



## Ms. Edna Lewis

Chefsville  
Kids

Cooking adventures that connect family, community, culture, math, science, language arts and social studies

Edna Lewis inspired a generation of young African American chefs and ensured traditional Southern foods and preparations would live on. Eventually she opened Café Nicholson in Manhattan, cooked for the stars and became a local legend. She is the author of three cookbooks, and is famous for making people pay attention to the beauty of Southern food.

Ms. Lewis was born in 1916 in Freetown, Orange County, Virginia, one of eight children. Her grandfather, an emancipated slave, helped found the community, hence its name. The family lived on a farm that had been granted to her grandfather and central to the family's life was food in all its phases: growing, foraging, harvesting and cooking. Without any modern cooking conveniences—everything was cooked over wood and, lacking measuring spoons, baking powder was measured on coins—food preparation called on **creativity, resourcefulness and ingenuity**. Ms. Lewis was extremely gracious with how she spoke with people.



At 16, after her father died, she left Freetown for Washington, D.C., and then New York City where her culinary journey got off to a rocky start with her first job ironing in a laundry. She had never ironed before and was fired after three hours. She may not have ironed but she had sewn, and quickly found work as a seamstress. She copied Christian Dior dresses, made a dress for Marilyn Monroe and became well known for creating African-inspired dresses.

In New York, after a series of jobs, she opened a restaurant, Café Nicholson, in Manhattan's East Side. She became a local legend and cooked for many celebrities and the President Roosevelt's wife. In the late '40s, female chefs were few especially black female chefs, yet Edna Lewis became well known and beloved for her simple, but delicious Southern cooking.

Ms. Lewis was the author of three inspirational cookbooks that offer a glimpse into African-American farm life in the early 20th century. Her cookbooks include: *The Edna Lewis Cookbook* (1972), *The Taste of Country Cooking* (1976) and *In Pursuit of Flavor* (1988).

Among her many awards are: "Who's Who in American Cooking," (Cook's Magazine, 1986); "Dr. Edna Lewis is lauded as one of the great women of American cooking. A specialist in Southern Cooking, She has received an honorary Ph.D. in Culinary Arts from Johnson & Wales University (Norfolk), College of Culinary Arts May 26, 1996"; "James Beard Living Legend Award" (their first such award, 1999), and being named "Grande Dame" (Les Dames d'Escoffier, 1999).

Dr. Edna Lewis died in 2006 at the age of 89.

YouTube Video on Edna Lewis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9ChOFhjY4>

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