



## **Food Roots & Today's Pantry: The Multiple Meanings of "Thrifty Know-How" among Older African American Women**

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### **Abstract**

In this article we put the themes of agency, food tradition, and time, into conversation with research on aging and food security to offer an intersectional analysis of older African American women's foodways. In particular, we explore the food provisioning practices of a group of older African American women in the U.S. South. We examine the various ways age, resources (monetary and non-monetary), gender, and Black food traditions shape everyday practices like shopping, cooking, and eating. Additionally, we explore the varied ways participant's past experiences, current social and health, *and* desires for the future contribute to their food choices. This multidimensional approach to understanding the relationship between aging and food moves beyond the point-in-time and income-expenditure frameworks often used in food security research to consider alternative ways of conceptualizing food resources and thrift. We find that participants' practices of thrift, like couponing, buying in bulk, and food budgeting, are not always or only reflective of economic constraints. Rather, we argue that participants' "thrifty know-how" operates as a form of gendered cultural capital that they draw on to navigate changing social and physical conditions and food goals over time. By using an intersectional lens and paying attention to older African-American women's agency, food knowledge, and the role of time – past, present, *and* future – this article makes visible the the complex and dynamic relationship between aging and food.

*Keywords:* foodways; cultural capital; intersectionality; limitations of food security measures



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### Introduction

Much of the existing scholarship on aging and food has assessed food security among older adults (Nord 2003; Frongillo and Horan 2004) or has emphasized the ways that seniors' present-day food habits and nutritional status impact their overall well-being (Wolfe, Frongillo, and Valois 2003; Lee and Frongillo 2001; Ahmed and Haboubi 2010). Both food security and health focused research frequently rely on standardized measurements, like calories and nutrients as markers of nourishment, and standardized assessment tools, like Household Food Security Survey Modules (HFSSM). These point-in-time measurements often treat food as separate from bodies, cultural and historical context, and the environment (Hayes-Conroy 2016). Likewise, food security research often focuses on how economic (income and food expenditures) and other social indicators, such as race, age, and gender (Dean 2011), operate as risk factors for food insecurity (Hall and Brown 2005). The result is often a reductionist perspective on food resources that leaves unexplored the ways that life experiences and individual agency intertwine with other factors to shape food practices and preferences (Wolfe, Frongillo, and Valois 2003; Jones *et al.* 2013). In this article, we begin to bridge this gap, by placing the measurements and concerns emphasized in the aging and food security literature in conversation with the themes of food tradition, gendered food labor, and agency to explore the foodways of a group of older African American women in the U.S. South.

Inspired by calls for intersectional approaches to food studies (Avakian and Haber 2005; Williams-Forsen and Wilkerson 2011) and a Bourdieuan attention to everyday practices, we conceptualize the relationship between aging and food in terms of foodways, or "the cultural and social practices that affect food consumption, including how and what communities eat, where and how they shop and what

motivates their food preferences” (Alkon *et al.* 2013, 127). We suggest that foodways, like habitus, are “shaped by the practical conditions of everyday life,” connected to history, and generative of individual and collective action (Bourdieu 1990, 53). They represent an accumulation of food knowledge and practical competence over time and can be used to meet a variety of social, cultural, and economic goals. Centering on food provisioning practices, we explore the ways a group of older African-American women accumulate and use food resources (fiscal and non-monetary). In particular, participants’ grocery shopping strategies provide an everyday entry point for examining the ways age, gender, income, and Black food traditions shape food preferences over time. We pay particular attention to practices of thrift (Miller 1998), like coupon clipping and shopping at sales, and the different meanings the women in this study attach to these practices as they age. While previous literature on food access and security among older adults often interpret thrift as a cost saving measure, we argue that older African American women’s “thrifty know-how” represents a form of cultural capital (Beagan, Chapman, and Power 2016) that is employed to meet diverse social, cultural, financial, and health goals. This alternative understanding of food resources and thriftiness allows us to see “thrifty know how” as more than a response to economic constraints. Importantly, participants’ childhood food memories, aging appetites, and adjustments to food traditions in the name of health shed light on the ways their food choices not only reflect their past and present, but also their orientation toward the future.

Two assemblages of literature offer touchstones for this paper: studies examining the relationship between aging, health, and food security and research exploring soul food traditions and the gendered labor of foodwork. In keeping with the food security literature, we begin by examining the intersections of age and financial resources as they relate to food insecurity and sites of food acquisition. Pushing beyond the traditional questions of food security, the second section considers how participants’ food memories and childhood lessons about homecooked (and often homegrown) food link to their contemporary food practices, as revealed through their reflections on changes in the quality of food and their food preferences over time. We then examine how participants’ shopping strategies, especially practices of thrift, reflect the dynamic intersection of age, income, and gender and point to the ways “thrifty know how” is deployed to navigate changing household dynamics, tastes, and physical conditions. In the final section, we place participants’ changing food practices into conversation with their expressed desires for longevity and health. Here, participants’ emphasis on food as a means of supporting their health and future aspirations, draws attention to an often-omitted time horizon in research on aging. Ultimately, our analysis reveals that while financial resources do influence some seniors’ food purchasing and eating habits, their practices are equally shaped by food preferences and values cultivated in childhood, gendered patterns of foodwork (Counihan 2009), and age-related health goals. By tracing the overlapping influences of resources, time, and agency on participants’ food provisioning strategies, this article makes visible the complexity of older African American women’s foodways and points to the need for research that examines the relationship between food and aging in terms of both potential constraints *and* productive possibilities.

### **Aging and food through the lens of food tradition and gendered Labor**

Scholarly attention to the relationship between food and aging has often examined the relationship between age, food insecurity (Nord 2003; Frongillo and Horan 2004), and health (Lee and Frongillo

2001; Frongillo and Horan 2004). Focused primarily on the economic, physical, and social constraints of older age, food security scholars argue that concurrent events, such as, fixed income, limited mobility, and restricted social networks, may increase seniors' likelihood of food insecurity (Nord 2003; Quandt and Rao 1999). Frongillo and Horan (2004) found that not only did physical impairment and limited transportation pose challenges to a senior's ability to purchase groceries and prepare meals, but seniors on fixed incomes often rationed and spent money allotted for food provisions on household expenses and health and medical costs, resulting in a lower nutritional intake. While seniors' income and food expenditures do shape their food security, Jones *et. al* (2013) suggest that such studies overlook the many strategies that seniors use to obtain food. For example, Oemichen and Smith (2016) found that SNAP and congregant meals were important forms of food support among low income seniors in Minnesota. Similarly, other researchers have explored the ways alternative food provisioning strategies, like food rationing, gardens, and social networks serve as "coping skills" (Green-LaPierre *et al.* 2012), buffering mechanisms (Wellman *et al.* 1997), and protective factors (Goldberg and Mawn 2014) against food insecurity. Our analysis suggests that seniors' use of cost-saving measures, like using coupons and buying in bulk or eating at senior centers, is not fully explained by financial constraints, nutritional necessity, or as a safeguard against food insecurity. Rather, our participants use thrifty practices for a variety of reasons: to ensure they have the types of foods they prefer, to provide food resources for others, and as a marker of their self-sufficiency.

Other scholars have taken a life course approach to understanding older adults' food choices, nutrition patterns, and food security. Falk *et al.* (1996) emphasize the need to understand food choice as a process that includes interactions between seniors' experiences over the life course, their ideals, food needs and resources (financial and non-financial), and their personal system for negotiating the value of food. Green-LaPierre *et al.* (2012), using an ecological systems approach, found that the women in their study did not self-identify as food insecure, despite noting access barriers, like transportation, income limits, and not having access to foods that meet their health needs. The authors suggest that seniors' experiences of living through and surviving economically difficult periods in the past have shaped their worldview in ways that run counter to current understandings of food insecurity. By considering the ways past experiences influence seniors' present-day food resourcing strategies, the life course perspective offers a more dynamic view of food resources, acquisition patterns, and preferences. At the same time, it does not account for the future – how and why present-day foodways might change to meet a future goal. In this article, we highlight the ways the women in this study are future-focused, situating their decisions to give up or adjust food traditions or return to a way of eating from their past in context of their pursuit of health and longevity.

For many Black Americans, soul food is synonymous with cultural tradition. Sometimes referred to as "down home" or "country food," Adrian Miller (2013) argues that soul food signifies shared memory, historical consciousness, and movement of enslaved people and traditions across the Atlantic Ocean and later within the United States. While enslaved persons' diets varied based on rations, whether they lived in urban or rural settings, and whether they could plant a garden, they frequently included cabbage, turnips, cucumbers, hull peas, and other vegetables as well as meat, cornmeal, and molasses (2013, 19-23). Post-emancipation, many of these vegetable and meat staples continued to be part of

African American people's diets and food tradition, particularly as they left the south and relocated throughout the United States during the great migration of the twentieth century. Soul food, as it came to be called in the north (Poe 1999), has been characterized in diverse ways over time. Prior to the 1950s, it was disparaged for its association with southern-ness, preparation strategies, and unhealthiness (Poe 1999; Opie 2010). By the 1970s, it was heralded as an important symbol of urban, collective Black identity (Miller 2013; Henderson 2007). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, soul food has been variously portrayed in film and on TV as a source of matriarchal love, an expression of family and cultural strength (Williams-Forsen 2006), as well as a serious health risk (Nettles 2007). The multiple representations and meanings of soul food over time not only reveal its complexities as a food tradition, but also suggest the importance of both personal and social history in understanding the roles these foods play in people's lives. In this article, seniors' memories of and reflections on the food items and preparation styles associated with a soul food tradition, which they refer to as "country food" or "homegrown" food, provide an important lens for understanding food preferences, changes in diet, and gendered labor over time. Moreover, their decisions to adopt or adjust these food traditions echo the complex representations of soul food in both popular and medical discourses.

Foodways can reveal the intersection of financial resources, race, and gender in important ways, particularly for African American women in the southern United States (Liburd 2003; Henderson 2007). The reproductive labor of planning and preparing meals often falls on the shoulders of women (Williams-Forsen and Wilkerson 2011; Counihan 2009) and shapes the ways women maintain their sense of identity and navigate their changing role and status in the household as they age (Plastow, Atwal, and Gilhooly 2015; Davidson, Arber, and Marshall 2009). Particularly relevant to this project are studies that have examined women's agency in resource constrained contexts. Counihan (2009) explores how women use food-related skills to meet their personal and household needs. Her analysis reveals the complex ways that the kitchen and cooking skills served to both reproduce gendered expectations within the household and create spaces for women to cultivate expertise in particular dishes. Counihan argues that such skills offered a site of agency, earning women appreciation at home, as well as social recognition within the community and, in some cases, income to support their families. Page-Reeves (2014) considers how everyday food acquisition practices are gendered responses to food constraints. She suggests that the Hispanic women in her study developed "food access expertise," including stretching food resources, making do with what was available, and drawing on a mix of social networks and food benefit programs, in order to feed their families. Similar to Counihan, Page-Reeves argues that such practices demonstrate personal resilience as well as resistance to structural inequalities (2014, 100). Importantly, the author's attention to agency in relationship to gendered food labor underscores the ways that material resources can be transformed into new forms of value and meaning for women, their families, and communities. For the older African American women in this study, "thrifty know-how" is a form of expertise used in different ways according to resources, age, tastes, and desires. Actions associated with gendered food work (Counihan 2009), like extending food budgets, feeding friends and family, ensuring their access to cultural food preferences, and reducing food preparation time, are expressions of agency. Participants not only employ "thrifty know-how" to accomplish personal, household, and social aims, but interpret their ability to acquire and manage their food resources as evidence of self-reliance (Reese 2018).

## Methods

This paper draws on a study of seniors' food resources and food security that was conducted during a qualitative program evaluation of a health and wellness curriculum offered in four senior centers in Memphis, TN from 2015-2016. We employed a phased, mixed methods approach to learn about seniors' foodways, including a food resources survey, focus groups, and interviews. The primary research team was composed of a middle-aged white faculty member, Katherine Lambert-Pennington, and an African American research assistant, who was pursuing a Master's degree in Applied Anthropology, Lyndsey Pender.<sup>1</sup> Overall, 93 participants took part in one or more of the research activities. Participants ranged in age from 50 to 94 years old; however, the majority (61%; n=42) were in the 60-69 age range at the time of this research. Most participants identified as women (91%; n=85), which is consistent with the gendered attendance of senior centers nationally (Pardasani, Sporre, and Thompson 2009, 51) and 74% (n=69) of these women identified as African American. The high rate of African American women's participation reflects both the geographic location of the four senior centers in neighborhoods with a high percentage of African American residents (84% or greater), and the overall population of Memphis.<sup>2</sup>

In this article we focus on the foodways of older African American women in an effort to address a qualitative gap in the aging and food literature. We draw on data from a food resources survey (n=69), four focus groups (n=38), and one-on-one interviews (n=35). The food resources survey primarily focused on factors considered important to food access and security, such as where respondents shop, modes of transportation, daily food consumption, and participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a federal program that supplements recipients' food budgets. Only 10% (n=7) of participants in this study reported living with children under the age of 18. Thus, we modeled the questions related to food security after the FSSM second-level screening tool, which was designed to measure moderate food security in households without children (Bickel *et al.* 2000, 8). The research team administered the survey at the end of a class session and were on hand to answer seniors' questions about the survey and assist anyone requiring help to complete the survey. Focus group and interview questions generated animated discussions about seniors' food-related activities, like shopping and cooking, as well as reflections on food choices and eating preferences and how these may have changed over time. Interviews and focus groups were conducted on-site at the four senior centers. Focus groups were led by the research team with assistance from note takers, who documented the discussions as they unfolded. These notes were then transcribed. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The overlap of seniors participating in focus groups and interviews worked as an extended conversation about participants' foodways.

We used the Qualtrics survey software to analyze the survey data. We coded focus group and interview data manually, using key themes connected with participants' food provisioning practices, like shopping, couponing, freezing, economic constraints, choice, and health. Then, drawing inspiration from Devine (2005), we coded for themes related to changes in foodways over time, including eating and cooking habits, food preferences, and childhood food memories. Finally, we systematically compared coded data by age and income categories. To access the shifting and nuanced experiences of



aging in relationship to food, we used four age groups: under 60, 60-69, 70-79, and over 80. Additionally, we included three income categories: resource restricted (participants with income less than 200% of the poverty line), resource constrained (income of \$2,000-3,499 per month) and resource flexible (income \$3,500 or greater). These comparisons helped us better understand not only how these material and social identity factors shape participants' food related practices, but also enabled us to explore diverse meanings participants attribute to them over time.

### Financing food

Seniors' food provisioning practices, especially their shopping, preparation, and eating habits, reflect how they negotiate various types of desire and constraint, including income, food availability, and personal preferences. These are all key factors in food security. Participants' financial resources varied widely, ranging from less than \$750 a month to over \$5,000 a month; however, the majority of survey respondents, 65%, (n=45), are resource restricted, reporting annual earnings under \$24,000. Twenty-eight percent of respondents (n=19) are resource constrained, reporting incomes between and \$2,000-2,999 a month. Resource flexible participants, those earning more than \$3,000 per month, make up 7% (n=5) of the survey respondents. Notably, approximately 51% (n=23) of resource restricted seniors are aged 60-69 (see Figure 1). The high poverty rate among the participants in this age range might be partially explained by the number of women under the age of 65 (n=13; 57%). They are not yet eligible for social security or Medicare and thus fall into an age-income gap.

### Economic Resources by Age Group

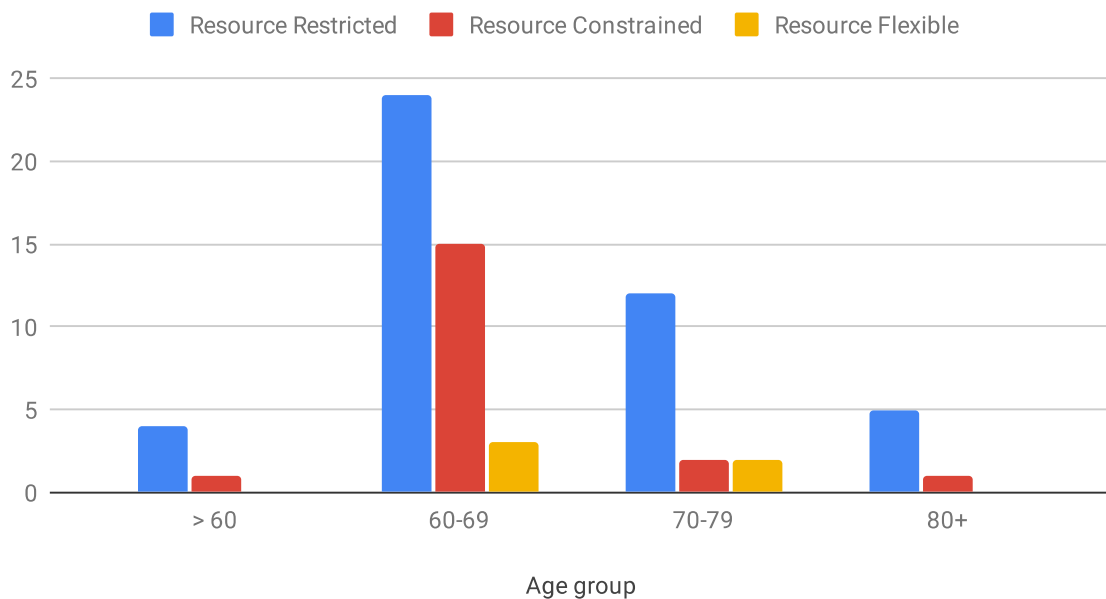


Figure 1: Economic Resources by Age Group

Seniors' financial resources play an important, but not always predictable, role in food security. Although 42% of participants reported incomes below the poverty threshold, traditionally a risk factor for food insecurity, the majority of the women in this study (91%; n=63) are food secure. Nine percent (n=6) of respondents, however, reported experiencing two or more characteristics of insecurity during the previous month, including anxiety about running out of food (6%; n=4), skipping meals (7%; n=5); not having enough to eat at some point during the previous 30 days (6%; n=4); and/or weight loss (4%; n=3). These findings can be interpreted as food insecurity without hunger (Bickel *et al.* 2000) and correlate with age and income in interesting ways. While a finding of 9% is slightly higher than the overall national rate of food insecurity, which is almost 8% (Coleman-Jensen *et al.* 2018, 18), it is significantly lower than the national rate of food insecurity among low-income households or households headed by African American women, which is 31.6% and 22.5%, respectively (*ibid* 2018, 13). Of the 9% (n=6) of women that reported two or more characteristics of food insecurity, 66% (4 of 6) reported incomes under the poverty line and 50% (n=3) were under the age of 65. This suggests that lack of social security benefits can contribute to food precarity.

Regardless of food security status, participants across age and income categories emphasized their ability to shop for themselves and to pay for their food without relying on help from family members. The federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), often colloquially referred to as food stamps, is an important source of economic assistance for 16% (n=11) of the women in this study. This represents less than half of the total number of participants eligible for the program (42%, n=29), which is determined based on household incomes below the 2015 poverty threshold (\$973 and \$1,311 for households of 1 or 2, respectively). Participants' low rate of SNAP usage is not uncommon. Nationally, only 43% of eligible senior citizens receive support from SNAP (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2015). Focus group participants offered several explanations for why they do not use SNAP. Some women said they were ineligible due to their income, while others felt that accessing these benefits carried a stigma. Still, others pointed to reasons like transportation challenges and long wait times at the Department of Human Services office. These explanations echo findings by Oemichen and Smith (2016), Guthrie and Lin (2002), and Page-Reeves (2014, 96). Additionally, two participants reported receiving SNAP in the past, but chose not to re-enroll because the monetary benefit was too low (under \$10 per month) to make a difference in their overall food budget.

These findings suggest that income, SNAP usage, and other demographic characteristics, like gender, race, and age, are imperfect indicators of food insecurity (Jones *et al.* 2013; Wolfe, Frongillo, and Valois 2003). While financial resources shape the possibilities for our participants' food provisioning practices, their overall low rate of food insecurity and minimal participation in federal benefits programs suggest a dynamic interplay between age, resources, food provisioning practices, and preferences. At the same time, temporal factors like age-based eligibility for social security highlight the importance of understanding older women's fiscal status as fluid over time. Moreover, these findings call for a broader consideration of food resources. Thus, in the next two sections we explore how the intersection of income, non-financial resources, particularly food traditions, personal history, and gendered food know-how, inform participants' food preferences and shopping strategies.



## Food Roots & Today's Pantry

Our participants' contemporary food practices represent accumulated food knowledge drawn from their previous life experiences and food traditions. Regardless of income, age or whether or not the women in this study grew up in urban or rural environments, many participants described growing up on "homegrown" foods like mustard greens, corn bread, cabbage, potatoes, chicken, tomatoes, okra, and peppers. In doing so, they often pointed to the specific foods and values they were taught in childhood, and compared them with food today. For example, Cat remembered, "My mom's main vegetable for my dad was like greens and string beans. My father didn't feel like it was a meal if we didn't have greens and string beans. Well now, I don't cook greens." Many participants, like Rene, pointed to "momma's kitchen" as the place where they learned how to cook. She recalled growing up in the 1950s "in the country" and said, "I was like 10 and 11 years old in the kitchen watching my momma put meals together. She made sure we had vegetables every day. If it wasn't turnip greens, it was collard greens or pinto beans or black-eyed peas, or baked chicken and stuff like that." Rene was not alone in describing some of the staples associated with soul food. "Homegrown" foods were also an important part of Betty's city-based childhood. She explained, "My momma had a garden. I love vegetables. I'm a vegetable person and I still love vegetables. I was raised on vegetables." These food memories highlight both the importance of vegetables and the gendered labor of food preparation in their childhood households. Women, usually mothers and sisters, and sometimes men, often fathers, played important key roles in planting, picking, slaughtering, and preparing the homegrown foods. Moreover, "Momma's kitchen" served as a gendered site for both cooking instruction and the preservation of traditions and tastes.

In addition to food knowledge and cultural traditions, participants often reflected on the values their parents attached to these practices and compared them with today. For example, Elise recalled, "We had a huge garden, we had chickens and eggs. . . . We got milk from the cows. My big sister used to milk the cows. We had everything we needed. The food now is so processed." Other participants like Sandra, linked her parents self-reliance to her to decision to prioritize eating unprocessed foods. She explained, "It's always been a part of my lifestyle to raise my own food and eat healthy foods. I saw my mom and my dad [do that] back in the day. We had to depend on our gardens and canned our own foods and prepared our own foods." For other women, the shift from fresh to processed food and increased levels of food waste mark the differences between past and present. As Lottie, now in her eighties, recalled, "My parents came up in the Depression. They taught us the value of fresh foods and not wasting anything." She contrasted these experiences with the food habits she sees among her grandchildren, which she described as "convenience food, TV, and fast food." Similarly, Judy, in her seventies, said "You didn't have to freeze it like we do now, and it was better for us. Cornbread, biscuit, we didn't have to get no biscuit out the cans and stuff like that. That's what I enjoyed. I miss that." These childhood food memories serve as signposts for contemporary food practices. Participants' preference for homegrown foods, emphasis on self-reliance, avoiding waste, and concern about fresh versus processed foods speak to the ways lessons learned in "mamma's kitchen" cultivated particular values and tastes (Bourdieu 1984) and mark changes in the food system and their access to it over time (Devine 2005). It also lays the groundwork for understanding why and how participants accumulate and use food resources in particular ways.

Today, the women in this study acquire most of their food from grocery stores and prepare food for themselves at home; however, a small number of participants also noted accessing food from personal gardens, farmers markets, restaurants, and senior centers. They cited fruits and vegetables as their first and second most important foods to have in their households, followed by cereal, bread, and other grains, and then meat, chicken, and fish (see Figure 2). Although not ranked in the top four, eggs and milk, were frequently noted as important. These rankings mirror the Southeastern Dietetic Association's soul food recommendations, which suggest grains provide the base (6-11 servings), followed by vegetables and fruits (5-9 servings), and milk and meats (4-6 servings) (Soul Food Pyramid 1998 cited in Nettles 2007, 110). While most women, regardless of financial resources, preferred fresh fruits and vegetables, they also regularly incorporated frozen vegetables and canned fruits depending on seasonality, affordability, and/or deals they could get at the store.

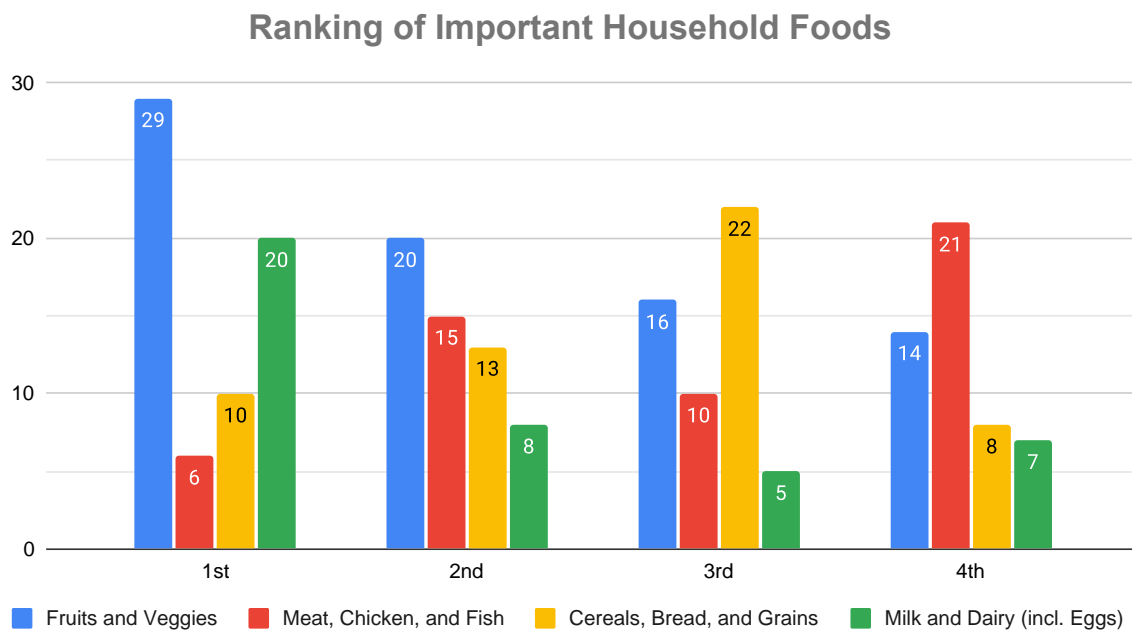


Figure 2: Important Household Foods

Participants placed a similar emphasis on fresh, healthy foods when deciding to eat at senior centers. Approximately 22% (n=15) of participants ate lunch at the senior center at least once a week. While senior food programs are often cited as providing a food safety net for older adults, eating at the senior center was not a given, despite the low cost of the meals (\$1-4 depending on the senior center). Rather, than cost, participants stressed that the healthiness of the food and personal tastes were their primary considerations. For example, Portia, who is in her seventies, explained, "They serve lunch at [my] senior center and it's a well-balanced meal. They have meat, two vegetables, we always have milk, and, it is not too salty. We don't ever have any fried foods." Participants' attention to the homecooked quality of senior center food and the emphasis they place on maintaining a selection of unprocessed childhood staples like vegetables, meat, and dairy in their homes, further suggest the ways taste and values cultivated in childhood shape the foods they eat and assign meaning to in the present. Further,

participants' rankings begin to shed light on the more than cost-saving role of thrifty practices. In the next section, we closely examine participants' thrifty shopping strategies to further probe the ways financial and non-financial resources, aging, and gender inform their food acquisition strategies.

### **Thrifty know how as cultural capital**

During focus groups, questions about shopping produced lively discussions in which the women compared notes on where to find the freshest vegetables, the best ways to find deals in stores, and which store apps they had on their phones. These exchanges revealed, that participants, like their mothers before them, take an active role in acquiring and preparing food for their households. In doing so, they draw on a repertoire of practices, such as food budgets and lists, as well as couponing, watching sales, and buying in bulk and freezing. The varied ways participants use thrift to acquire and prepare food resources constitutes their "thrifty know how." These skills, knowledge, and values represent a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) that brings to light the overlapping influences of income, age, and gendered labor on food practices. In what follows as we explore how participants use "thrifty know how" in a variety of ways to navigate social and physical changes that accompany aging.

Practices of thrift were pervasive among the participants in this study, regardless of income; however, which strategies participants used and how they used them varied by income and age. In particular, budgets and lists were used by both low and high income shoppers. Participants with more limited resources employed them as an economic safeguard, while others used lists to organize their shopping. Buying in bulk and freezing, not only contributed to savings, but also allowed women across income groups to have ongoing access to preferred foods, reduce their food-related labor, and meet household food needs. Resource restricted participants described using a mix of strategies, such as knowing exactly how much items cost or waiting until payday to do grocery shopping, as well as maintaining lists of things that need to be purchased and stocking up when things go on sale. For example, Elise tried to strike a balance between having the foods she needs and making sure nothing goes to waste. She explained, "I do have a freezer, but I don't want to get overstocked. I can't afford to throw away food. I might have two three things of chicken and fish. I just get enough to carry over for short time. Just in case something takes place." Similarly, Judy who is in her seventies, explained, "I use coupons, and I shop wisely. I look in my pantry and see what I really need. I look in my deep freezer. . . . Now, I'm putting up my food for the winter. I went to the market and got me some peas and stuff like that. . . . Frozen food and frozen vegetables. . ." Stocking up on particular items when they go on sale and freezing foods allow Elise and other resource restricted participants to stretch their food resources if money is tight or they are unable to shop due to illness or schedule conflicts. For these women, avoiding waste, a lesson reinforced in childhood, also translates into saving on food costs.

Importantly, as Judy suggests above, not all resource restricted participants viewed buying in bulk and freezing strictly in terms of financial savings. Some participants use this strategy to ensure they have access to seasonal or preferred foods or to prepare several days-worth of food at a time. For example, Alice, who is 80, buys in bulk and freezes so she will have snap peas throughout the year. She explained, ". . . I put them in those freezer bags so it can keep. You can freeze your stuff -- you can start now and have it up to next year in the summer." Other resource restricted seniors, like Byrdie, who is in her

seventies, use this strategy to feed themselves and others. She said, "I get the big thing of chicken and I cook it, and I freeze enough for me and if somebody comes over -- they'll get this other part. And then I fix cornbread and I cut it up. I keep it cooked cause I don't like cooking every day." Similarly, Tess, who is in her late sixties and resource constrained, also bought in bulk for both efficiency and of savings. She said, "I usually go to [membership-based food warehouse] and I get what we need. I separate it, because it's only my husband and I. I even season it before I put it in the freezer, if it's meat. I don't run back and forth to the store." For Tess, buying in bulk results in lower food costs and enables her to scale and season her bulk food purchases for the size and tastes of her two-person household. Moreover, practices like preparing food ahead of time and freezing it, allows participants to minimize the gendered, reproductive labor of cooking and shopping, waste less food, support social relationships and personal tastes, and potentially avoid overspending or over-buying.

Notably, participants with more financial resources engaged in some of the same strategies as their peers with greater budgetary constraints, but often to different ends. Many resource flexible seniors reported buying in bulk and freezing, but few used lists other than for organizational purposes. For example, Cat, who is in her seventies and lives in a multigenerational household, detailed her thrifty shopping strategy, saying, "I'm a coupon queen. I clip coupons all the time... My daughter does the grocery shopping and I do the separating of the food because we buy in abundance – in bulk. I wash and season it, separate it how we gonna cook it, and we freeze it." Her self-description as a "coupon queen" highlights the pride she takes in getting a deal and underscores the gendered labor of food acquisition. Cat's expertise and effort to prepare the food for freezing both deepen the household food resources and shorten the time it takes to prepare these foods in the future. Moreover, the mother-daughter team's division of labor both accommodates Cat's difficulty walking long distances and allows her to maintain a leading (queen) role in the managing the household's food resources. Thus, for households like Cat's that can afford to buy in abundance, these practices are less about economic necessity than about meaningfully contributing to foodwork (Counihan 2009) and meeting food preferences and tastes.

Couponing and buying in bulk were not currently practiced by all participants. Seniors who no longer use this shopping strategy cited age, and changes in household size and configuration as reasons for this shift. For instance, Anne, who is in her eighties and resource restricted, described how her changing economic circumstances and age have shaped her food provisioning practices over time. She said, "I used to cut coupons, but my daughter said to me one day, 'Mother, stop buying all this food. Your closets are full and you don't have room anymore.' When I didn't have enough, I would buy what I wanted and as a result I would have too much and end up giving away most of it... Now, I've learned to buy what I need and I don't waste anything." Anne's conversation with her daughter highlights the way her caretaker role has changed as she has transitioned from household matriarch and cook to living alone and cooking for one. Not all seniors have fully transitioned their shopping habits. Wanda, who is in her seventies, also described no longer using coupons and trying to curtail her food purchases. She explained, "I don't go to the store that much. Seniors don't eat a whole lot and I over-buy when I go. Well you know, I'm used to buying for a big family and I'm having a hard time cutting it back." While coupon clipping and buying in bulk was a helpful strategy an earlier point in their lives, both Anne's

and Wanda's reflections reveal the ways these habits can lead to over buying and food waste in the present. They further suggest the ways older women's adjust their foodways to accommodate changes in household size, decreases in appetite, and shifts in income.

Whether shopping, clipping coupons, or buying in bulk and freezing, participants' food acquisition activities are a form of gendered labor. Moreover, their "thrifty know how" reflects a high level of skill and knowledge of food planning and preparation. It allows the participants to provide for themselves and others in their households, maintain a variety of foods in their homes, particularly vegetables and meats, and take advantage of deals offered by sales and bulk purchases. While the majority of participants experience economic constraints and may use thrifty practices out of necessity, our findings suggest other key factors are also at play. Shifts in shopping and eating habits reveal the intersection of age and gender as participants accommodate lifestyle and life changes, particularly transitions in household make up and gender roles, from mother and/or wife to single person and/or grandmother with multi-generational obligations. Moreover, their emphasis on not wasting food crossed income categories but had different meanings. For some resource restricted women, not wasting food was a resource saving measure and an act of thriftiness. For those participants whose household size and/or appetite had decreased, not wasting food translated into the absence of thrifty practices. Participants' attention to food waste echoes the lessons of self-sufficiency they learned in their mothers' kitchens. Likewise, seniors' practices of stocking up on seasonal foods allow them to prioritize the tastes and food traditions they have developed over time.

### **Eating (or not) for longevity**

Healthy foods and healthy eating are a part of participants' past food experiences and shape which foods they buy and keep in their homes, as well as what and where they choose to eat. Accordingly, these practices are central to how they plan for the future, a temporal consideration often missing from studies of food and aging. Participants from across income and age categories identified food as a means of disease prevention and treatment for some of the chronic health conditions they face, including hypertension (56%, n=39), high cholesterol (38%, n=26), arthritis or rheumatic disease (36%, n=25), and diabetes (22%, n=19). For some participants eating healthy in the present equates with the ability to be self-reliant in the future. Margaret explained "as you get older your body gets smarter and lets you know when things are bad for you. You get more focused on health, since you're going to be on your own." Mary, who is in her mid-sixties, is similarly future-oriented. She explained, "My health has the biggest influence on my diet. Because I want to maintain my health. I want to be healthy. I want to live long. I want to start seeing the oldest grandchildren graduate next year and then they are going to college." Significantly, participants' awareness of the impact of food on their physical bodies and the links they made between healthy eating and longevity translated into actions like prioritizing or omitting specific foods and eating less. These steps often meant calling on and navigating soul food traditions in a variety of ways.

Interviewees frequently mentioned cutting back on or omitting salt, sugar, and pork, which they linked to particular health conditions like hypertension, diabetes, and high cholesterol. For participants like Eli, who is in her seventies, this meant changing the way she prepares certain foods. Although she grew

up eating her mother's homegrown cooking, she has adjusted how she prepares these dishes, saying, "My health tells me: watch your salt intake. You can't cook with ham hocks like mama did. You got to get those turkey necks and season your food or get the bouillon cubes and season your food. I miss that part, but I have to adjust and I have adjusted." Eli is not the only senior that has revised a soul food tradition with a healthy future in mind. Cat recalled bacon, cooked in her mother's well-worn skillet, as one of her favorite foods growing up; however, she noted, "We've come off of pork. We don't do pork anymore. At first, I didn't like turkey bacon, now I like turkey bacon." While Eli and Cat substituted ingredients, others participants, reduced their intake certain foods. Pam described cutting down on pork, saying "I had a smothered pork chops yesterday with gravy. I ate one of them. That was it. . . . Pork ain't too good for you, especially when you got hypertension." As these examples suggest, participants readily combined their health and food knowledge to adjust, rather than abandon, mother-taught food traditions to meet their present-day health concerns. Importantly, these choices are further reflected in the ways participants shop, the foods they prioritize having in their homes, and how they use their "thrifty know how" to secure preferred food resources.

For other seniors, healthy eating meant eating lighter and eating less. Approximately half of the seniors we interviewed talked about having smaller appetites, eating smaller portions or less often, and cooking less than in previous periods in their life. For example, Judy explained, "I don't eat as much as I used to. I'm easy to get full. . . . I get full by just looking at a lot of food and stuff." Other seniors described how their eating habits have shifted toward "lighter" foods that do not require cooking, like sandwiches or salads. Mary described her late afternoon meal in the following way, "I just eat a salad -- something light, especially if I eat lunch here [at the senior center]." Such changes in eating habits are not unusual for aging adults, as decreased food intake due to biological and activity changes, particularly shifts in olfactory and taste sensitivities (Morely 2001) as well as changes to the digestive system, hormones, disease, and pain (Pilgrim *et al.* 2015), often lead to changes in appetite. The prevalence of eating less among the older women in this study suggests one of the ways food security data may have limited explanatory power, as standard food security instruments do not distinguish between skipping meals due to declining appetite or to avoid running out of food.

Participants' focus on health, whether in the general sense or in relation to a specific health condition, highlights the evolving and temporal condition of foodways. Many women linked their desire for longevity to their food practices, specifically quantity, quality, and the types of foods they put in their bodies. Their attention to health and healthy eating is also reflected in the foods they choose to purchase and eat and the changes they have made in their eating habits as they have aged. For some participants, eating less is an artifact and affirmation of an aging body. For others, avoiding foods that exacerbate underlying health conditions, like diabetes or high blood pressure, also means adjusting soul food traditions. The choices participants make, to alter a family recipe, eat less of a favorite dish, or simply eat less, rely on accumulated knowledge about their bodies, health, and food preparation. These changes not only reveal the intersection of aging, gendered agency, and food traditions, but also highlight the importance of the future for understanding how older African American women position themselves and their foodways in relationship to their physical and social goals for aging.



### **Time, thrift, tradition**

Food is a past, present, and future phenomenon. Foodways are dynamic and the labor of food provisioning is gendered. Income changes, downsizing of households, fluctuation in tastes, appetite and food tradition, desires for longevity, as well as decreases in time and energy spent on food preparation all factor in to how and what foods older African American women acquire and consume. Yet, few of these dynamics are accounted for in traditional, point-in-time food security measurement tools like the HFSSM or in analysis that frames income, race, age, gender, and/or presence of coping mechanisms as risk factors for food insecurity. While these indicators can reveal some things about the relationship between aging and food, they do not offer the complexity or socio-cultural nuance of the intersectional approach offered here. We have put everyday food practices, time, and cultural capital at the center of our analysis and suggested alternative ways to understand how these factors intersect to shape African American women's foodways, whether they are food secure or not. Our analysis reveals that older African American women's food resources are fluid over time. Changing access to age-related benefits, like social security, or use of SNAP can contribute to or lessen food vulnerability, as can changes in physical mobility, access to transportation, and living arrangements. Likewise, standard food security measures, like eating less or skipping meals, can also be accounted for by decreased appetite and changing taste buds, which are part of the physical processes of aging.

Further, we have reconsidered the meanings and purpose of thrifty practices, looking beyond their economic uses and what they might do as buffering mechanisms against food insecurity. While fiscal constraints can and do factor into many seniors' thrifty practices and likely contribute to their food security, this is a narrow view. Examining "thrifty know-how" as a form of gendered cultural capital, makes visible the ways older African American women employ their food expertise and gendered labor to pursue cultural, social, and personal needs, tastes, and desires. Here, understanding the role of past experiences, present conditions, *and* future goals is key. Uses of "thrifty know-how" can be demonstrations of self-reliance and ability to care for self and others, especially as economic, social, and physical circumstances change over time. Likewise, specific food knowledge, including Black food traditions and healthy food practices cultivated in childhood, serves as a resource that older African American women draw on to manage and mitigate the social and health changes that come with aging, as well as meet present-day tastes, and direct their eyes to the future.

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### **Notes**

1. Several additional graduate students assisted on an ad-hoc basis by taking notes at focus groups.

2. Memphis has a population of approximately 653,000. According to American Community Survey 1-year estimates for 2016, 64% of residents are Black/African-American, 25.4% are white, 7% are Hispanic, 1.5% are Asian (<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/memphis-tn/#demographics>).

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