

Bringing to Light the Cuisine of Hercules Posey, George Washington's Enslaved Chef

For more than 200 years, the story of the nation's first presidential chef has been lost to history, but a group of historians is working to give Hercules Posey his due.

By Ramin Ganeshram

Ramin Ganeshram, a culinary historian, has spent 15 years researching Hercules Posey. She is the author of several works about his life.

Published Feb. 20, 2024 Updated Feb. 26, 2024

On Feb. 22, 1797, while George Washington celebrated his 65th birthday at a ball in Philadelphia, his celebrated chef, Hercules Posey, slipped from the meager enslaved quarters at Mount Vernon, the president's Virginia estate. Stepping into the damp night under the light of a waning moon, he found his freedom, only to be lost to history for the next 200 years.

In the six years before his self-emancipation, Posey had worked daily to create what would become the first American diplomatic cuisine, cooking elaborate meals for a variety of events: the President's weekly congressional dinners, socials given by Martha Washington for the ladies of political society, executive office entertainments and meetings, and Washington's birthday celebrations.



Edward Savage painted this 18th century painting of Mount Vernon, depicting how the house looked during Washington's later life. Visitors to the plantation would have first seen this view of the mansion. The cookhouse where Posey worked is barely visible to the right of the main house. Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch via National Gallery of Art, Washington

Despite his considerable skill, Posey's contributions to high American cuisine largely remain unknown because of his status as an enslaved person and because a lack of recipes in his own hand makes recreating the particulars of Posey's culinary genius difficult. A small group of historians are working together to painstakingly research the compelling tale of Posey's rise, fall and ultimate reinvention as a free man.

Exploring the details of Posey's cooking is an important way to understand the American story, said Kelley Fanto Deetz, the author of "Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine."

"Food is one of the most influential expressions of society and culture. When you add the power dynamics of enslavement and racism, tracing these expressions becomes a vital lens through which to understand the perseverance and creativity of the enslaved chefs," Dr. Deetz said. "Their food is an essential element of our nation's history."

In addition to honoring their resilience, Mary V. Thompson, the historian emerita at Mount Vernon, wants people to realize the technical skill and talent of enslaved cooks, noting that some have questioned whether a chef like Posey would have been skilled enough to make complicated dishes. Ms. Thompson, the author of "The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret" about slavery at Mount Vernon, has spent the last four decades debunking this myth by piecing together evidence using family and period cookbooks, account books and financial and farm records showing ingredients, utensils, livestock and produce.

Although his birthplace is as yet unknown, Posey became Washington's property — the bond on a forfeit loan — around the age of 20. Posey was likely apprenticed to older Mount Vernon cooks when he was a young man. He was 42 years old in 1791 when he was summoned to Philadelphia, then the nation's capital, to cook for Washington in the executive mansion. He labored with eight other enslaved people. The Washingtons rotated their enslaved "servants" out of Pennsylvania multiple times a year to prevent them from benefiting from the state's Gradual Abolition Law that freed enslaved persons living there for at least six months.



This 19th century painting, signed E. Johnson, depicts the quarters of an enslaved family at Mount Vernon. Enslaved people lived in a variety of barracks and cabins on the estate. via The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

While in Philadelphia, Washington allowed Posey some measure of freedom to traverse the city. He also let the cook sell kitchen leftovers, earning an annual salary that was double the average working man's. Posey became recognizable throughout Philadelphia for his fine clothes and gallant demeanor. His unique flamboyance was as audacious as the new nation.

In his memoir, Washington's step-grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, portrayed Posey as a Gordon Ramsay-like figure whose was uncompromising and wildly creative:

“The chief cook would have been termed in modern parlance, a celebrated *artiste*,” Custis wrote, adding “as highly proficient in the culinary art as could be found in the United States.”

Washington wanted his table to set precedent for hospitality without opulence, showcasing abundant American ingredients and international imports that spoke to the first family's wealth and power. Household accounts show purchases of Portuguese and French wine; Italian olive oil; Indian mango pickles; Suriname coffee; Caribbean coconuts; pineapples; and more.

Recipe: Hoecakes



Hoecakes, cornmeal pancakes, were a favorite of George Washington's and were eaten by all classes of society, including his enslaved people. Washington ate them "swimming" in butter and honey so they were soft enough to chew with his notoriously bad teeth. Matt Taylor-Gross for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Barrett Washburne.

Posey mastered these diverse ingredients while working 16-hour days, and managing a kitchen staff of free and indentured white people. Outside the president's house, he interacted with Philadelphia's Free Black community including peppercorn women, oystermen, bakers, fruit sellers and confectioners. At the same time he prepared simple fare that Washington privately favored, including hoecakes — a cornmeal pancake that was among the president's daily favorites.

Letters, like the one written in 1795 by Massachusetts Rep. Theophilus Bradbury, reveal the volume of food produced under Posey's command, like roast beef, veal, turkey, duck, puddings and jellies.

Washington family and period cookbooks indicate that Posey's cuisine featured complex sauces, molded ice creams, delicate pastries, rich black cake, preserved and fresh vegetables, and dishes from the Far East, Caribbean and India.

Cheyney McKnight, a historian who has interpreted enslaved and free cooks on her popular website, Not Your Momma's History, and social media accounts said recreating Posey's table was important because historic foodways are a powerful way to teach difficult stories about the enslaved.

"Conversations about enslavement are hard, but historic foodways are an instant draw to many people," Ms. McKnight said. "When I speak about Chef Posey to the public, the conversation begins with what he cooked but that quickly allows me to go deeper into the

harsh laws that governed his life even while he worked as a high-end chef. This helps humanize him beyond his status as property.”



Cheyney McKnight is an historian who interprets the experience of enslaved women, including cooks. She says the public interest in food provides an opening to discuss difficult histories. Not Your Momma's History

Posey's journey to freedom began in the summer of 1796, when Washington left the cook at Mount Vernon, fearing his chef had plans to escape from the capital city by using its vast abolitionist network. By autumn of that year, Posey was no longer decorating elegant platters for high profile guests but digging gravel for roads. After his escape, Posey headed to Philadelphia where he remained for a while before settling in Manhattan to work as a laborer and cook until his death in 1812.

For the League of Descendants of Mount Vernon's Enslaved Community, revealing histories of, and publicly recognizing, enslaved figures is important. The League is lobbying to have a street in Alexandria, Va., renamed for Hercules Posey, as part of a

project to replace the city's Confederate-named thoroughfares.

“Chef Hercules Posey holds a significant place in history,” said Arthur Wilson, the league's chairman, “not only for descendants of the enslaved at Mount Vernon or because he was George Washington's cook.”

“He is a representative of a rich community of enslaved cooks whose contributions played a crucial role in shaping the city's — and America's — commerce, society and growth,” Dr. Wilson said.

Follow New York Times Cooking on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Pinterest. Get regular updates from New York Times Cooking, with recipe suggestions, cooking tips and shopping advice.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section D, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: Giving George Washington's Chef His Due