

# Collards: a Moroccan Mystery

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Abderrahim Ouarghidi was born and raised in Morocco, but until the day he and his wife Bronwen Powell found them in oasis gardens during their fieldwork, he had never seen collard greens there. So what are they doing on the edge of the Sahara, and what can that tell us about collards in the Southern US?

To begin at the beginning, what are collard greens?

**Brownwen:** Collards are a flat leafed, open heading variety of this species *Brassica oleracea*. This is a botanical crop species that is very fascinating to scientists, because it's one of the most diverse species of crops that we cultivate. In fact, within that same species are broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale, and collards. There's some gray between where cabbage starts and finishes and where collards start and finish, and the same for kale.

**Jeremy:** So they're not forming a head, like a cabbage. They're just sort of leaves like, I would say, kale. But I don't know collard greens. Is there a difference between kale and collards?

**Brownwen:** They look very similar. They taste a little bit similar. They're a little bit more spicy. All of the *Brassica oleracea* species are evolved from an original wild relative that we don't know what it is. Until the 14th, 15th centuries, all cabbage was open, non-heading like collards and kale, and it wasn't until the 1500s, 1600s when the headed cabbage that we know today developed in, they think, in Germany or the Netherlands.

**Jeremy:** So, I'm familiar with collard greens as part of southern and particularly Black southern cuisine. But you do find it elsewhere. You find it in East Africa. But Abderrahim, you found it in Morocco, which is where I understand from the paper, which is where you grew up. But you'd never seen it before. So how did how did all this happen? I

don't understand how it can be in Morocco and you'd never seen it before.

**Abderrahim:** Yeah. It's a very interesting. I grew up in in Marrakesh actually, and we started working in the south of Morocco, in the south east of Morocco, since 2019. But it's only in 2023 when, one morning, me and Bronwen and our girls, we were walking in the fields that we noticed the collard green. Then, it was a really big surprise for us. We started asking the farmers, and it seems like the farmers were so excited about it. And he said, it's one of the the leafy vegetables in Morocco that is largely consumed in the region of Zagora and Errachidia. That's in the south, southeast of Morocco.

**Jeremy:** So over the Atlas Mountains and on the edge of the Sahara.

**Abderrahim:** Yes. That's right.

**Jeremy:** Okay. So that's the only place more or less where you've seen them.

**Abderrahim:** Yes. And a bit in ... towards Tinghir (?), which is mountainous and it's an indigenous community called, Achidir (?) but otherwise I've never seen it elsewhere. And it's very important in oasis and mountain agro-ecosystems. It's locally adapted crops grown in the Ziz Valley, where we've done our work and grown in small scale farming systems alongside dates, different varieties of dates, and cereals and legumes, and some fodder, such as alfalfa.

**Jeremy:** So, Bronwen, when you saw this, what did you think? What were your first thoughts when you came across this?

**Brownwen:** Abderrahim and I moved to the US ten years ago, and since moving to the US, I've been reading a lot about African-American food ways. And so when I saw the collards in Morocco, right after I had been reading about collards in the US, that connection started to go, whoa, hang on a minute. Why are these here? And then when we started talking to the farmers and the women and the communities and asking how they cooked collards, some of the recipes look very similar to the ways collards are cooked in the US.

We started asking farmers, and they spoke really fondly of this in ways that mimic or appear very similar to how important collards are in Southern American foodways.

**Jeremy:** So, when you spoke to the farmers, Abderrahim, and the women, , did they have a sense of collards being recent or was it kind of time immemorial? Was it, my grandparents grew this stuff?

**Abderrahim:** Actually, we did ask them this question and if it's something that was introduced recently, or if it's something that is very old in their culture. But they were surprised about the question because they were expecting us to know that it's something that's been there forever. And they said, like, we heard this like from our ancestors. They couldn't be like specific about the time back, but they were very clear that the green collard, it was there forever.

**Brownwen:** And they have all these sayings, they have all these sayings about collard greens.

**Abderrahim:** Yeah. One of their sayings because, as as you might know, like in the south ... Some regions in the south east of Morocco are a little bit vulnerable and, I would say, like marginalised and the collard green was very important for their culture because it's considered as a 24 month crop. And they can eat it whenever they want and it's always there.

**Jeremy:** Year round?

**Abderrahim:** Yeah, it's not very demanding. They will call it the slave of the house because he won't react, he won't say anything. Then, whenever you need it, it's there, it's right there. And that's why it's considered as the slave, the slave crop of the house.

**Jeremy:** That's interesting because from what I read in the paper, agriculture in the oases is very labour intense, takes a lot of labor. Was slave trading part of how that operated?

**Abderrahim:** Yes. The slave trading was mainly for labour in agriculture, but also in serving some of the, what we call ksah, or ksoh, that's the plural of ksah, which is a fortified village. I did some search on if there is any connections between the enslavement system in North America and in Morocco, but I can't find any connections. Both systems happened differently. Then because we

were trying to trace to see if there is any overlap between those slaves brought to Morocco, then to Europe, and ones shipped to North America. But it sounds like both systems aren't overlapping.

**Jeremy:** Okay, so I can I can see two or three possibilities. That it could have come from Europe where these things were grown. Maybe it came with slaves from sub-Saharan Africa who might have brought it up, because it's eaten in East Africa. Or some other place. I mean, can you can you say where it came from, Bronwen?

**Brownwen:** We ruled out the possibility that collards came from Europe, because people were saying that that they had been there forever. And in that part of Morocco, there was very little contact with Europeans until the middle of the 20th century. The French colonial system spoke about how hard it was to work in that part of Morocco.

We did wonder if possibly people fleeing the Iberian Peninsula during the Spanish Inquisition could have brought collards to Morocco. However, most of those people moved to the north of Morocco, where there are no collards, and the Muslim and Jewish communities in the south of Morocco had been there since forever, for a very long time. And in the ancient Andalusian textbooks, cookbooks, that we looked at from the 14th century don't contain any recipes for collards, but they do contain a lot of other leafy vegetables.

So finally we thought, well, maybe they came across the Sahara with enslaved people. There's certainly evidence that millet and amaranth and possibly other crops came north across the Sahara during the trans-Saharan slave trade. But collards are a cold weather vegetable, and while you can propagate them vegetatively in warm climates, they don't go to seed unless they're cold enough. In addition to that, there isn't really historical documentation of collards in West Africa. So that left us wondering where.

**Jeremy:** So, it's not coming from Europe. It's probably not coming from south of the Sahara. Abderrahim, where was it coming from do you think?

**Abderrahim:** The city of Sijilmasa, it can be the place where the collards has been spread in Morocco. Sijilmasa is one of the most important historical cities in the southeastern Morocco. It's located in the Ziz Valley near the city called Rissani today. The Sijilmasa was

founded in the eighth century around seven 757, I think, CE. And it used to be a major trans-Saharan trade hub that connects North Africa and West Africa, especially in the gold region, like in Ghana, for example. And it's known for the trade of gold, salt, slaves, and textiles as well.

And why this place was important? It was like a very fertile oasis system in an arid region. And it supported dates palm agriculture, and very, very complex irrigation system. And it used to be for caravan rest stops as well. And it also served as a gateway to the Sahara Desert, especially roads towards Timbuktu and Gao in Mali. Then our guess is, all of this has started in Sijilmasa given the connections between Sijilmasa and the rest of Morocco, but also with the the rest of the sub-Saharan countries as well.

**Jeremy:** Okay, but here's the problem I'm having. Sijilmasa, the oasis where you found it, are kind of there on the edges of Sahara, but they're in the middle of a very arid territory. You said that probably it didn't come from the moister areas of West Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. So how is it getting to Sijilmasa? How are the collard greens arriving in Sijilmasa?

**Brownwen:** Sijilmasa was founded by a group of traders who established the first trade route across the north of the Sahara. This was before the period where there was trans-Saharan trade. The very first trade routes through the Sahara ran across the north of the Sahara from Baghdad through Oman, and then ended at Sijilmasa. These traders were Kharijite Muslims. They were largely outcasts in the Middle East and fleeing to the margins of the Islamic world.

And what is really interesting is that when we started searching and searching and searching for records of collard use in any of these places that had links to the south of Morocco, to Sijilmasa, what we found was a cookbook from the 10th century Baghdad that had recipes for collards. They called them cabbage. But the description of what those collards looked, what that quote unquote cabbage looked like, is exactly what collards look like, right? The recipe to finely chop the leaves doesn't work if it's a heading cabbage. So we know then that Sijilmasa was founded by people who were coming from Baghdad through Oman to Sijilmasa. And at the same time, we know that there was collards use in Baghdad and Oman prior to and around the time of that early established trade route across the north of the Sahara.

**Jeremy:** So that's your best guess, essentially, is that they came along the north of the Sahara. And did the same people take them to East Africa? Is there any evidence that that's how they got ... Because they're very common and popular in on the sort of Kenya Tanzania border.

**Brownwen:** There isn't clear evidence because of a couple of problems with science. One is that Brassica, Brassica oleracea, is difficult to identify in the archaeological record.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, because the seeds all look the same.

**Brownwen:** The seeds all look the same. Leafy vegetables don't get preserved in the archaeological record. The other is a linguistics problem, where in all of the languages that we have written records of, collards and cabbage are often called by the same name. So historically in Europe, cabbage could be the open leafy thing that we call collards today. Or it could have been a heading cabbage. That is true in Portuguese, in Spanish and English and in Arabic.

**Abderrahim:** Yeah, there is one thing to add when Bronwen was talking about the recipe between the ... in that book in Baghdad and the current recipe in Morocco, in the oasis of Zagora, what was interesting, it's not only it's chopped the same way, but also they use, I think both recipes, they use cow head meats because they prefer to use some oily meat in both recipes. And like the recipes, they overlap between that book and the current recipe now in oasis.

**Jeremy:** And how about the recipes then in the American South? Do they share characteristics with the recipes in Morocco?

**Brownwen:** So I've studied leafy vegetables in West Africa, which is the other place that collards are hypothesised to come from. Leafy vegetable recipes in West Africa most commonly include palm oil, ground up peanuts or groundnuts, sometimes ground fish, sometimes the seeds of a tree called *Parkia biglobosa*, dawadawa or neri. Often they're very spicy. And collards recipes in the American South don't look like that. They include sometimes a piece of ham or a chicken, chicken wing or turkey wing or turkey leg. So again, in those recipes in the American South, you see that importance of cooking collards with a piece of fatty meat. In Morocco, the recipe is with the meat off of the edges of an animal's head. The recipe in Baghdad similarly called for the meat off the back of an animal. So a piece that had some fat in

it. This is a string that starts to tie together, where we don't otherwise have a whole lot of clear evidence.

**Jeremy:** Okay. We know that a lot of recipes did cross over from West Africa to the American South. This recipe or the collard recipes apparently didn't. So what's your best guess as to why they cook it that way? Because they weren't coming from Baghdad or the south of Morocco.

**Brownwen:** So we continue to dig and dig. We have published the paper, but it's still a fascination. Abderrahim and I have both looked very carefully for evidence of ties between that trans-Saharan trade system and the transatlantic trade system. We've spoken with many colleagues who are well-known historians from that period, and nobody has really clear answers. But we do know that Columbus sailed for America the same year that the Spanish Inquisition passed a rule to vanquish Muslims and Jews out of the Iberian Peninsula. And so it's very possible that there were people who had been involved in the trans-Saharan slave trade, who were living, trading, working as sailors, working as armed guards, who then went on to work in the transatlantic slave trade. I can imagine a Portuguese ship captain wanting somebody who has experience dealing with enslaved people and managing them to help transport — forcefully, violently transport — human bodies across the Atlantic.

**Jeremy:** Final question for you, Abderrahim. We see a lot of what I would call minor vegetables are being kind of rediscovered. I mean, certainly in the American South, African American people are proud of their ancestral cuisine and relish their collard greens as a statement of who they are. Do you see any possibility that collard greens will become more widespread as a dish in Morocco, or are they destined to stay in these quite isolated oases?

**Abderrahim:** That's a great question. And me and Bronwen, we've been discussing this within the community of Zagora. And what we found out is most of the people from the oasis who migrate, for example, to the north and Casablanca and other cities to work temporarily for a few months there, they ask their family to ship them or to send them some of the collard greens. They have access to other collard greens in the north, but they say it's not the same taste and it's not the real collard greens. Then they ask their family to send, for example, 10 or 20 kilos of collard greens in the bus. And given, for

example, there in those cities, in Casablanca — and Casablanca is a very giant city — and in Rabat and they have access or connections to other people and I'm sure the collard greens at least it's spread in those cities. People, they thought ... They know now about the collard green, they are using the same recipe, but actually what they're doing, they're using different crops as collard green and they are cooking them the same way.

It's very powerful. Whenever we talk about collard green with the people from Zagora, for example, whether they're in Zagora or they work in other cities and it's part of their identity. It's something that they use at least three or four times a week, even when they're away from home, because it's something that reminds them of their place, of the taste of their ancestors, and it's pretty strong within that community.

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