

This Day in History... April 13, 1916

Birth of Edna Lewis

Celebrity Chef Edna Lewis was born on April 13, 1916, in Freetown, Virginia. Lewis is credited with reviving interest in the style of simple Southern cooking. She was the co-owner and only chef at Café Nicholson and wrote four cookbooks that infused classic recipes with personal stories.

One of eight children, Lewis was the granddaughter of an emancipated slave who founded Freetown. When she was 16, Lewis joined in the Great Migration north. She went to Washington, DC for a while, where she participated in Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1936 presidential campaign. She then married Steven Kingston, a retired Merchant Marine, and moved to New York City.

In New York, Lewis first found work at a laundry, where she was assigned to ironing. She'd never ironed before and only worked there for three hours. She was a talented seamstress and found work making dresses, copying those of Christian Dior, for people, including Marilyn Monroe. She also became well-known for her African-inspired dresses.

Since her move to New York, Lewis held regular dinner parties for her friends. In 1948, one of her friends, John Nicholson, opened Café Nicholson and hired Lewis as its chef. The café was very popular from the time it opened, attracting many well-known artists and entertainers. These included William Faulkner, Marlon Brando, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Richard Avedon, Gloria Vanderbilt, Marlene Dietrich, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Diana Vreeland.

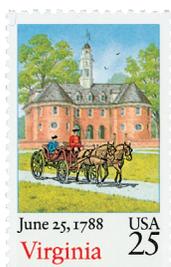
While at Café Nicholson, Lewis revived a long-lost style of simple Southern cooking. She insisted on using fresh, in-season ingredients and specialized in pan-fried (not deep-fried) chicken, pork, greens, and chocolate soufflé. When she left the restaurant after five years, it had become a prominent New York

establishment. The café survived over five decades, closing its doors in 2000.

After leaving the restaurant, Lewis briefly opened her own, but closed it soon after. She also did catering and taught cooking. Additionally, Lewis ran a pheasant farm and worked at the American Museum of Natural History. After breaking her leg in the late 1960s, she was unable to cook professionally. She was encouraged to write her own cookbook, *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*. She followed that with *The Taste of Country Cooking* in 1976. In addition to recipes, the book had stories and information about Southern and African American food. It was wildly popular, and one critic said it "may well be the most entertaining regional cookbook in America."

Lewis then returned to cooking in restaurants – in North Carolina, South Carolina, and New York. She founded the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food, which later became the Southern Foodways Alliance. In the 1990s, she befriended fellow chef Scott Peacock and they worked closely together towards the common goal of preserving classic Southern cooking. They were known as "The Odd Couple of Southern Cooking."

During her lifetime, Lewis wrote four cookbooks and won several awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Association of Culinary Professionals, the James Beard Living Legend Award, and more. She died on February 13, 2006. Edna Lewis's lifelong pursuit was to "recapture those good flavors of the past." Her revival of old-style Southern fare did just that and brought a true American cuisine back to tables across the country.



Lewis's cooking was inspired by the food she ate growing up in Virginia.



Lewis specialized in fried chicken, among other recipes.



Edna Lewis was honored in the 2014 Celebrity Chefs issue.



William Faulkner was a regular at Lewis's New York restaurant.

This Day in History... April 13, 1916

Birth of Edna Lewis

Celebrity Chef Edna Lewis was born on April 13, 1916, in Freetown, Virginia. Lewis is credited with reviving interest in the style of simple Southern cooking. She was the co-owner and only chef at Café Nicholson and wrote four cookbooks that infused classic recipes with personal stories.

One of eight children, Lewis was the granddaughter of an emancipated slave who founded Freetown. When she was 16, Lewis joined in the Great Migration north. She went to Washington, DC for a while, where she participated in Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1936 presidential campaign. She then married Steven Kingston, a retired Merchant Marine, and moved to New York City.

In New York, Lewis first found work at a laundry, where she was assigned to ironing. She'd never ironed before and only worked there for three hours. She was a talented seamstress and found work making dresses, copying those of Christian Dior, for people, including Marilyn Monroe. She also became well-known for her African-inspired dresses.

Since her move to New York, Lewis held regular dinner parties for her friends. In 1948, one of her friends, John Nicholson, opened Café Nicholson and hired Lewis as its chef. The café was very popular from the time it opened, attracting many well-known artists and entertainers. These included William Faulkner, Marlon Brando, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Richard Avedon, Gloria Vanderbilt, Marlene Dietrich, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Diana Vreeland.

While at Café Nicholson, Lewis revived a long-lost style of simple Southern cooking. She insisted on using fresh, in-season ingredients and specialized in pan-fried (not deep-fried) chicken, pork, greens, and chocolate soufflé. When she left the restaurant after five years, it had become a prominent New York

establishment. The café survived over five decades, closing its doors in 2000.

After leaving the restaurant, Lewis briefly opened her own, but closed it soon after. She also did catering and taught cooking. Additionally, Lewis ran a pheasant farm and worked at the American Museum of Natural History. After breaking her leg in the late 1960s, she was unable to cook professionally. She was encouraged to write her own cookbook, *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*. She followed that with *The Taste of Country Cooking* in 1976. In addition to recipes, the book had stories and information about Southern and African American food. It was wildly popular, and one critic said it "may well be the most entertaining regional cookbook in America."

Lewis then returned to cooking in restaurants – in North Carolina, South Carolina, and New York. She founded the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food, which later became the Southern Foodways Alliance. In the 1990s, she befriended fellow chef Scott Peacock and they worked closely together towards the common goal of preserving classic Southern cooking. They were known as "The Odd Couple of Southern Cooking."

During her lifetime, Lewis wrote four cookbooks and won several awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Association of Culinary Professionals, the James Beard Living Legend Award, and more. She died on February 13, 2006. Edna Lewis's lifelong pursuit was to "recapture those good flavors of the past." Her revival of old-style Southern fare did just that and brought a true American cuisine back to tables across the country.



Lewis's cooking was inspired by the food she ate growing up in Virginia.



Lewis specialized in fried chicken, among other recipes.



Edna Lewis was honored in the 2014 Celebrity Chefs issue.



William Faulkner was a regular at Lewis's New York restaurant.