

**From Vietnamese manicurists' favourite shrimp rolls to Brazilian cabbies' midnight feasts, US radio reporters Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson are out to unearth hidden culinary treats. Hattie Ellis joins them on their dedicated trail**

What is a hidden kitchen? It might be a woman selling tamales from a mobile stall made out of a pram. Or community cooking in the shape of the big fundraising church picnics of Kentucky. Or a kitchen buried in the past and found through memories, like the unofficial home restaurant of Georgia Gilmore, who fed Martin Luther King and civil rights activists with slaw, hog maw and corn muffins.

These places and stories exist down an alley, in the back of a van, through grandmothers' dishes, at our own stoves. They are unearthed and broadcast on the Hidden Kitchens radio show on America's National Public Radio (NPR) by the Kitchen Sisters, Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson. "You get your Hidden Kitchen glasses on and you see them," says Silva. "Once you start peering around the corner, it's like looking for anything. People say, 'I just never knew to look, that's all.'"

"We look for ways that people, in this extremely divided and contentious world, have a glimmer of a possibility of coming together, of crossing the divide," says Nelson. "Food is one of them." UK fans can listen to the show via the pair's website, [kitchensisters.org](http://kitchensisters.org), and catch them tomorrow night when Silva and Nelson give a talk at Goldsmiths College. While they're in the country, the Kitchen Sisters are seeking under-the-radar food in London. When we spoke, they were sniffing out characters and good cooking smells on East End allotments.

The pair have been a team for 20 years, finding grassroots stories for radio. "We haven't always done food programmes," explains Nelson, "but whenever we were working on a show we'd ask people what they'd had for breakfast. There's something so secure about a question like that. Everyone feels comfortable and has something non-controversial to say. And it gives some sort of entry point to their lives."

To gather stories, the Kitchen Sisters become detectives on the street and broadcast appeals on the radio: "Who glues our community through food? What are your kitchen rituals and traditions? Who are the visionaries and pioneers? What is endangered? What do we need to chronicle before it disappears?" One thing leads to another. People phone in after each programme with further hidden kitchens and memories of their own.

In the four years that the Kitchen Sisters have been on their quest, some 48 hours of answerphone messages have come in from people who want to tell them what's cooking, leading to 30 programmes and four one-hour specials for NPR.

One of the most clandestine of the "hidden kitchens" was the sweet-making of Robert "King" Wilkerson, a Black Panther who had spent 29 years in solitary confinement in Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, before he was exonerated and freed in 2001. Wilkerson made pralines in his cell using sugar and milk from coffee rations and pecans from the prison's grounds on a stove improvised from Coke cans and burnt toilet rolls. When Martha Stewart - doyenne of the domestic arts, who herself served five months in prison in 2004 for stock-trading offences - expressed interest in getting the Kitchen Sisters on her TV show, Silva and Nelson suggested to her production team that Wilkerson could make his pralines (or "freelines" as they have been known since his release) alongside Martha rustling up her "home-made" prison jams. "But it never quite happened," says Silva.

"What did I have for breakfast? I didn't have breakfast," was Jeffrey Newton's answer to their habitual warm-up question. Newton, 57, used to live in a cardboard box under Wacker Drive in Chicago. He found a George Foreman Grill at a shelter and used a long extension cord to steal electricity by plugging it into a socket on a pole on the street. The Sisters then recorded George Foreman's own memories of childhood hunger: how the future heavyweight boxing champion went to school without breakfast; how he'd peek through windows to watch other kids eat lunch at home and crave the crusts their parents pulled off the bread; how hunger makes you angry. "The stories trigger people's imaginations in ways we'd never expected," says Nelson. "We never imagined how it would lead us down that road of hunger."

Indeed, a number of the hidden kitchens are found on the street. Nelson noticed how many of her cab drivers came not just from Brazil, but from the same town of Goiana. One directed them to a night cafe, where Janete, a woman from Goiana, served Brazilian street food from a tent that had disappeared by dawn.

Word of mouth led to a report on the Vietnamese manicurists who work in the nail bars in California and their Christmas Eve feast of pork and shrimp rolls. Then Nelson's hairdresser revealed how the 100,000 Japanese-Americans interned during the second world war had developed a taste for American food such as hot dogs. This ended up as a story called Weenie Royale.

Podcasting and digital radio have revolutionised grassroots radio. Silva and Nelson used to slice quarter-inch tape with razor blades and broadcast once. Now digitally captured stories can spread across the internet and be downloaded by anyone. The programmes are well produced, layering the music of the time with the sounds of the place and people's voices.

"It is communicating and sharing someone's process, not a fleeting moment," says Silva. "With the microphone it is easier to coax people into that frame of mind. With a camera you are on the spot. There's something more luxurious and forgiving about radio."

There is a political purpose behind their mission: the idea that food brings people together and into the lives of others. It is about fellowship, about crossing divides, about a vital and domestic form of resistance. "During the last election, when America was redefined as red and blue in a polarised nation, we made a programme and found the opposite to be true," says Silva. "It was men and meat and midnight and a pit. They were universal things: roasting around the fire, with a pig usually, and camaraderie; a little drinking is often involved; and a dream state where things hark back to a common place where stories are told. What we keep seeing is the capsizing of the family table and what dissolves when people don't gather. There's the passing down of traditions of a dish and all the ritual and culture that go with it; how to set a table and stay in real time with people and listen and develop a taste for the unknown. Food is this passport."

One caller to their show, a home economics teacher from Seattle, spoke of how she gives her students a recipe assignment to go home and prepare. In the past five or six years, the kids no longer have the equipment to cook. She had a pupil who had never had a meal prepared in her house: the family lived on takeaways. "We walk a fine line of nostalgia," says Silva. "But at the end of the message, the teacher made a call to action: 'Wait a second, it doesn't have to be this way. How could it be different?' That's the power of Hidden Kitchens to us."

Nelson sums up their mission in the shape of Lou the Glue, a kitchen visionary who is a resident of her home city, San Francisco. Lou cooks pasta and calamari in a boathouse for old-timers at an outdoor swimming club.

"You meet certain people in life who give you a philosophy for life," she says. "You think you are hearing about lone dogs and pasta but then Lou gets us swimming in the bay, which is ice-cold, and he says: 'The main thing is you just look it in the eye and go.' I can't tell you how many times I've been at a crossroads and I hear him say that. Now on my birthday I gather my tribe, we swim in the bay, we slam a few martinis and eat some calamari. You cross that line between stories and then it becomes part of your daily life. These are stories to live by".

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