

Setting a Purpose for Reading

- Underline or highlight information that helps you define the concept of cultural identity.
- Circle unknown words and phrases. Try to determine the meaning of the words by using context clues, word parts, or a dictionary.



WORD CONNECTIONS

Etymology

Hors d'oeuvre (awr DURV) is a French term that refers to appetizers—small food portions served before a main meal. The word can be traced back to 1714 and a meaning of “outside the ordinary courses of a meal.” It comes from *fors* (“outside”), *de* (“from”) and *ouvre* (“work”), which in turn is from Latin *opera*.

Personal Essay

Ethnic Hash

by Patricia J. Williams from *Transition*

1 Recently, I was invited to a book party. The book was about **pluralism**. “Bring an hors d’oeuvre representing your ethnic heritage,” said the hostess, innocently enough. Her request threw me into a panic. Do I even have an ethnicity? I wondered. It was like suddenly discovering you might not have a belly button. I tell you, I had to go to the dictionary. What were the flavors, accents, and **linguistic** trills that were passed down to me over the ages? What are the habits, customs, and common traits of the social group by which I have been guided in life—and how do I cook them?

2 My last name is from a presumably Welsh plantation owner. My mother chose my first name from a dictionary of girls’ names. “It didn’t sound like Edna or Myrtle,” she says, as though that explains anything. I have two mostly Cherokee grandparents. There’s a Scottish great-grandfather, a French-Canadian great uncle, and a bunch of other relations no one ever talks about. Not one of them left recipes. Of course the ancestors who have had the most tangible influence on my place in the world were probably the West Africans, and I can tell you right off that I haven’t the faintest idea what they do for hors d’oeuvres in West Africa (although I have this Senegalese friend who always serves the loveliest, poufiest little fish mousse things in puff pastries that look, well, totally French).

3 Ethnic recipes throw me into the same sort of **quandary** as that proposed “interracial” box on the census form: the concept seems so historically vague, so cheerfully open-ended, as to be virtually meaningless. Everyone I know has at least three different kinds of cheese in their fondue. I suppose I could serve myself up as something like Tragic Mulatta Souffle, except that I’ve never gotten the hang of souffles. (Too much fussing, too little reward.) So as far as this world’s concerned, I’ve always thought of myself as just plain black. Let’s face it: however much my categories get jumbled when I hang out at my favorite kosher sushi spot, it’s the little black core of me that moves through the brave new world of Manhattan as I hail a cab, rent an apartment, and apply for a job.

4 Although it’s true, I never have tried hailing a cab as an *ethnic*...

5 So let me see. My father is from the state of Georgia. When he cooks, which is not often, the results are distinctly Southern. His specialties are pork chops and pies; he makes the good-luck black-eyed peas on New Year’s. His recipes are definitely black in a regional sense, since most blacks in the United States until recently lived in the Southeast. He loves pig. He uses lard.

6 My mother’s family is also black, but relentlessly steeped in the New England tradition of hard-winter cuisine. One of my earliest memories is of my mother

pluralism: state in which people of different backgrounds live in society together but hold on to their unique traditions and customs

linguistic: relating to language

My Notes

quandary: dilemma; difficulty

Exploring Cultural Identity

My Notes

piccalilli: relish of pickled vegetables

primeval: ancient or old

faux: fake

culmination: conclusion

gastronomic: relating to cooking
palate: appetite

borrowing my father’s screwdriver so she could pry open a box of salt cod. In those days, cod came in wooden boxes, nailed shut, and you really had to hack around the edges to loosen the lid. Cod-from-a-box had to be soaked overnight. The next day you mixed it with boiled potatoes and fried it in Crisco. Then you served it with baked beans in a little brown pot, with salt pork and molasses. There was usually some shredded cabbage as well, with carrots for color. And of course there was **piccalilli**—every good homemaker had piccalilli on hand. Oh, and hot rolls served with homemade Concord grape jelly. Or maybe just brown bread and butter. These were the staples of Saturday night supper.

7 We had baked chicken on Sundays, boiled chicken other days. My mother has recipes for how to boil a chicken: a whole range of them, with and without bay leaf, onions, potatoes, carrots. With boiled chicken, life can never be dull.

8 The truth is we liked watermelon in our family. But the only times we ate it—well, those were secret moments, private moments, guilty, even shameful moments, never unburdened by the thought of what might happen if our white neighbors saw us enjoying the **primeval** fruit. We were always on display when it came to things stereotypical. Fortunately, my mother was never handier in the kitchen than when under political pressure. She would take that odd, thin-necked implement known as a melon-baller and gouge out innocent pink circlets and serve them to us, like little mounds of **faux** sorbet, in fluted crystal goblets. The only time we used those goblets was to disguise watermelon, in case someone was peering idly through the windows, lurking about in racial judgment.

9 I don’t remember my parents having many dinner parties, but for those special occasions requiring actual hors d’oeuvres, there were crackers and cream cheese, small sandwiches with the crusts cut off, Red Devil deviled ham with mayonnaise and chopped dill pickles. And where there were hors d’oeuvres, there had to be dessert on the other end to balance things out. Slices of home-made cake and punch. “Will you take coffee or tea?” my mother would ask shyly, at the proud **culmination** of such a meal. . . .

QUADROON SURPRISE

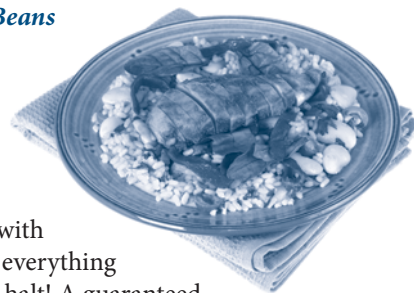
10 Some have said that too much salt cod too early in life hobbles the culinary senses forever. I have faith that this is not the case, and that any disadvantage can be overcome with time and a little help from Williams-Sonoma. Having grown up and learned that you are what you eat, I have worked to broaden my horizons and cultivate my tastes. I entertain global **gastronomic** aspirations, and my **palate** knows no bounds. After all, if Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben¹ can Just Get Over It, who am I to cling to the limitations of the past? Yes, I have learned to love my inner ethnic child. And so, I leave you with a recipe for the Twenty-first Century:

Chicken with Spanish Rice and Not-Just-Black Beans

- **Boil the chicken**
- **Boil the rice**
- **Boil the beans**

11 Throw in as many exotic-sounding spices and mysterious roots as you can lay your hands on—go on, use your imagination!—and garnish with those fashionable little wedges of lime that make everything look vaguely Thai. Watch those taxis screech to a halt! A guaranteed crowd-pleaser that can be reheated or rehashed generation after generation.

12 Coffee? Tea?



¹ African American advertising icons that some consider to be offensive.

