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The Cookbook, the Memoir, and the Grey Area

by

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photo: Marcus Kenney

Savannah restaurateurs John O. Morisano and Mashama Bailey set out to write a book. Instead, it started a conversation.

The Grey has always been more than just a good restaurant. It's also a good story. The James Beard Award-winning establishment has shown up on *Chef's Table*, in travel guides, and in the pages of dozens of magazines. It's a tale of two creative minds serendipitously meeting in New York a decade ago and deciding to meld Italian and American Southern cuisines together in a formerly segregated 1930s Greyhound terminal in Savannah, Georgia.

Now, in *Black, White, and the Grey*, Mashama Bailey and John O. Morisano are setting out to tell that story in their own words. The result is a candid memoir about their partnership and friendship, told from alternating perspectives. The nontraditional cookbook unfolds through honest conversations about race and painful admissions of naivete along the way. It follows along as two New Yorkers (one of whom, Bailey, spent part of her childhood in Georgia) set down roots in Savannah and fall in love with the city and its rich food culture. Each chapter ends with a recipe—not necessarily a dish from the Grey's menu, but often just a dish that Bailey and Morisano have cooked or eaten together at some point over the years. There are the clams oreganata that remind them of New York and the Greek-style wings that remind them of a favorite neighborhood bar in Savannah.

A recent phone conversation with Bailey and Morisano made me realize how much reading the book had been like having a conversation with the two restaurateurs or sharing a meal with them. They poke fun at each other, ask each other's opinions, and sometimes even finish each other's sentences.

Mashama, you write in the prologue about going through a few different formats and drafts with the book before landing on the current structure, in which each of you interjects and you tell the story side by side. When you both started to think about writing a book, what sort of book did you picture?

Bailey: There were ideas floating around about a cookbook. Our literary agent is David Black, and he originally approached me to write a cookbook, which I wasn't really interested in. And then Johno met him, and they came up with the idea of writing a restaurant memoir of how the Grey got started. And I think once the book was shopped and sold, Lorena Jones at Ten Speed thought it would be a good idea for both of our voices to be in the book. So I think once that happened, when Johno started to write the initial manuscript, that's when the book changed direction.

Morisano: That's all pretty right-on. I thought the story was worth telling. And I wanted to write a book, and Mashama, as she mentioned, was just busy.

Bailey: And I think for me, this was my first job as a head chef, and I was in a new city, and I didn't have a team that came down with me. So the first seven years—we're in our seventh year right now—I really didn't want to be a flash in the pan. That was my main focus, structuring up the team and creating a restaurant and the menu structure of a restaurant that has some legs to it. And it needed all of my attention. So writing a cookbook then just didn't make sense. Or writing a book at all.

Also, a restaurant cookbook is sort of a portrait of the restaurant frozen in time—it's a little static. So I would imagine it's hard to do while you're evolving and growing as a restaurant.

Morisano: I think that's true. Having been alongside Mashama for all of those discussions, I think you felt like you didn't even have the repertoire to start thinking about a cookbook because your voice was still happening.

Bailey: Yeah, also our PR company would approach us with a lot of asks for recipes. And there was a point where I stopped doing that because I was like, I don't really even know if these recipes are a true representation of what I'm trying to say. So there was a little bit of a pause of sending recipes to magazines, because I was still trying to figure it out. And then David Black was like, "Do you want to write a cookbook?" and I said, "Hell no, I don't want to write a cookbook." And I think Johnno really fancies himself as a writer. [*laughs*]

Morisano: Oh, please, that's not true! I fancy myself as someone who tries to write.

Bailey: So he wanted to write a book. I remember one of the early discussions, before we even really knew what the restaurant was going to turn into, he was talking about writing. So I think this was always going to happen for him. I wrote in high school and junior high school, but more poems. So it's kind of interesting that it laid out like this.

A lot of the recipes echo the memoir format: They're dishes that you've cooked together or tributes to dishes you've eaten together

in restaurants. Were there any that you knew you wanted in the book from the get-go?

Bailey: I'm going to speak for Johnno—and I never speak for Johnno: Probably the Sunday gravy was one that he wanted to do. I really love the harissa carrots, and also the country pasta. The country pasta's kind of a funny story. I was sort of reflecting on what the menu was going to be, and I called Johnno, and I told him that I wanted to make a pasta that my grandma made growing up. It was spaghetti and meat sauce, and she would put cheddar cheese in it, and mix the pasta up with the sauce. I don't think I even put a name to it. He was like, "That's not pasta!" I was like, "That's the pasta she made," and I looked it up, and it's called "country pasta." You can find this version of spaghetti in Southern cookbooks. So that's sort of how the idea for country pasta became born, and then we made it based off of carbonara, with a braised pork belly instead of a cured pancetta. But the story behind country pasta is that I was trying to put on this grandma dish, and he was like, "No."

From the recipes and the stories in the book, it also sounds like you have a shared love of Italian (and Italian American) food. Does that sensibility make its way into the food you serve at the Grey at all?

Bailey: Absolutely. The first menu was really structured like that—antipasta, a pasta course, and then these larger-formatted entrees. And I think that was the result of traveling together and eating in that way. Before we opened, we traveled to Italy together for about two weeks. I really love the idea of focusing on grains here because I think that they're important, and they've been really absorbed in the culinary

world in the South. And you can easily relate those things to Italian cooking—grits and polenta, farro verde, even rice, risotto. You can relate those things to cooking in an Italian way, so we sort of naturally absorbed Italian cooking techniques and styles, using Southern ingredients. So I think that was the way we broke out into the scene.

What has it been like to create a neighborhood restaurant in a neighborhood that you were both new to at the beginning of this all? Were people wary of you both as out-of-towners?

Morisano: I think so. [My wife] Carol and I had been here for a few years before Mashama and I started the Grey. So I was a little more rooted in the city than Mashama was. Mashama was here as a child, but she came here cold, and within six or seven months of getting here, she opened the Grey. I think the community was wary of if we were serious and if we were serious about our commitment to the community and being a neighborhood restaurant, rather than a couple of carpetbaggers who were trying to take advantage of the town. And I think that came from all aspects of the community—the white community, the Black community, the South in general. So I think it took a few years for people to start to trust us. And I think the reason they started to trust us is that you couldn't walk into the restaurant at any point of the day or night and we weren't there. Our commitment to it, and to trying hard, I think won people over ultimately.

Bailey: We were working toward something, and I think people saw that and recognized that and gave us a little bit of a break.

There's a moment in the book where Johno and some other white, male restaurant designers are talking about how difficult it would be to find a talented chef who's also a Black woman, and Mashama, you mourn the fact that people only ever know about the Black female chefs they see on TV. What advice would you give to someone now who was opening a restaurant and looking for a chef beyond the white guys with the most visibility in the industry?

Bailey: I think my advice would be more of searching within the community and talking to people who actually work in restaurants. The thing about those two people—they were designers. They design restaurants, and they were sort of at the beginning of their independent career. But they didn't know any cooks, so they couldn't refer Johno to any cooks. And I think that when he started to talk to chefs is when he started to get a lot of questions answered, and I think that gave him a little bit of leverage to seek out someone like me and take a real account of what was going on in the industry. I think the funny thing about the conversation is that none of them knew where to start. And just putting yourself in that environment will give you more realistic information.

Morisano: I think that social media and the groups that are forming—there are lots of affinity groups, where I think it's easier to identify people now. I think if I were going to give people advice, [it would be to] find someone who can cook, definitely, but the whole reason we did things the way we did was to be representative of the community. Having two white men as partners wasn't representative of the community. I wanted the Grey to be representative of Savannah. So someone opposite of me, both in gender and ethnicity, was sort of the idea.

The book ends just as news about COVID was starting to enter the public psyche. How different do you think this book would have been if you had written it after the pandemic had begun, given everything that the restaurant industry has gone through, and also given some of the overdue conversations we've been having about race as a country?

Bailey: You know, it's funny. The book was pretty much finished before all of that. We were done with our major rewrite before we really even knew what COVID was. But the book being about race, the book being about partnerships, was there before this last year—before all of those things started to interrupt society. So it's just sort of serendipitous that it happened the way that it did. We didn't really predict that.

Morisano: I think it could have maybe felt inauthentic, frankly. One of the things we noticed was after the whole social justice movement broke out after the killing of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, a lot of people who had never called us before started calling Mashama to ask her opinion on things. I think if we had written this book with all of these influences around it, I think it would have been a worse book. I think writing it in the vacuum of just our points of view made it truer to what it was meant to be. And I think that all of the outside influence now would probably have altered it. We didn't have all of the questions or all of the answers, and we were good with that. And now, I think there's more pressure on that. I think we're really lucky, as Mashama said, that it came out when it did.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.



photo: Andrew Thomas Lee.

THREE EXCITING RECIPES FROM *BLACK, WHITE, AND THE GREY*

BRAISED CABBAGE WITH TOMATOES AND FISH SAUCE

Bailey and Morisano wanted to create an accessible at-home version of a braised eel and cabbage dish that they ate together in Comacchio, Italy. This cabbage, braised in Italian colatura, is what resulted.

CLAMS OREGANATA

This is a take on an Italian American classic that Morisano and Bailey have eaten together countless times and always transports them straight back to New York.

COUNTRY PASTA

What started as a version of Bailey's grandmother's cheddar cheese spaghetti evolved into a pork belly play on carbonara.