

Sidedoor Season 6 Ep. 6 Lena Richard America's Unknown Celebrity Chef

Lizzie Peabody: Hi Sidedoor listeners. It is March and in honor of Women's History Month, we've decided to share one of our favorite episodes from last year. Now, to be clear, we don't just celebrate important women in March, but I will take any excuse to talk more about Lena Richard and her incredible career, and of course, her famous gumbo and oysters, and her dream melon. Is anyone else getting hungry? While the Sidedoor team is off flambaying up some hot new stories for you, we're delighted to share again, Lena Richard: America's Unknown Celebrity Chef. Enjoy!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Paula Rhodes: Okay. Well, I'm grabbing the cookbook now as we speak because I'm long overdue in making my gumbo.

Lizzie Peabody: Paula Rhodes is a lawyer, professor, and human rights advocate. She's also a really good cook.

Paula Rhodes: Okay. On page 135 of her cookbook, there is a brief description of making of the roux, since that's a base for a lot of the recipes, not just the gumbo.

Lizzie Peabody: Paula lives in Denver now, but she grew up in New Orleans. And when I called her up, she was patient enough to walk me through a New Orleans classic: her grandmother's gumbo recipe.

[SOUND: Clicking of gas burner, flame coming up]

Lizzie Peabody: Starting with the roux.

Paula Rhodes: Okay. You heat fat.

Lizzie Peabody: Alright. Add heat.

Paula Rhodes: Then you add flour...

Lizzie Peabody: Flour's going in.

[SOUND: Adding flour – Sizzle]

Paula Rhodes: You stir until light brown.

[SOUND: Whisking and Sizzling]

Paula Rhodes: If you over cook it, then when you add liquids and stuff, it's not gonna come out the right consistency.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). How do I know when it's ready? (Laughs).

[SOUND: Whisking and Sizzling]

Paula Rhodes: Add onions.

[SOUND: Whisking and Sizzling]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. Here we go!

[SOUND: Sizzling]

Paula Rhodes: And continue to stir until onions and flour are a golden brown.

[SOUND: Sizzling]

Paula Rhodes: So, that's her basic recipe for a roux.

[SOUND: Sizzling]

Lizzie Peabody: Paula learned to cook from her mother, who in turn learned from Paula's grandmother, Lena Richard. Lena Richard died when Paula was just a baby, but Paula's heard lots of stories about her grandmother from her family, but also from relative strangers! Because when Lena Richard was alive, just about everyone in New Orleans knew her cooking.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: She called herself a cateress, but...

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: She was so many things that it's hard to really determine what to call her.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Culinary Historian, Jessica B. Harris.

[MUSIC]

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: I mean, she was such a trailblazer, but an unknown trailblazer.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: A woman of color in the Jim Crow South, Lena Richard defied the place assigned to her based on her race and gender, to become a Celebrity Chef. She had her own televised cooking show more than a decade before Julia Child. She faced down barriers we still grapple with as a nation today, to claim her place as a culinary icon.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This time on Sidedoor, Lena Richard's extraordinary story and my very ordinary attempt at her famous gumbo, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Lena Richard was only 14 years old when she started working, which seems awfully young, but this was the early 1900s, and for an African American girl in New Orleans, going to work for a wealthy white family would have been pretty normal. Her mother was the maid for a prominent New Orleans family, the Vairin family, and when Lena wasn't in school, she went along to help.

Ashley Young: She started off, you know, preparing lunches for the children and just some household tasks here and there.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Ashley Rose Young, Historian of the, "*American Food History Project*" at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, and she has spent a decade retracing Lena Richard's life through oral histories and archival research. And Ashley says Lena Richard might easily have grown up to follow in her mother's footsteps, but...

Ashley Young: ...around 19 years of age, an opportunity arose that really changed Richard's life, and that was the fact that the Vairin's cook left the household. And Mrs. Varian actually asked Richard, if she could prepare dinner one night.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Lena Richard wrote about that night in a short autobiographical essay.

[MUSIC]

Chef Dee Lavigne Reading Lena Richard's Essay: She told me I could buy just what I wanted to. I got a chicken, made stew and had fruit for dessert. From this time on, it seemed that no other cook could please her.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We asked New Orleans Chef, Dee Lavigne, to read Richard's words for us for this episode.

[MUSIC]

Chef Dee Lavigne Reading Lena Richard's Essay: I was getting \$10 a month and was raised to \$15. She then told me that I could go to the store and pick out any kind of cooking utensils that I wanted and that she was going to give me cooking lessons and send me to cooking schools and every demonstration. If no other colored women could get places, I certainly could.

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: Lena Richard had a very close relationship with Mrs. Vairin. And once she saw this talent that Richard had cultivated at such a young age, she encouraged Richard to experiment in the home and eventually, she sent her to cooking school in Boston; a renowned cooking school for women at the time.

Lizzie Peabody: Crystal Moten is a Curator of African American History in the Division of Work and Industry at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Crystal Moten: And so, what this support does is it allows her access to educational opportunity that was not open to her, that would have excluded her based on her race and her gender.

Lizzie Peabody: So, in 1918, Lena Richard, age 20 or so, heads north to Mrs. Farmer's Cooking School.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, do we have any idea what that might have been like for her?

Ashley Young: Women of color had to acquire the permission of every white woman in the class so as to attend the class with them.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait a minute, every white woman in the class had to give written consent that they were okay with being in class with a black woman?

Ashley Young: Yes. You know, there's this stereotype that racial segregation was something of the American south, but racial segregation permeated every aspect of the United States.

Crystal Moten: It was not the Jim Crow South. (Laughs). It was the Jim Crow Nation, right?

Lizzie Peabody: Hmmm.

Crystal Moten: “And separate, but equal” forms the basis of a Jim Crow segregated society. Blacks and whites cannot sit together.

Lizzie Peabody: Richard ate her meals in a separate dining room from her white classmates, but the classes themselves were kind of a confidence boost.

[MUSIC]

Chef Dee Lavigne Reading Lena Richard’s Essay: I found out in a hurry; they can’t teach me much more than I know. I learned things about new desserts and salads, but when it comes to cooking meats, stews, soups, sauces and such dishes, we Southern cooks have Northern cooks beat by a mile. That’s not big talk; that’s the honest truth.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The 8-week course gave Lena something more valuable than cooking instruction. It gave her credibility as a trained professional, a rare thing for a woman of color at that time, and it gave her an idea.

[MUSIC]

Chef Dee Lavigne Reading Lena Richard’s Essay: I cooked a couple of my dishes like Creole Gumbo and my Chicken Vol-au-vent, and they go crazy, almost, trying to copy down what I say. I think maybe I’m pretty good, so some day I’d write [it] down myself.

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: There’s this seed of an idea that maybe one day she should actually write a cookbook and as we will see down the road, that’s exactly what happened.

Lizzie Peabody: But hold on. We’re not there yet. First, Lena returns to New Orleans, gets married, and, with the help of the Vairin family connections and her new cred as a cooking school graduate, she starts her own catering business around 1928. This is Culinary Historian, Jessica B. Harris again.

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: Catering was a traditional path for African American women in food, from street vending to catering, because setting up a restaurant was costly, and everyone couldn’t.

Lizzie Peabody: But Lena Richard’s catering stood apart from all the rest.

Ashley Young: So, she was perhaps best known for this dessert that she called, “Dream Melon.”

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: And she called it, "Dream Melon" because she came up with the idea in her sleep! And...

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Wow!

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: It's basically an edible watermelon made completely out of ice cream and sherbert and she would use little raisins as the seeds. So, once you take it out of the mold, you would have this perfect, dainty, little ice cream melon slice that you could eat through the rind and people just loved it. They went wild for this Dream Melon!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The local paper wrote that Lena Richard's watermelon ice cream quote, "Has delighted many a New Orleans socialite and usually rings gasps of admiration at such places as the Orleans Club." Lena Richard's edible artistry made her a star among the white New Orleans elite. She could make anything from sculptural show stoppers to Jambalaya and Red beans and Rice, to dainty tea Sandwiches. She had the range and the reputation to build her business throughout the Depression years. And in 1937, she opened her own cooking school.

[MUSIC]

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: There was very much a racial component, if you will, to her desire to open that cooking school and to specifically open it for African Americans, so that they could get better employment.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, she really had an eye to elevating the community as a whole and making a path for other young professionals.

[MUSIC]

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: Yeah. Back then, there was a term. I don't know if it was in use in New Orleans, but it was certainly in use in the North, of being a, "race man" or, "race woman."

Lizzie Peabody: Huh!

[MUSIC]

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: She was certainly that. She was out for the race.

[MUSIC]

Chef Dee Lavigne Reading Lena Richard's Essay: My purpose in opening a cooking school was to teach men and women the art of food preparation and serving, in order that they would become capable of preparing and serving food for any occasion and also, that they might be in a position to demand higher wages.

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: The cooking school is one of the most important aspects of her career to me...

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Hmmm.

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: ...because it really shows how Richard was so invested in her community.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And while she was teaching cooking classes, she was also teaching herself how to break down recipes into precise measurements and simple, replicable steps.

Ashley Young: So, the cooking school actually ended up being a laboratory of sorts for her to start working on that cookbook she first had an idea for back at the Fannie Farmer School in 1918.

Lizzie Peabody: 20 years after the idea began percolating, Lena Richard self-published her cookbook in 1939. The title, "Lena Richard's Cook Book."

Lizzie Peabody: So, tell me about the cookbook.

Ashley Young: It is described by some as, "the best Creole cookbook ever written."

Lizzie Peabody: Really?!

Ashley Young: Yes! Yes. I mean, this is an important work, because this is the first African American authored, Creole cookbook. And that's huge. Now, I want to bring up here a kind of important definition of 'Creole cooking,' and when I say 'Creole cooking,' I mean cooking of the city of New Orleans. And as a port city, New Orleans had a very diverse population. And so, it was many communities coming together in tension and in communion to create this cuisine that's very distinct to the city itself.

Lizzie Peabody: And Ashley says, what's important for us to understand is how, historically, the cuisine of this diverse city was represented by only one group of people.

Ashley Young: The first Creole cookbooks that were published were published by white authors and that started a tradition that privileged whites' voices in defining Creole cuisine. In fact, the first cookbook in 1885, *"La Cuisine Creole,"* was authored by someone who wasn't even a chef! His name was Lafcadio Hearn, and he wasn't even from New Orleans! In fact, he just compiled these recipes from New Orleanians and placed them in this work to be sold. And so, it's not until almost 55 years later, when Richard publishes this self-titled cookbook, that we have an African American author defining Creole cuisine on her own terms and for her community, and that is so important.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In that first cookbook from 1885, the one by Lafcadio Hearn, there's a picture on the cover, of a smiling African American woman in a headscarf and checkered dress, holding a pot. The image of the stereotypical quote, "black mammy."

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: So, this is a figure of a woman of color: smiling, jovial, kind, willing to, "serve other people."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And baked into this image, are many stereotypes. One of them, that the skills it took to run the house and cook the meals were not learned, but somehow inherent...

[MUSIC]

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: ...that African Americans were innately, good cooks. There are quotes that, to paraphrase, pretty much say, you know, 'If the Big House cook is ill, just go down to the quarters and pretty much ask anybody and they can come up and fill in.'

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: This is a very harmful stereotype, as many scholars have pointed out, including Toni Tipton-Martin, who wrote this incredible book called, *"The Jemima Code,"* where she really homes in on this idea of how destructive an Aunt Jemima stereotype can be.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Destructive in what sense?

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: It places women of color, who work in food industries, in a subservient role. It makes them palatable and acceptable for white audiences, and that is racism at its core. And then you have a woman like Lena Richard, who has a self-titled cookbook, who comes in and says, "I own these recipes and I used hard work, culinary classes, technology to build these recipes in an accessible, scientifically informed manner."

[MUSIC]

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: She's not just doing this because it's intuition. "A little bit of this little bit of that." She's a trained individual.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In the Preface of, "Lena Richard's Cook Book," Lena Richard wrote:

Chef Dee Lavigne Reading Lena Richard's Essay: The secrets of Creole cooking, which have been kept for years by the old French chef. There's no need to experiment for I have done the experimenting in my own laboratory kitchen as well as in my cooking school.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In the front of Lena's Richard's cookbook, there's no anonymous woman in a checkered dress. There's a portrait of Lena wearing pearls, hair coiffed in a 1930s wave, smiling slightly. It's a professional headshot.

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: And that just reverses the stereotype of the Jemima Code. It puts it on its head. And it presents an entirely new image of what an African American cook is.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: After the break, Lena takes her new book on the road North, to show those Yankees how Gumbo is made. Meanwhile, I'll be checking in on my Gumbo because it's time to add the shrimp!

[MUSIC]

[SOUND OF SIZZLING]

[MUSIC]

Paula Rhodes: And she says add that in the stock, too, all at the same time.

[SOUND OF SIZZLING]

Lizzie Peabody: Going to add the stock!

[SOUND OF TAKING COVER OFF POT]

[SOUND OF SIZZLING]

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We're back! And here's where we are.

[SOUND OF SIZZLING]

[SOUND OF TAKING COVER OFF POT]

Lizzie Peabody: Holy *BLEEP*! Oh no! Now there's chicken stock all over...

Lizzie Peabody: I just spilled chicken stock all over my kitchen floor... [Sadly Laughs] ...in an attempt to make gumbo, one of the 333 recipes in Lena Richard's 1939 cookbook. The first Creole cookbook published by an African American author. And unlike so many self-published books, this one did not languish on bookstore shelves. Within a week of the book's publication, 200 people sent letters from Philly, New York, and Boston trying to order it. In an era before Amazon, that's pretty remarkable. Historian, Ashley Rose Young, put it this way.

Ashley Young: Her book was blowing up!

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Ashley Young: I mean it was all the rage!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, what does she do next? Goes on book tour of course! Lena and her assistant, her daughter Marie, head North, suitcases bulging with 10 pounds of cane syrup, Louisiana shelled pecans, old fashioned brown sugar, and shrimp.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Wait, did she really pack shrimp?

Ashley Young: Yes. dried shrimp. Yeah. (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: She wanted to be sure she had everything she needed to give proper cooking demonstrations, while promoting her book. But to travel all the way from New Orleans to New York, for Lena, was a risk. And a warning for our listeners, this next section describes racial violence.

Lizzie Peabody: How dangerous would it have been to travel as a black woman during that time?

Crystal Moten: It could have been very dangerous. Dangerous in the sense that black women faced the very real threat of sexual violence and sexual harassment. Because accommodations were segregated, they couldn't go to perhaps mainstream hotels and restaurants. That puts women in a precarious situation.

Lizzie Peabody: Smithsonian Curator, Crystal Moten says, "It's important to remember that in this period following the Great Depression and WWI, leading into WWII, lynchings were happening."

Crystal Moten: The images of lynching were circulating around the country, right? Lynching postcards traveled through the Postal Service. And so, it was in the public consciousness, in African Americans' consciousness.

Lizzie Peabody: Did you say lynching postcards?

Crystal Moten: Definitely. Yeah. That speaks to when you ask about the danger, right?

Lizzie Peabody: Lynching postcards depicted murders and were sent openly through the U.S. Mail until 1908, when they were outlawed, but people still sent them just, in envelopes.

Crystal Moten: That's the environment that Lena Richard and Marie were traveling in.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmmm.

Crystal Moten: Right? That's the environment, that's the environment. Many times, lynching occurred not because of suspected sexual violence against white women, but because African American folks were becoming economically successful, and they were becoming threats to a social, economic and political order that threatened white supremacy. And so, for Lena Richard to say, "I am going to step out of the societal structure that would have me be a so-called menial servant" is saying no to a culture where severe violent reprisals could happen as a result.

Lizzie Peabody: So, it was pretty courageous that she made this trip to New York, but also that she was daring to place herself in that role of authority.

Crystal Moten: That's right.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But during this book tour, something amazing happens. A major publisher, Houghton Mifflin, decides to re-publish Richard's cookbook for national distribution.

[MUSIC]

Crystal Moten: For Lena Richard to be picked up by this huge mainstream press is just, you know, it's astonishing, really.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Backed by Houghton Mifflin, Lena Richard's name starts circulating the country. And this is where she goes from local to national celebrity!

Ashley Young: I think it's fair to say when a family like the Rockefellers calls you and recruits you to be the Head Chef of one of their new restaurants, I think that's how we might define celebrity, right? (Laughs). When the Rockefellers call you up! (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The Rockefellers! The 1%. The oil tycoons! At the Rockefellers' restaurant, The Travis House, Lena Richard cooked for high ranking British military officials, and even Winston Churchill's family! She wrote...

[MUSIC]

Chef Dee Lavigne Reading Lena Richard's Essay: "Mrs. Churchill and her daughter, Mary, came back to see me, and shook my hand. I've got Mrs. Churchill's autograph in one of my books. She's got mine."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: People came from California, New Mexico, and Indiana to taste her dishes.

Ashley Young: I mean, people came to The Travis House because they knew Richard was the Head Chef and they loved the particular dishes she made there. I mean, you can see that in the guestbook reviews that people left, the comments. Oh my gosh!

[MUSIC]

Guestbook Review of Lena Richard at The Travis House: "My Dear Lena. Seldom have I enjoyed a meal as much as I have in dining here. And I have dined with royalty."

[MUSIC]

Guestbook Review of Lena Richard at The Travis House: "Ugh, Lena, what oysters! If every one of them contained a pearl."

[MUSIC]

Guestbook Review of Lena Richard at The Travis House: "Lena, your oysters actually have character!"

[MUSIC]

Guestbook Review of Lena Richard at The Travis House: "Lena Richard, we think your oysters are superb."

[MUSIC]

Guestbook Review of Lena Richard at The Travis House: "The oysters are supreme!"

[MUSIC]

Guestbook Review of Lena Richard at The Travis House: "My compliments. Your gifted fingers have given the oysters a soul."

[MUSIC]

Guestbook Review of Lena Richard at The Travis House: "P.S. What oysters!"

[MUSIC]

Guestbook Review of Lena Richard at The Travis House: "And they aren't oysters, but perfection."

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: I mean those oysters, if I could go back in time and have any dish, it would be Lena Richards scalloped oysters!

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Ashley Young: So, you see, The Travis House really just building up and adding to a national reputation.

Lizzie Peabody: By the late 1940s, the now nationally-known Lena Richard was back in New Orleans. There, she started an international frozen food business, opened her own fine-dining restaurant, and nearly 15 years before Julia Child appeared on TV in, "The French Chef," Lena Richard starred in her own cooking show.

Ashley Young: When her program aired in 1949 on WDSU-TV, the local channel in New Orleans, this was a big deal! I mean, it was the first culinary program on WDSU-TV and it was most likely the first program in the country that starred an African American Chef!

Lizzie Peabody: The show was called, "Lena Richard's New Orleans Cookbook." In each 30-minute episode, she guided viewers through one of her recipes. It aired twice a week, alongside shows like, "Howdy-Doody", "Broadway Review," and...

Ashley Young: "How to Improve Golf."

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). I'm sorry. That sounds like the most boring show in the universe! (Laughs).

Ashley Young: Well, it also kind of indicates the TV viewers at the time.

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: Remember what a nascent medium TV was back then. TV was only owned by the elite in the late '40s. We're not even talking about the degree of popularity that TV had in the days of Julia Child and this predates Julia Child by decades.

Lizzie Peabody: But unlike Julia Child's show, we won't ever know what Lena Richard's sounded like because no record of the show exists.

Ashley Young: So, this is one of the heartbreaking things about studying Richard's story, which is that we don't have any recordings of her television program. We don't even have scripts and believe me, I have looked at every archive imaginable and, and I just can't find this evidence.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: All we have to go by are the memories of New Orleanians who watched her show, like Ruth Zatairan, who Ashley spoke with, back in 2011. She remembered the kinds of meals Lena Richard prepared on the show.

[MUSIC]

Ruth Zatairan: She cooked the kind of food that New Orleanians were used to eating. Good basic, red beans, meatballs and red gravy, and stews, gumbos, that kind of food. It was like she

was talking to you. It was like you were talking to her in her kitchen. She was really unique and original.

[MUSIC]

Ashley Young: And when you watched, did you just watch the show or did you take notes if she said something?

[MUSIC]

Ruth Zatairan: You always took a paper and pencil 'cause you might pick up something new.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Decades after leaving the Vairin family home, at the height of her career, Lena Richard was back in the homes of white families, but in a completely new way.

[MUSIC]

Crystal Moten: Black women were usually hidden away in the kitchen. Black women were supposed to be, "seen and not heard" right?

Lizzie Peabody: Hmmm.

[MUSIC]

Crystal Moten: But that is not what is happening in this cooking show.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, here she is. She's seen and she's heard.

Crystal Moten: Right!

Lizzie Peabody: And she's not behind the kitchen doors. She's in the living room.

[MUSIC]

Crystal Moten: That's right! That's right. Right. And she's in the living room, perhaps reaching more people than she could have imagined.

[MUSIC]

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: It is absolutely unfathomable. This is a black woman on TV as an authority. Name 5 in 2020. They don't exist.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: By 1950, Lena Richard had built a culinary empire. Her book had sold so well, Houghton Mifflin was working on a second, expanded edition. Her restaurant, frozen food business, and school were thriving. She'd hobnobbed with the Churchills and the Rockefellers. She was a New Orleans TV star.

Ashley Young: She was really just kind of starting out on this truly nationally known stardom.

Lizzie Peabody: And so, what happened?

Ashley Young: After a year and some change after her TV program premiered, she went home, not feeling well. And in November of 1950, she passed away of a heart attack. And her story abruptly ends.

Lizzie Peabody: Lena Richard was about 50 years old.

Lizzie Peabody: Do you ever wonder what might have happened if she hadn't died so young? And so suddenly?

Ashley Young: I think about it a lot, actually. You know, she is a role model of mine. And I think a role model for many people who know her story, and I can't help, but think about what else she could have done, had she been able to stay on TV at a time where those local programs started broadcasting nationally. I think she would be a household name.

[MUSIC]

Dr. Jessica B. Harris: In the short time that she had, she did a hell of a lot. God bless her. She kicked some doors in that we're still trying to keep open.

[MUSIC]

[SOUND OF SIZZLING]

Paula Rhodes: So, it says, the last step is, "season with salt, pepper, and just before serving, stir in filé."

[SOUND OF PEPPER GRINDER]

Lizzie Peabody: Alright, moment of truth. Lena Richard's gumbo.

[SOUND OF A BOILING IN POT]

Lizzie Peabody: (Slurp). Mmmmm. That's really good! (Laughs). That's really good.

[SOUND OF CLANGING]

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I think we'd call that a success!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Lena Richard was born into a segregated country, and she died without ever knowing that would change, but she claimed a new place for herself publicly, unapologetically in America's kitchens and living rooms. And opened the door for others to come.

[MUSIC]

Paula Rhodes: It was not just about the cooking skills and abilities and stuff, but it was about the community, and being part of a community and the sharing. I mean, it really was.

[MUSIC]

Crystal Moten: It takes a lot to kind of be aware of the world you live in and say, I am going to create another world for myself. And I think that's what Lena Richard did.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: To see a photograph of Lena Richard on the set of her cooking show, you can find it in our Newsletter. Subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our colleagues at the National Museum of African American History and Culture have launched a powerful new web portal called, "Talking About Race." It provides digital tools tailored for educators, parents, and caregivers, as well as individuals committed to racial equity. We highly recommend taking a look, and we'll link to that in our Newsletter as well.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Enormous thanks to Ashley Rose Young, whose archival research and interviewing made this episode possible. Crystal Moten and Ashley Young have co-curated an exhibition called, “The Only One in the Room,” featuring stories of pioneering women in business, including Lena Richard! That exhibition launches digitally this summer.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Thanks also to New Orleans Chef, Dee Lavigne, for bringing Lena Richard’s words to life for us. You can find her on social media @DEELIGHTFULCUPCAKES. (That’s d-e-e-lightful cupcakes). And thank you to Lily Katzman, for bringing this story to our attention. Keep an eye out for Lily’s upcoming article about Lena Richard in the Smithsonian Magazine.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Additional thanks to Liz Williams and our colleagues at the Southern Food and Beverage Museum, the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, the Newcomb Archives and Vorhoff Library Special Collections at Tulane University, and to the wonderful Valeska Hilbig. Thanks also to Toni Tipton-Martin, whose book, “The Jemima Code” helped inform this episode.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Oh yes, and I almost forgot. Thanks to our oyster-lovers: Kathleen and Andrew Waite, Ellie Klein and Nicholas Rodman, PJ Tabit, and Sidedoor alums, Tony Cohn and Jason Orfanon.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: For more stories of important women in history, be sure to look into the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative. To learn more, go to womenshistory.si.edu or join the conversation using #becauseofherstory on social media.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O’Neill, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John, Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: How do you know if it's burned?

Paula Rhodes: Uh, (laughs), well, eventually you see it turn black, (laughs) but if you're really bad it, you can tell right away. You just have to start over again. Okay? (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Paula Rhodes: (Laughs). No doubt about it! Okay? (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Paula Rhodes: (Laughs).

[MUSIC]