

Episode Title: Kardea Brown's Delicious History

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, chats chef, author, and the host of Delicious Miss Brown, Kardea Brown. They talk about some of her favorite Gullah recipes, what she loves most about her mother's cooking, and why she wrote her terrific new cookbook, *'The Way Home: A Celebration of Sea Islands Food and Family.'* Plus, Kardea gives us a Gullah history lesson and shares the story behind the very first dish she learned how to make.

Episode Type: Full

Episode Rating: Clean

Season Number: 3

Episode Number: 17

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins)

Sid Voice Over: Welcome to Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine, and my guest this week is a chef, author, and the host of 'Delicious Miss Brown,' one of the most successful shows on the Food Network. Kardea Brown was born in Charleston, South Carolina, and spent much of her childhood on Wadmalaw Island, where she grew up learning Gullah Geechee recipes and traditions from her mother and grandmother. She moved to New Jersey to pursue a career in social work, but when the Food Network saw a video of her cooking everything changed. She quit her job, moved back to Charleston, launched a traveling Gullah supper club, and after a few years of hard work and determination, eventually landed her own TV show. Today, we'll chat about some of her favorite Gullah recipes, what she loves most about her mother's cooking, and why she wrote her terrific new cookbook, *'The Way Home: A Celebration of Sea Islands Food and Family.'* Plus, Kardea gives us a Gullah history lesson and shares the story behind the very first dish she learned how to make. All that and more this week on Biscuits & Jam.

(Music fades)

Sid Evans: Kardea Brown, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Kardea Brown: Thanks for having me, Sid.

Sid Evans: It's great to see you again and I just wanna say: congrats on your new book!

Kardea Brown: Oh my goodness, thank you so much. I'm so excited about it.

Sid Evans: It's a beautiful book. I haven't seen the physical copy, but I've seen the digital version and I can tell you, it made me very hungry.

Kardea Brown: (laughs)

Sid Evans: And it's called 'The Way Home: A Celebration of Sea Islands Food and Family.'

Kardea Brown: Yes.

Sid Evans: And it looks great and you must be so excited to have that out in the world.

Kardea Brown: I am, you know 'cause it's kinda like a full circle moment for me. Leaving Charleston and leaving the South to go to school in New Jersey, my grad school, I went to St. Peter's University in New Jersey. And being away from home made me so homesick. But then I realized how rich and how important home was after I left. I took it for granted. Like, this is low country living. This is what I know. This is what I'm used to. It's just the everyday way of life for me. And then moving somewhere like New Jersey will really make you miss the low country. (laughs)

Sid Evans: (laughs) Well, sometimes you have to move away to really appreciate a place.

Kardea Brown: Mm-hmm. Absolutely. That's why I named the book 'The Way Home' 'cause I definitely found my way home.

Sid Evans: Well so, Kardea, talk to me about home. You were born in Charleston, and you grew up spending a lot of time on Wadmalaw, which is an island just south of there. And there's a lot of farmland, there's a lot of water, a lot of marsh. Talk to me a little bit about growing up in that environment.

Kardea Brown: Uh, man, it's so hard to describe something that was so beautiful. My childhood literally was spent barefoot running in sand and being very close to water and eating very fresh vegetation right out of the garden patch, eating okra right out of the okra fields. We have a very large family on Wadmalaw Island, between Wadmalaw and John's Island. And I can't even tell you how many cousins I have.

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: (laughs) It's insane (laughs). My grandmother is one of 14 children. And so could you imagine them all having four and five and six and eight children. It's a huge family. And so I grew up very closely to my cousins who are actually all around the same age. and we grew up just hanging out on the island, beach days in the summertime. I just remember all of the beautiful things of just being in the low country. I also remember the muggy days. And just, you know, being so close to family and enjoying seafood. How could I forget the seafood? Plenty of that.

Sid Evans: Yeah, it's just a part of, of everything, right? It's a part of every day, every meal, every outing (laughs).

Kardea Brown: Yes. Seafood and rice.

Sid Evans: So Kardea, this book is dedicated to your mother and your grandmother.

Kardea Brown: Yes.

Sid Evans: And I wanted to start by asking about your mom. You had this quote in the book that I just love. You said, "My ma's every move was effortless like a dance." Tell me what you meant by that.

Kardea Brown: I grew up in a family where children were not allowed to play in the kitchen while the adults were cooking. And so I was able to witness my mother and my grandmother, especially like my mother, the way she maneuvered in the kitchen and was able to handle a meal. I never saw her break a sweat. And if she did, it was just because the kitchen was hot. Not because she was, like, (laughs) nervous or anything. It was because she just did it so well. I mean prepared two or three meals at one time. She could make breakfast, also make lunch and dinner, pack it all up and have it ready, you know, before 9:00 a.m. Insane.

Sid Evans: You know, you talk about how your mom used to listen to Anita Baker and others when she cooked. So we talk a lot about food and music on this podcast. Were food and music always kind of intertwined in your house? Was there always something playing or was that just unique to your mom?

Kardea Brown: Always. Music and food go hand in hand in my family, especially my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother, to this day, always has this little radio that she keeps on all day long. And even growing up, she would always have that radio, the same radio playing, and miraculously it still works. I think for my mother, and my grandmother, music always got her in that mood. That good song, that good tune would just get her going and she'll find a really cool playlist and just keep that playlist going until she's completely done with the meal so it was something that, it was everyday life for me. It was normal to have music playing and cooking. I do the same thing. When I'm cooking, if I have enough time, but normally I do have enough time, I have some type of music going. something about music and the feeling and the sensation and the vibration just really, I don't know, it just gets you in the mood to make really great food.

Sid Evans: What are some things you like to listen to when you're cooking?

Kardea Brown: Oh gosh, I'm all over the place. It all depends on, like, how I'm feeling in the moment. But normally it's some type of, like, soft jazz, soul music.

Sid Evans: Something that kinda gets your creative juices going.

Kardea Brown: Oh yeah.

Sid Evans: (laughs) So, tell me a little bit about your grandmother. You talk about her a lot and it sounds like she was a huge influence on you in terms of cooking and entertaining and learning to respect your culture. What was your relationship with her like? And I'm guessing this is your mother's mother?

Kardea Brown: My mother's mother. Yes. And she just recently turned 81 so she's still, you know, as feisty as ever. (laughs) In a southern charm way. (laughs) Oh my gosh. I grew up in a p- a household where my father was not present. So my grandmother took on that role of that second parent, you know. And between my mother and my grandmother, they're like my best friends. They were my original best friends because we spent so much time, and for so long I was the only grandchild. There's a nine-year age gap in between me and my oldest cousin. And so my grandmother just, she's the first person in our immediate family and out of her siblings to ever go to college. She moved away from Charleston, South Carolina at the age of 17 to become a nurse. She moved to New York and I think back in that time in the '50's, '60's, a lot of people moved from the South to move up north to get better opportunities. And my grandmother was the only one out of her siblings to take that leap of faith and really just work on herself and her career and her education. And my grandmother's parents never learned to read or write. And my grandmother had kind of a, you know, nontraditional education on Wadmalaw. It wasn't as good as education in other places. And so I think I, I gravitated towards my grandmother so much because I looked up to her. She was just a, a force to be reckoned with, like you know, to move from Wadmalaw Island, to grow up in such a small place on a small farm and to move to a place like New York at 17 years old with no family, no help, no assistance, looking at her I was like, "God, this woman is incredible." And so I've always just had that connection with her. I could talk to her about anything. And she's so sweet.

Sid Evans: What's her first name and, and what do you call her?

Kardea Brown: Her first name is Josephine and I call her Grandma.

Sid Evans: Oh (laughs) okay. Keep it simple.

Sid Evans: Was gardening a big part of her life as well?

Kardea Brown: Growing up, it was. When she moved into her first home she did a lot of gardening as far as flowers. She didn't really grow her own foods. I guess she got to the point she's like, "I did it so much as a child..." like, okay. You know. So but, growing up, gardening was very important to my grandmother and her siblings because, living on Wadmalaw back then in the '40's and the '50's, there was no convenience store. There still isn't really a convenience store out there, or a supermarket. So the only way that they really would eat was growing the vegetables in the garden or a neighbor who had food or vegetables. And fishing. My great grandfather made fishing nets by hand. That's what he did for a living. So the things that they ate came from the sea or came from the land.

Sid Evans: Yeah. And if you don't get it from there, then it's a long trip to the grocery store (laughs).

Kardea Brown: Exactly. You're just not eating it. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Kardea, I wanna ask you about spirituality, which is something that you talk about a lot in this book. And you have a line in the introduction that says, "Values like God and community, kinship, respect for elders, honoring the ancestors, and a near sacred connection to nature are part of our DNA." Can you talk about that a little bit?

Kardea Brown: Yes. So I grew up in a Southern Baptist household. And I went to church religiously with my grandmother and my mother. And as I got older, I wouldn't say I strayed away from religion, but I started to kind of question... and I wanted to see the world from a bigger scope outside of religion. And so I started to get into spirituality. Taking different parts from different religions, and my ancestors, and creating this, I guess, this idea of what I felt my connection to God was. What I call my spirituality and, and connection to God, I found it a lot in nature. The beach. taking walks in the park. Like, it all intertwines for me. And so that's what that statement comes from is, my spirituality is taken from what I grew up being taught and what I've learned along the way.

Sid Evans: Well, it's a very spiritual book in a lot of ways and you feel that coming through. I mean, this is not just a, a collection of recipes. It's really a representation of who you are and the culture that you come from.

Kardea Brown: Absolutely.

Sid Evans: So Kardea, when you're trying to explain Gullah cuisine to someone, what's a dish that you like to use as an example?

Kardea Brown: Okra soup. (laughs)

Sid Evans: (laughs) Okay, that's a good one.

Kardea Brown: That's the first thing I think of 'cause it's all the ingredients that we normally use in Gullah cuisine. There's the tomato. There's the okra. There's the lima beans and, if you wanna get fancy, add some corn. But okra stew or okra soup, that's the first thing I think of. And of course red rice. Um (laughs), like that's our staple dishes. Anything to do with rice and okra, that's Gullah. But I like to describe Gullah cuisine as the type of food that is very centered on seasonality. Whatever is in season and whatever is available as far as the right time of year. Eating okra when okra is in season. Eating shrimp when shrimp is in season. That's Gullah cuisine.

Sid Evans: So I wanna ask you about a -a specific dish that you talk about in the book and that you had some early success with. When I say the words "mac and cheese," what does that mean to you?

Kardea Brown: (laughs) That's the very first dish I learned how to make without assistance. (laughs) Well, physical assistance. I was, gosh, 13 or 14 I think. My father does have other children and I was at my half sister's house and they just were cooking one day and we were like, "Hey, let's make a big meal for everyone in the house right now." And they were like, "Okay, you got this, you got this, Vida, you're making the chicken and Kardea, what do you wanna make?" And I didn't wanna tell anyone I never cooked in a kitchen by myself. I said, "I'll make macaroni and cheese." And (laughs) they were like, "Okay, that's ambitious."

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: So, I called my grandmother. I was like, "Grandma, I'm making macaroni and cheese at Vida's. What do I do?" And she tells me. We get the ingredients. I pray to my ancestors and the gods above "Please let this macaroni and cheese come out good."

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: 'Cause there's quite a few people who are waiting on this. (laughs)

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: So I make it exactly how my grandmother tells me. I pull it out of the oven and, oh my goodness, it was the most beautiful macaroni and cheese I had ever seen besides my grandmother's. And we get into it and they're like, "Oh. Man. Like, this is good." So ever since then, I have been making macaroni and cheese and that's the very first thing I made by myself.

Sid Evans: (laughs) But I'm guessing you've tweaked the recipe a bit since then.

Kardea Brown: Oh, yeah. (laughs) I've perfected my grandmother's recipe and now I have several other macaroni and cheese recipes. I do a seafood macaroni and cheese, I do pulled pork macaroni and cheese. I have variations now. But the, the start of it, my grandmother's macaroni and cheese, I can do it with my eyes closed.

Sid Evans: Yeah, I saw the seafood version in the book which is so interesting. Sounds good.

Kardea Brown: Oh, it's rich. (laughs)

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: It's decadent. There are several types of white cheeses in there and it's made with the bechamel and it has crab and shrimp and... Yes, I probably should've ate before we did this podcast because (laughs)-

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: ...I am starving thinking about that macaroni and cheese. It's delicious.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

Voice over from Sid: I'll be back with more from the Delicious Miss Brown after the break.

(AD BREAK)

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

Voice over from Sid: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and today I'm talking with Kardea Brown.

(Music fades)

Sid Evans: (laughs) So Kardea, I'm wondering if you can give me a little bit of a Gullah history lesson. You talk about this in the book some. Where in Africa did most of the Gullah people descend from?

Kardea Brown: West Africa. Because settlers, European settlers, found that the people in West Africa through exploration had a vast knowledge of growing the grain rice. And they also realized that the Southeastern, the low country, the Gullah/Geechee corridor area, had the same environment as West Africa. So they realized, you know, oh, West African inhabitants, they've created this irrigation system that is just far beyond the knowledge that the settlers had at that moment, at that time. And so they realized this is a cash cow here, you know, you can take the same knowledge from West Africa and bring it over here to the low country and grow that crop rice, the grain rice and make money from it because the area is very similar. It's marshy. It has seasonality. It has the water. And they realized that, again, people from West Africa had this specific type of skill set to grow rice. And so most of Gullah/Geechee people or Gullah people are from West Africa because of that.

Sid Evans: And specifically in terms of countries, I think you mentioned Angola. What were some other countries that are countries now that they would've come from?

Kardea Brown: Yes. A small percentage are from Angola as well. But when you go further west, it's Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea. Some even from the Ivory Coast. But mainly from Ghana and Guinea and Nigeria. And Sierra Leone. My uncle did a research project where he found that because of where our family was located on Wadmalaw, our family is actually from Sierra Leone.

Sid Evans: Hm. So interesting.

Kardea Brown: Mm-hmm.

Sid Evans: Well you'll have to go back there at some point if you haven't already.

Kardea Brown: Oh, absolutely. That's in the works.

Sid Evans: (laughs) Oh it is? Okay. (laughs)

Kardea Brown: Yeah.

Sid Evans: So one incredibly unique thing about the Gullah people is not just the food, but the language.

Kardea Brown: Mm-hmm.

Sid Evans: Did you grow up hearing that all the time?

Kardea Brown: To this very day. Yes. I for some reason never picked up an accent. It's the weirdest thing (laughs). What you hear now is fragments of authentic Gullah speaking people. You'll have some elders that are still alive that speak authentic Gullah dialect. What they call broken English. It really isn't broken English. It's a form of a Patois. It's a collection of West African language and American Southern language. And so it's a collection of all of these different tribes that were in one area where, you know, you had a tribe that was from Ghana or a tribe that was from Nigeria. They didn't speak the same language. In order for them to communicate on these plantations, they had to create a language where all of them understood. So, when you meet someone that has never been to Charleston and they meet someone that's from one of the sea islands and they have that thick Gullah accent, they always say, "Oh, are you from the Caribbean?" At one point it was called a broken language but it was really just a way of communication for enslaved African people in the South.

Sid Evans: So it's more something that you understand and you know what everybody's saying, but you're not necessarily speaking it when you're home.

Kardea Brown: Yeah, no, it's just certain things that we say, again, because I don't speak authentic Gullah, you know. I would be considered Geechee. When I was around my family that spoke authentic Gullah dialect and I would pick up on that, my grandmother, because she moved away and became, you know, very educated, during the time when she was growing up in the '50's and '60's it was considered bad to talk that way. And that's not because she didn't appreciate where she came from. It was just that she was taught that speaking like that was wrong. And that if you wanted to go anywhere in life, if you wanted to get an education, you've gotta learn how to speak proper English. And so when I would pick up on the accent, and it's probably related to why I don't really speak the language now is because my grandmother would always say, "Don't talk like that. That's broken English." You know, "Enunciate your

words. Pronounce your words. Speak correct English.” And so I understand it fully, but just don't speak it because I was taught not to. But I'm picking up on it again.

Sid Evans: Well, and hopefully that's changing and there's more of an effort to really preserve this language.

Kardea Brown: Absolutely. My grandmother's 81 now. And I realized that, you know, I pray we have, you know, 81 more years together, but realistically I know we don't. And so I've just taken an interest, I would say, over the last 10 years of recording everything – recording my grandmother, the things that she says, and asking her about her mother and her father and how they spoke and what they ate and how they dressed. And so I am using that as something to help me preserve the culture. 'Cause the culture as I know it is very different from the culture when my grandmother was growing up. Or even my mother. 'Cause my mother spent summers in Charleston, because she was actually born in New York when my grandmother moved away, but my mother spent most of her childhood in Charleston and she moved back and went to Middleton High School in Charleston. And so my mother, as well, had a different experience than I did. Because my mother would tell me stories of how she would go to Wadmalaw where her grandparents were, my great grandparents, and would, like, you know, skin a chicken and do all of these things. I'm like, "I didn't do that." (laughs) So I'm, I'm keeping these stories from my mother, my grandmother and I'm using that to help preserve it and one of those ways is this cookbook.

Sid Evans: Well, I wanna talk recipes for a second. And you did a traveling supper club for a while and I wanna ask you about a- a recipe that's in your book and that you used to do with the supper club and it's called a swamp water. What's the story behind that and how do I make it? (laughs)

Kardea Brown: So (laughs) the swamp water was something that was always served with each meal. And it's basically homemade lemonade, homemade tea, and ginger beer. So it has a, a snap to it, but it's one of those things that, it doesn't look the best (laughs).

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: But it tastes amazing. It looks swampish. And so-

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: ...we named it swamp water because guests at the supper club were drinking it like it was just plain water. Like, chugging it back. It's like, "We'll just call it swamp water. It looks swampy to me."

Sid Evans: Now did this have alcohol in it or was it just a nonalcoholic thing?

Kardea Brown: It could either be nonalcoholic, but most of the time because the type of supper clubs I threw, it was a party, we would add some bourbon to it.

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: Mm-hmm.

Sid Evans: And get the party rolling, I'm sure.

Kardea Brown: Absolutely.

Sid Evans: (laughs) So, Kardea, what is a Gullah dish that's always on your Thanksgiving table?

Kardea Brown: Mmm. Several. We have Gullah red rice. oh gosh, our chewies. That's always on the dessert table. We make oyster stuffing. We make oyster rice. Because you know of course oysters are in season in November. You know, we always remember oysters are in season with the months that have an R in it. So, September, October, November, December, January, February, March, April. We don't eat oysters after that. Oh my gosh, our seafood pasta, our hot water cornbread. Our Thanksgiving tables are... it's insane.

Sid Evans: Well, and if you get all those cousins cooking, I'm guessing you get a little bit of everything.

Kardea Brown: Oh my gosh. And two or three of the same things. And so (laughs) like, how many sweet potato pies can we have? We make sweet potato pone, that's another dish that's in the cookbook as well. It's shredded sweet potatoes. It's made with cinnamon and sugar and it's almost like a sweet potato casserole with the flavors of sweet potato pie.

Sid Evans: And I wanted to ask you about crab rice. Is that something that you grew up with or that you still like to make?

Kardea Brown: We definitely grew up on crab rice. We would take the blue crab, we would go crabbing on the crab traps, get the crabs out, get the blue crab, and hand pick the meat from the blue crab. We didn't have fancy lump crab meat back in those days. So we would get blue crab, hand pick it, and then fry it up with some bell pepper, celery, onions. Take that blue crab, fry it up in the pan with that Carolina gold rice, you got yourself a meal. You got your protein, you got your carb, and you wanna consider your veggies, you know, your bell peppers, your mirepoix, that's all in one dish. So I grew up eating that and I still do.

Sid Evans: I also love the idea of these fried grits balls with Tasso ham-

Kardea Brown: Mmm.

Sid Evans: ... that you have in the book. Those look amazing.

Kardea Brown: With that hot pepper jelly. Man. I don't know about anyone else, but every time I make a pot of grits, I always make too much. I could be making it for one person and I am gonna make at least three cups of grits. And so what I've learned to do, and that's where this recipe came from, is take that day old pot of grits and take it out, form a ball with some ham and some cheese, coat it, fry it, dip in hot pepper jelly, you have yourself another meal. It's like reinventing those day old grits. It's delicious.

Sid Evans: I just love that. I got so excited looking at that picture this morning I (laughs)-

Kardea Brown: (laughs)

Sid Evans: ...I thought, "I've gotta have one of those."

Kardea Brown: Oh my gosh.

Sid Evans: So Kardea, you're in your seventh season of 'Delicious Miss Brown.' Is that right?

Kardea Brown: Mm-hmm. I am. I am and it's doing really well.

Sid Evans: That's so great to see. I just love that it continues to attract new fans and keep going. But I also know that it must be a ton of work to produce and to keep the show going on your end.

Kardea Brown: Mm-hmm.

Sid Evans: How do you keep up the pace and how do you keep the creative fire burning? I mean, what is it that drives you to wanna keep producing that show season after season?

Kardea Brown: I think- I know what keeps me going is that this is my purpose. You know, it's the reason why I feel that I'm here because not only am I cooking and doing what I love, I'm also preserving my culture. And so long after my mother and my grandmother and, you know, all the other elderly people, you know, el- elders in my family are gone, I have something to keep their memory and our legacy alive with this show. 'Cause it means so much. Having a show, being a Southern girl and being from Wadmalaw and West Ashley, it doesn't happen all the time. That's just not a regular thing. You know, I don't have a culinary background. I didn't go to culinary school. I am literally someone who just loved to cook. And I have a fascinating story to tell. You always hear about people getting these, these shows and they last one or two seasons and you never hear from them again. And so I didn't want that to be my story because I knew that this show was a gift from God and it's something that I need to hold on to as long as I can. And so that keeps me motivated season after season, year after year, even when I'm tired. 'Cause I, I go from 'Delicious Miss Brown' to filming 'Spring Baking Championship.' Like, I'm here in Knoxville now and I'm motivated because I know that this doesn't happen often and I'm blessed. And so, why not just take full advantage of all that is right now?

Sid Evans: Well, Kardea, now you've got this wonderful book, and you've put so much of that into this book and I just think it's, it's great that you can share your story through that as well. It's really beautifully done and, um, I can't wait for people to see it.

Kardea Brown: Thank you and I can't wait for people to read it because I think this book is... You know, I get that question a lot of like, you know, "How did you start? Where did you come from? How'd you get a show?" Like, "What's all of this about?" You know, I think the world knows 'Delicious Miss Brown,' but this book is introducing the world to Kardea Brown. And I can't wait for people to get to know me.

Sid Evans: Well, Kardea, I just have one more question for you... What does it mean to you to be Southern?

Kardea Brown: It means being the best. (laughs) I'm just joking. We are really cool though. But being Southern is just, it's a sense of pride. 'Cause I really feel like Southern cuisine and Southern culture is the fabric of American culture. And being a Southern woman on top of that, it's pretty cool. You know (laughs).

Sid Evans: (laughs)

Kardea Brown: It's pretty cool. And I'm grateful. I wouldn't have been- I wouldn't have wanted to be born anywhere else other than Charleston, South Carolina.

Sid Evans: Amen to that. Well, Kardea Brown, congrats on the book and thanks so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

Kardea Brown: Thanks Sid.

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins)

Sid Outro: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Kardea Brown. You can visit KardeaBrown.com to preorder her book, find recipes, watch videos, and more. Southern Living is based in Birmingham, Alabama. Be sure to follow Biscuits & Jam on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at southernliving.com/biscuitsandjam. Make sure to come back here next week for my conversation with Oxford, Mississippi chef, Vishwesh Bhatt.

(Music fades)