WANT TO TASTE BLACK HISTORY THIS YEAR? LOOK FOR SWEET POTATOES IN THE PRODUCE AISLE

November 18, 2025

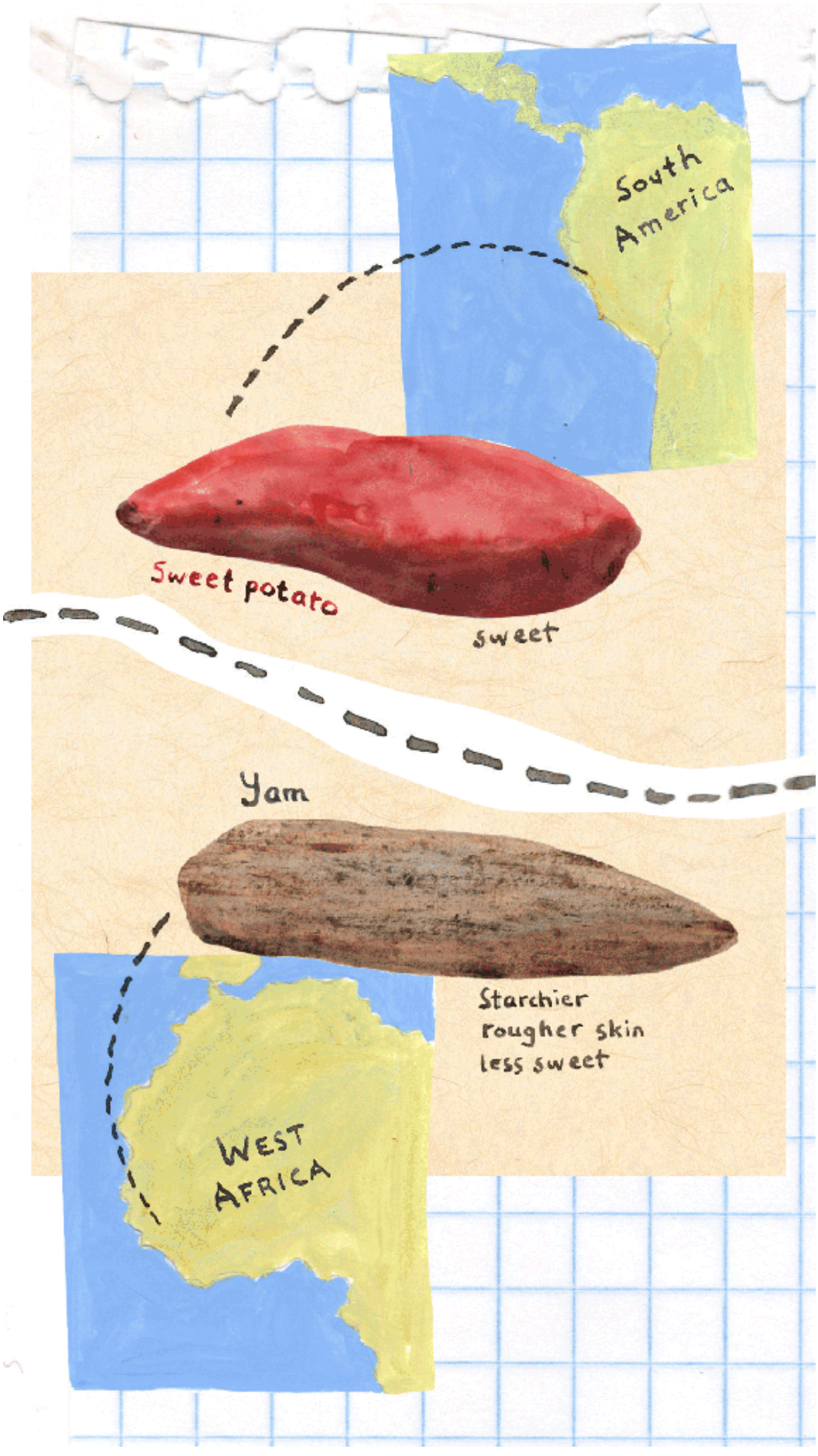

South America
Sweet potato
sweet
Yam
Starchier
rougher skin
less sweet
WEST AFRICA

Illustration by Caty Bartholomew

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By Femi Redwood

When I walk into the Coop's produce aisle and see boxes of sweet potatoes, I see more than a root. I see history. The sweet potato's journey began in South America, became a survival food for enslaved Africans in North America and later found a lasting place in Black culture. And while pumpkin pies may define the holiday table for some Americans, sweet potato pies are at the heart of celebrations for many Black families.

"Sweet potatoes are almost the way to determine whether it's a Black Thanksgiving or not a Black Thanksgiving," says Tonya Hopkins, a Brooklyn-based food and drink historian, spirit strategist and Coop member.

Yams and sweet potatoes are often used interchangeably, but they're different. Yams are native to West Africa whereas sweet potatoes originated in Peru. When colonizers arrived in the Americas, they began exporting sweet potatoes to Europe and Africa.

> AS TIME WENT ON, ENSLAVED COOKS PERFECTED SWEET POTATOES INTO FORMAL DISHES FOR WHITE FAMILIES. ENSLAVED FAMILIES ALSO ATE SWEET POTATOES, BUT AS A NUTRITIOUS NECESSITY.

English royalty loved them, including Henry VIII, who often ate sweet potato tarts. Sixteenth-century Jesuit writings suggest they believed sweet potatoes were aphrodisiacs, which may explain their popularity.

In West Africa, yams were part of a regular diet and were used in soups and stews. Hopkins says Europeans assumed Africans would eat sweet potatoes because they re-

sembled yams, but that wasn't the case. Locals didn't like the taste and only ate the green, leafy part. Africans who were shackled on boats or enslaved on plantations had no choice. "They were given the fleshy, starchy potato part as this food ration," Hopkins says.

In America, wealthy colonialists often followed English trends, so they, too, requested sweet potato dishes. As time went on, enslaved cooks perfected sweet potatoes into formal dishes for white families. Enslaved families also ate sweet potatoes, but as a nutritious necessity. "Enslaved people often grew sweet potatoes in their own garden plots," Hopkins said. They lacked the tools in their own kitchens to make a dessert, but they were able to roast or boil a whole potato over a fire.

BLACK FAMILIES CONTINUED TO TAKE CULTURAL OWNERSHIP OVER SWEET POTATOES AS MANY MIGRATED NORTH. THIS CONTRIBUTED TO SWEET POTATO PIES, ESPECIALLY DURING HOLIDAYS, BECOMING A DISTINCTLY BLACK AMERICAN FOOD.

After emancipation, Black families gained greater access to ingredients like butter and sugar and had more time to cook in their own kitchens. While pumpkins were staples in the North, sweet potatoes remained a staple in the South due to their ease of growth. In fact, scientist and inventor George Washington Carver persuaded Southern farmers to plant sweet potatoes to help them transition away from their reliance on cotton. He even published a sweet potato guide for farmers and cooks.

Hopkins says Black families continued to take cultural ownership over sweet potatoes as many migrated North. This contributed to sweet potato pies, especially during holidays, becoming a distinctly Black American food.

"Sweet potatoes are probably the most recognizable food source in the South during the fall in the Black family beside collard greens," says Howard Conyers, a pitmaster,

family farmer and moonshiner in Manning, South Carolina.

While many of us are disconnected from how our food is farmed, Conyers says he wishes consumers understood how physically demanding it is to farm sweet potatoes. He remembers collecting sweet potatoes as a child after they were harvested with a mule plow pulled by a tractor.

“We used to pick up like a quarter acre to an acre by hand in buckets,” Conyers says. Sweet potatoes sold in stores today likely come from commercial harvesters, he says, but those are still physically demanding jobs for workers.

Conyers, who studied agricultural engineering at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University before earning an engineering doctorate from Duke University, grows the same sweet potato seed his ancestors did. “It’s an old seed that’s probably been passed down almost a hundred years,” he says. He continues: “Maybe I’m tasting the sweet potato pie that my grandmother made or my great-grandmother made going back as far into slavery,” he says. He notes it likely tastes different from anything you’ve ever tasted because it’s made from heirloom sweet potatoes.

> MOONSHINE, LIKE SWEET POTATOES, IS PART OF BLACK HISTORY, THOUGH BLACK EXPERTISE IN THE INDUSTRY IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED.

But while there is reverence for the past, many, like Conyers, are experimenting with sweet potatoes in new ways. Hopkins says they are a “great muse” for experimenting with recipes. Conyers has replaced carrots with grated sweet potatoes in his mother’s carrot cake recipe and uses sweet potatoes to make moonshine, another staple of Black history and African tradition.

In 2020, he and his father opened Backyard Distillery, one of the few Black-owned moonshine makers. Moonshine, like sweet potatoes, is part of Black history, though

Black expertise in the industry is often overlooked.

Hopkins says the roots of moonshine-making can be traced back to African traditions, and in America, Black folks in the South were among its key makers. It was used for both medicinal and recreational purposes. Hopkins adds that moonshine was also a path to economic freedom for many, including her own family. Her grandmother ran a speakeasy in Camden, New Jersey, during Prohibition and afterwards.

For Conyers, moonshine isn't just a business; it's a continuation of Black creativity and survival. "It should be the spirit of Black people in America. We talk about bourbon and this other stuff, but moonshine is just as important to Black America," Conyers says.

Conyers hopes to expand how he shares these innovation stories and he's optimistic about starting tours next year of his family farm and distillery. "I hope people will come down and see what we're doing at our integrated farm distillery," he says. "So, you can see how we're trying to use the whole ecosystem to tell the whole story of the South through Black people's eyes," he continues.

> "SWEET POTATOES WERE HARDY ENOUGH TO SURVIVE THE MIDDLE PASSAGE, PRACTICAL ENOUGH FOR ENSLAVED PEOPLE'S GARDENS AND VERSATILE ENOUGH TO STRETCH ACROSS BOTH PLANTATION KITCHENS AND FREEDOM KITCHENS," - SAID TONYA HOPKINS.

Based on what Hopkins shared, whether sweet potatoes are used in moonshine, pie, cake or any other dish, their botanical persistence and durability mirror the resilience of Black people. "It stores well through hardship and regenerates year after year," said Hopkins. "It was hardy enough to survive the Middle Passage, practical enough for enslaved people's gardens and versatile enough to stretch across both plantation kitchens and freedom kitchens. Its very durability and ability to reinvent itself made it

much more than a survival crop.”

Want to taste Black history? Try one of these recipes this Thanksgiving. We suggest using Beauregard or Jewel sweet potatoes for the best flavor. You can also use Garnet sweet potatoes, but your pie will be slightly less sweet. At the time of publication, all three of those varieties are available at the Coop. The Coop also carries Japanese, purple majesty and purple sweet potatoes, but those are not recommended because they won’t give you the sweet, creamy filling and color of traditional sweet potato pie.

CLASSIC SWEET POTATO RECIPE

- 2 pounds of sweet potatoes
- 4 ounces unsalted butter, softened
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup evaporated milk
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon ground cloves
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup packed brown sugar
- 1 9-inch pie crust

Instructions

- Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Grease a baking sheet with your preferred oil or spray it with non-stick spray.
- Wash and dry the sweet potatoes. Pierce them several times with a fork, then place them on the baking sheet. Bake for 45 minutes or until soft.
- Remove the sweet potatoes and lower the oven temperature to 350 degrees.
- Once the sweet potatoes cool, peel and throw away their skin.
- Grease the pie pan with your preferred oil or spray it with nonstick cooking spray. Add the pie crust.
- Add the peeled potatoes to a large mixing bowl and blend. Add the softened butter and continue to blend. Add the eggs and continue to blend. Add both sugars and all

the seasonings, then continue blending. Lastly, add the vanilla and evaporated milk and continue blending.
- Pour the filling into the pie crust. Bake at 350 degrees for 50 to 60 minutes, or until the top is brown. You can also insert a toothpick or knife in the middle of the pie to check if it comes out clean.
- If your pie is done, remove it from the oven and let it cool for at least 30 minutes.

HOWARD CONYERS'S SWEET POTATO CAKE, MODIFIED FROM HIS MOM HALLIE'S CARROT CAKE RECIPE

- 1 ½ cup vegetable oil
- 2 cups sugar
- 4 eggs well beaten
- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup pecan
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 tsp. cinnamon
- 2 tsp baking soda
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 3 cups grated sweet potatoes (peeled)
- 1 tsp nutmeg
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 3 9-inch cake pans

Instructions for the cake

- Mix the oil and sugar, and beat well. Add eggs.
- Sift all dry ingredients, particularly the flour, two to three times. Add nuts and mix with the sugar mixture.
- Lastly, add grated sweet potatoes a small amount at a time.
- Bake in the pans at 325 degrees for 30 minutes.

Instructions for the cream cheese frosting

- ½ to 1 stick of margarine or butter
- 8 oz of cream cheese
- 1 box powdered sugar
- 2 teaspoons of vanilla extract

Mix all ingredients, beat well. Spread between layers and on the top.

If you want to support Hopkins' work and learn more about the intersection of food, drinks and history, you can join her Paetron platform.

To learn more about Conyers and his work and arrange a tour during your next southern visit, check out his website.

Femi Redwood is a Murrow Award-winning journalist. For over a decade, she has worked in prestigious newsrooms including VICE News and CBS Newspath, holding a range of roles from on-air correspondent to department manager. She lives in Crown Heights with her wife, Julie, and their cat, Leo.