

Interview with John and Gerry Cotton, Owners of St. Cotton Restaurant
Interview by Sydney Addison, Alyson Kinsey, and Taylor Carter, April 17, 2013

John and Geraldine Cotton own St. Cotton, a soul food restaurant in Macon, Georgia. They have been open for over twenty years.

Sydney Addison: Would you like to introduce yourselves?

Mrs. Cotton: I am Gerry Cotton.

Mr. Cotton: And I am John Cotton.

Sydney Addison: Who taught you how to cook, and how old were you?

Mrs. Cotton: When I started cooking, I'm a country girl. I started cooking at age six. My mom taught me and my auntie. From there I grew up just cooking. I went to college, not to cook, but to be a secretary.

Alyson Kinsey: What does food mean to you?

Mrs. Cotton: It's nourishment, and it's good if it's cooked right. I have learned to eat food that doesn't have a lot of seasoning. I have learned to take pork out of food here lately, and use turkey meat instead of pork.

Sydney Addison: Why did you decide to do that?

Mrs. Cotton: Because the Bible teaches us not to eat pork. It is taught at my church. That's one reason. Then, when I read it myself I just stopped doing it. I can make my food taste just as good with turkey meat as I can with fatback.

Mr. Cotton: It has to be smoked turkey meat. That's the seasoning.

Taylor Carter: How does African food relate to southern food?

Mrs. Cotton: How does what now?

Taylor Carter: how does African food relate to southern food?

Mrs. Cotton: I've never had African food before. Southern food is just the way we grew up. We learned from planting a garden to killing hogs at the time or cows and what have you, cleaning them and going through all that to get it like we want, and whatever way to marinade it and season it and put it into what we used to call a cold storage. We put it in the storage and when it came out it was just right. Sometimes we would use a lot of salt to salt it down, because at that time we had no other way of keeping our food other than that way.

Sydney Addison: Why did you open a restaurant?

Mrs. Cotton: Why did I open a restaurant? That was John Cotton's idea. Like I said I started out being a secretary.

Mr. Cotton: Well, I've always wanted to be in business, and there is a long story behind opening up a restaurant. I prayed about and God helped me. I didn't have any money, and believe it or not I started off with five-hundred dollars. God blessed me, and we found a place over on Houston Avenue, and he

rented it to me. Really, I asked God once we got it up, I said, "Lord, I'll be satisfied if you allow me at the end of the month when we done peeked to do forty-thousand dollars for that month. I'll be satisfied. I'm sure we can handle it." We went in the business we got the building ready, the sign up, and the only groceries we had were some drums. We was going to go in that Saturday morning and they was going to season the drums and get it ready. I was going to call my members to come and taste them, and let us know what they thought about our seasoning, how they liked it. Okay, we go in that morning just me and the cooks we were there one of my members he was going to help me. And a man came in with everything lit up; he drove in, walked in. I said, "Yes sir, how can I help you?" He said, "Alright I want to get two fifteen piece and two white and two dark meat." I said, "Okay," and I looked at him. He said, "What's wrong?" I said, "Well, sir we haven't really opened up." He said, "Oh I'm sorry! I thought y'all were wide open man. I was ready for some chicken." So, he left. When he left the Holy Ghost spoke to me and said to go get a case of chicken. So I went and got a case of chicken, and when I got back the place was full of people. My wife and the other two cooks, they had already started cooking and trying to get some stuff together. They came up with the peach cobbler and the way we do our cornbread. We got the chicken, and they started cleaning and getting everything ready, and we rolled all day that Saturday. At that time we were staying open on Sunday. We come back that next day, that Sunday, and we rolled all day. We did that for a solid month just rolling, no advertisement. I don't know how people knew we were open, but it had to be the hand of God. So, at the end of that month we had did forty-thousand. Oh I'm excited now it could be a bad business. So, at the end of the month God had done what I asked him to do. No advertisement. We was new, and God just gave us everything that along with what we already knew and everything was working.

Then, after that month was over I decided then I was going to be like the other business men: I'm going to raise my prices and competitive. Man I haven't made that much since, but that's a good thing, because it gave us time to perfect our food. I came up with the sweet potato pie, me and my wife. We perfected them, and they're one of the best sellers in town. We got the best sweet potato pie. She's the one that made the peach cobbler. She always do that. She's a throw down good cook, oh Lord. At that time we was eating pork, and cooking our vegetables in pork, and look like everything that would work for us God would tell me to come out of it. So I had to stop putting pork in our seasoning, so we just put a smoked turkey neck in our seasoning. We found out that did even better plus we are not going against the will of God. But that don't mean I don't sell pork. I sell pork. Anybody want a pork chop. I sell you one today. Anything that we got here that got any pork and you request it, we'll sell it. So I get that from God, because God could have made us where could do nothing but do the right thing, but he made us choose what we want to do. He said, "This day I set before you good and evil, it's up to you. If you do evil you're going to pay the consequence. If you do good I'm going to bless you." So, that's the way we do people when they come in here, because some of you we can't get them off of pork. I don't change up seasoning for nobody because I have to eat here too. So I have to make sure I don't have no pork in my turnips and in my collards, or any of my vegetables. I had a few customers that get mad with me, and wouldn't come back but guess what they kept on eating that pork. I seen them they're coming in they done had a stroke they was sick. They say, "You were telling me right. You told me to stay off that pork." So, now they still come in at night and get their dinner, because they don't want that pork in their food. But that's the way it got kicked off.

Now we haven't really hit our peak. I just had message from God a couple years ago. It's our time now to really reach out and let him do what he really planned to do for us from the beginning. It has been rough hanging in here, but we had some jobs fall two or three. We kept the doors open. We kept everything going, and I'm grateful for that. And it was a good thing because it fixed my mind. See, money and stuff can mess you up so bad you'll never get straightened out. You have to be conditioned to be blessed and

most people are not conditioned. Sometimes God just let them be blessed and make all the money. They know how to make money. They get it and make it. When they don't know anything they corrupt it. Then they start taking from everybody and dog eat dog. You got a mess on your hands. I'm very grateful to God that he took me this way. The long way around, and I stayed with God, so we had to close done on Sunday. Sunday was one of our best days. God said, "Close it down on Sunday." It's still standing. Out of everything he told me to do I did it. I obeyed him, and we are still standing. Now I know he's going to do what he promised to do for us. It isn't no telling how, but that's the way.

Mrs. Cotton: Our desserts on our menu are simply peach cobbler, potato pie, and bread pudding. Those are the only three. We started out with cake, but I got tired of baking cakes. But our desserts basically are sweet potato pie and bread pudding and the peach cobbler. Our only drinks are peach punch, lemonade, and iced tea. We started out with soft drink, coca cola and what have you, but they didn't sell. The peach punch is our best seller then lemonade.

Sydney Addison: What is your favorite thing to cook and why?

Mrs. Cotton: What is my favorite thing to cook? Don't you ask me that. We do serve breakfast here now. We do have breakfast here in the morning. I think my favorite part of the day probably is breakfast, because we do have hot grits. We couldn't even sell the hash browns here. They wouldn't eat them, so we just have our regular stuff. We have grits and eggs. Salmon is our best seller, our fried salmon. We have bacon and the pork patty sausage. We also have the turkey meat, and most of our people love turkey meat. Turkey is one of our biggest sellers for breakfast.

Alyson Kinsey: How does food carry on southern culture and tradition?

Mrs. Cotton: Because it's soul food. Everybody likes soul food. Everybody likes good vegetables. Everybody likes the old fashioned sweet potato pies, bread pudding, and stuff like that. Everybody's just looking for soul food. We have people that come all the way from Atlanta just to get some good soul food. We also have customers that come in to buy food to take to New York and different places to serve their people. It sells well at Thanksgiving and Christmas. They want their turkey. They want their dressing. They want the potato salad and all that good country stuff.

Sydney Addison: What is the difference between soul food and any other kind of food? What makes it unique?

Mrs. Cotton: Well, I would say the difference in our food, the reason we call it soul food is because we do a lot of praying. We always pray over our food and it's just old tradition that...well y'all aren't my age, but when I was your age we started out eating that type of food and other people did too. Our people worked in homes the white people homes and what have you. They wanted them to always cook what they call soul food, because it comes out fresh out of the gardens. They wanted that type of food. That's where it originated from. Not that I would have a garden. I would go to the markets and things to buy the collards and stuff like that.

Sydney Addison: Do you have anything that you would like to share with us that you think would be important for us to know?

Mrs. Cotton: We speaking on soul food? Ok, in speaking on soul food it's just good to have good food. Don't have it too greasy. We don't use the fatback. We use vegetable oil and peanut oil. Those are the only two types of oil we use. We don't used mixed oil at all. I find that people love it better. If you own any type of restaurant...now a lot of people are owning restaurants, soul food restaurants, because

that's what people are looking for. People are looking for what used to be back in the olden days when I grew up. That type of food. I found out that a lot of restaurants that are opening up now, they are really serving soul food. And it's good for you as long as they don't make it too greasy. We do have the cornbread patties. That sells very well. We cook that on top of the stove. A long time ago they used to call it a hoe cake, but we just have the cornbread patties that we cook on top of the stove. It's really just flip-flip.

Sydney Addison: At home we just use the oven to bake corn bread.

Mr. Cotton: Yep, yep that's one of the main ways.

Mrs. Cotton: We tried that. They don't like that. We tried the crackling bread. We tried cooking the bread in the oven, but they'd rather have what they used to call hoe cakes. Flip it over and over, and they love it better. You can try some of it if you like. I can fix a dinner that you can take with you.

Sydney Addison: Sure!

Mrs. Cotton: Ok what would you like? We don't have any baked chicken. That's one of our biggest sellers in here, but we do have fried chicken. And fried pork chops. We have turnip and what have you. I can have a young lady come out here and take your order, fix it for you and take it with you. Come back and let me know how you liked it.

Sydney, Taylor, and Alyson: Thank you!

Mr. Cotton: I tell you what I'm going to go back here and try and find me something to eat.