the World Soul Food Museum's larger mission. But positioning himself as soul food's savior hasn't come without its challenges.

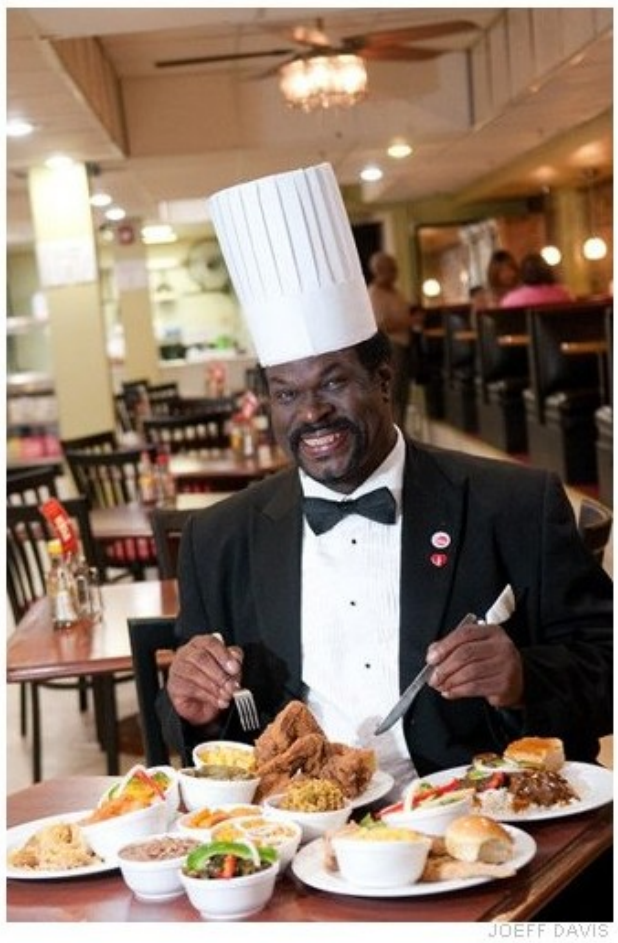
DESPITE HIS LARGER-THAN-LIFE PERSONA, Willhoite believes his purpose outweighs him. It's about celebrating the story of a people, he says. And he's taken it upon himself to make it a priority by initiating a capital campaign to raise funds for the museum.

"Soul food needed a face, a leader, someone to be proud of it, to take it forward as it evolved," he says. "And I'm the one that's doing that. So when I step in a room, I'm dressed for business and I mean business."

While it may be grassroots, it's more than a vanity project. Willhoite has surrounded himself with supporters and board members over the years. But his credibility as a museum curator has also been questioned in past media write-ups. A 2008 *New York Times* article challenged the accuracy of some of his claims regarding the African-American origins of certain items at the museum.

He dismisses it as typical media bias. Perhaps he has a point. What would a soul food museum be without a little folklore on the menu? Of course, the real irony is few of the media outlets he's been featured in would even regard soul food as cuisine worthy of serious critique — unless it's being served at an upscale restaurant.

"It's really been a personal and grassroots museum, which is beautiful," Willhoite says, "by the people, for the people. And that's what you want, a grassroots museum, cause it's soul food."



JOEFF DAVIS

SUPER SOUL: Chef Kenneth Willhoite with half the menu at one of his favorite soul food restaurants in the city, Big Daddy's Southern Cuisine on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive S.W.

But his effort to take it to the next level is already requiring him to stretch.

"I've had to wear many hats, from marketing, from cooking and proving that I am a chef, that I do know what I'm talking about. 'Cause you have to live what you preach. People watch you."

Financing is still the biggest hurdle. Even in preparing to launch his capital campaign, he's been advised by close supporters to lower his $100 million goal.

"You have to start out with a number that is realistic," George Andrews says. As the founder of the former Capitol City Bank in Atlanta, Andrews knows something about raising capital. He had to raise $6 million in 1992 to start the black-owned bank. After more than 20 years in business, Capitol City failed last year.

> Yet Andrews remains fully committed to helping the World Soul Food Museum come to fruition.
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> "It can be accomplished and it will be accomplished provided [Willhoite] surrounds himself with individuals that have the capacity to deliver," he says, naming people such as Reed, Deal, Congressman John Lewis, and corporate leaders including Coca-Cola, Georgia-Pacific, and SunTrust. "If you truly want to have a successful event [and museum] then corporate Atlanta has to step to the plate and the minority business community of Atlanta has to step to the plate."
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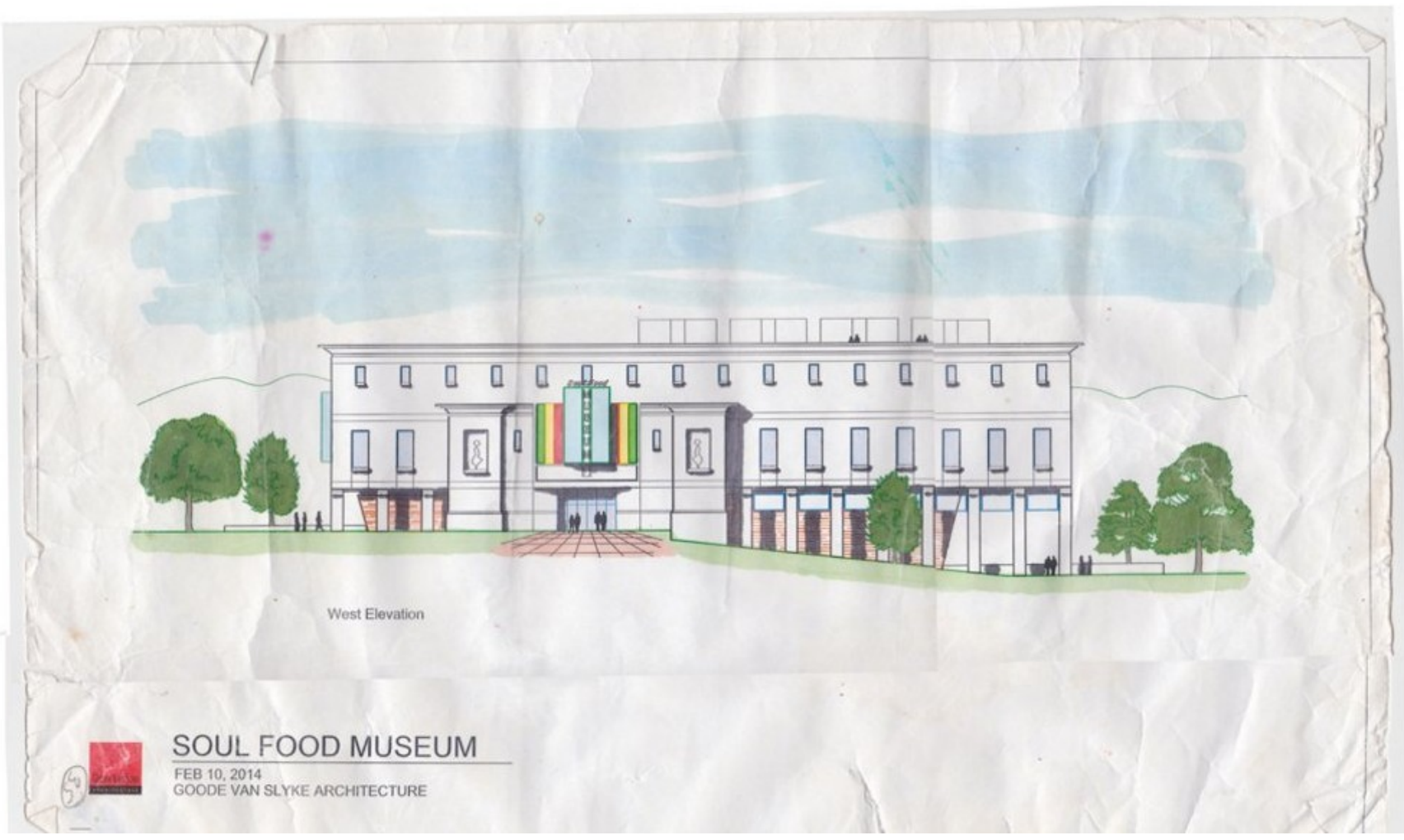
> Andrews' affiliation with the Soul Food Museum started several years ago when Willhoite invited him to deliver the keynote address for his annual awards ceremony. Though he hadn't heard of the chef or his museum before, he



GRAND SCALE: An architectural rendering conveys the scope of Willhoite's $100 million vision for the World Soul Food Museum.

Howard Cooper, a retired Morris Brown College hospitality administration instructor, became invested in the Soul Food Museum after Willhoite came to campus more than a decade ago and introduced himself.

"He impressed me," Cooper says, recalling his reaction to the idea of "someone chronologically going back and looking at the history of soul food. I thought that it was something I would enjoy working with him on."

Though Cooper is no longer an official board member, he's still a strong supporter of Willhoite. Cooper, a chef who received an achievement award from the American Culinary Federation in March, believes Willhoite's window of opportunity is wide open now if he's willing to scale his plan back.

"If he can get somebody to help him get the Soul Food Museum idea out to the public before all the black schools go, before the black president goes, he could then have his foot in the door," Cooper says. "Now is the time. If he misses this trying to get it all over the world — this is his best chance. And I'll be there to vouch for him."

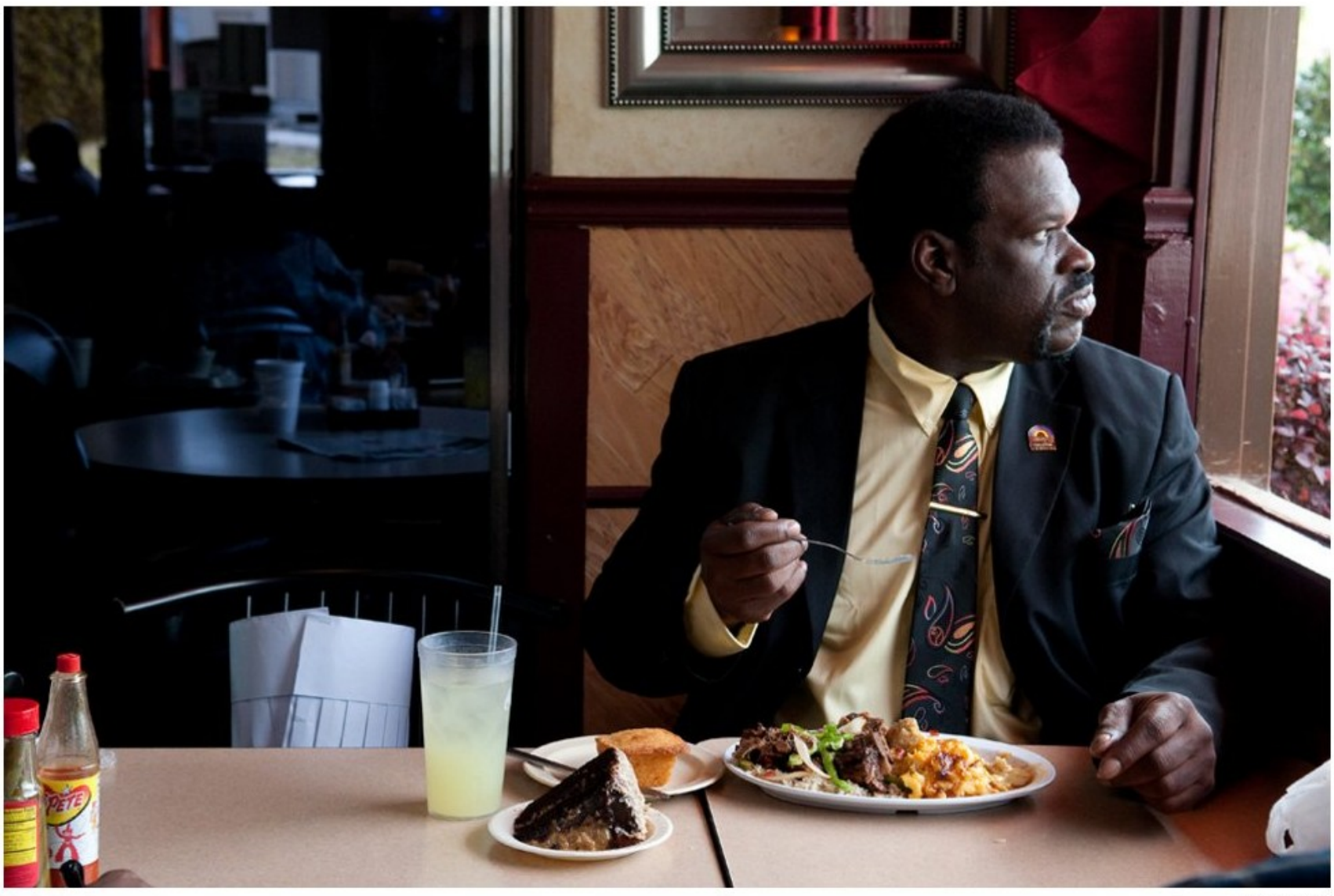
Despite all the good advice, Willhoite refuses to compromise his vision. He certainly doesn't think his plan is too ambitious.

"Too many people look at why something shouldn't be as opposed to why it should be," he says. "Everything we anticipate the World Soul Food Museum to be to help human beings, it will be. It must."

WILLHOITE IS STILL a praying man. He prays before each meal. He prays when he wakes up in the morning. He asks God for guidance. He seeks confirmation from the "spirit of the ancestors."

The same grandmother who taught him how to make a fried egg sandwich in a cast iron skillet as a kid is an ancestor now. But if he reaches further back, there are generations of black folks like her. They provide a spiritual link to all that was lost through the Middle Passage, including the soul food traditions carried through enslavement.

"That's why I'm not worried about the museum, cause the spirit of the ancestors, they want this for us here on Earth," he says. "They want this museum to be. And because they want it and they're able to work it through me, it's going to be. They just need people to work through that believe."



JOEFF DAVIS

COMFORT FOOD: Willhoite refuels at southwest Atlanta soul food institution the Beautiful Restaurant.

I've met a lot of people as a working journalist in this town over the past decade. Nearly every one of them has had a dream, a hunch, or a hustle they were ready to bet their lives on. Never in my life have I met someone with a vision more wildly ambitious and seemingly impossible than Chef Kenneth Willhoite.

Will he see it through? I haven't a clue. But there's something about the spirit of a man, still willing to dream so big at this stage in his career, with little more than faith and the stubborn will needed to achieve it.

When I initially called Willhoite after the holidays to decline his award, I wasn't sure if he'd understand why accepting his five-foot trophy could present a conflict of interest. So I was glad when I got his voice mail. I left a quick message explaining all of the above and hung up. Chef never mentioned the honor to me again.

But something tells me everything turned out exactly as he'd intended in the end.