**“Coming Out Meatless”**

Gravy Podcast

Southern Foodways Alliance

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[Lead-in]

TINA ANTOLINI: The South has a complex relationship with meat. Historically, a lot of people here were too poor to afford a big hunk of it. So meat was used in small amounts to season vegetables, reserved for special occasions. But that little bit of salt pork in your greens in Mississippi or that special occasion steak in Texas. It’s become folded into the identity of many Southerners, which can make it difficult when one of them decides to opt out.

CHOYA: Why can’t zucchini be soul food? Cause it can. I make some really good zucchini. I can make some really bomb ass kale and I can make some vegetarian gravy.

[Intro to the Gravy Podcast and background music]

[Beginning of the story]

TINA ANTOLINI: Stories of the changing American South through the foods we eat. We are a production of the Southern Foodways Alliance. I’m Tina Antolini. Today, the identity that’s wrapped up in eating meat, or not eating it. And how, for one young man and his family, the question of eating meat or not has led to a whole bunch of other questions, about ethnic and racial identity, belonging, sexuality, and a whole lot more. Radio producer Renee Gross brings us the story.

RENEE GROSS: At home in his apartment in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Choya Webb shifts easily from the serious to the silly. And from the political to the goofy, and back again. But he dislikes people thinking of him as just another liberal college student going to school in Ann Arbor. And although he doesn’t eat meat, he even dislikes the term vegetarian. He says the label comes with too many assumptions.

CHOYA WEBB JR: Well, you probably do yoga, and I do do yoga. And you probably drink coffee at the, at the local coffee shop across from your house and I don’t do that actually.

RENEE GROSS: Choya is biracial, Black and Latino. Part of his family lives in Texas and the other part lives in Michigan. I met Choya through his boyfriend Nick. We would hang out in big groups a lot. But it wasn’t until we both happened to be on the same long distance bus trip that we just talked, just the two of us. He told me about his recent decision to stop eating meat. He says he’s flirted with the idea for a long time.

CHOYA WEBB JR: I was the typical Myspace kid in 7th grade who found out about vegetarianism and was super thrilled by it and was, like, yeah I’m gonna do this.

RENEE GROSS: But cutting out meat was harder than he thought especially with his single mom and his grandparents.

CHOYA WEBB JR: I’m not eating meat but at the same time, McDonald’s is right there. We’re on our way home, Mom just got out of work at 7, you know, that’s what’s convenient.

RENEE GROSS: Eventually, Choya decided that giving up meat entirely was near impossible. He became an on-again, off-again vegetarian. Then he went off to college and studied abroad in the Dominican Republic. That’s when things changed. Meat was all he ate.

CHOYA WEBB JR: My host mother served me ham every day. At least twice a day.

RENEE GROSS: At first, the food was not a big deal. He was in a new country trying to be a good guest. Then he lost the taste for ham and for meat altogether, but he was worried about going to Houston, Texas for Thanksgiving. Texas is the home of longhorn steers and beef brisket. It’s the home of barbecue and big cuts of meat. It’s also the home of Choya’s dad. They hadn’t been in touch for years.

CHOYA WEBB JR: My dad is a pastor and already we have some interesting sort of dynamics because of my sexuality.

RENEE GROSS: Choya never told his dad that he’s gay, but back in high school, his cousin found out from other kids.

CHOYA WEBB JR: My cousin, who was staunchly Christian at the time, um, was, feared for my life, was her direct words, and so she had to tell all of my family members because they were worried about, you know, my salvation.

RENEE GROSS: So his dad knew that his son was interested in men. But there wasn’t any discussion about it.

CHOYA WEBB JR: I was kinda told to sit alone, in the sense of, we don’t have to talk about it. It’s a phase, but we know.

RENEE GROSS: It was assumed that Choya would grow out of it. Fast forward years later to this past Thanksgiving. He hadn’t grown out of it. And there was something else he needed to tell his dad.

CHOYA WEBB JR: I texted my dad before I got there, in, to Texas. Telling him I was, um, vegetarian.

RENEE GROSS: His dad responded right away.

CHOYA WEBB JR: Immediately, he was saying, you’re not gonna be able to eat anything, so, um, you’re gonna have to find somewhere else to eat.

RENEE GROSS: It was a joke, but the message came across clearly.

CHOYA WEBB JR: He was just trying to say that he wasn’t really interested in editing the meal at all because of me, the only person who isn’t eating meat right now in the family probably.

RENEE GROSS: Choya says he felt excluded from the rest of his family.

CHOYA WEBB JR: It’s a different kind of “other.” It’s an “other” that they are familiar with, but not someone who they, I guess, would assume would be at our Thanksgiving. Not- there wouldn’t be a person not eating meat. It’s Thanksgiving. Much like there wouldn’t be a gay person in our church because it’s a church.

RENEE GROSS: When Choya arrived at his dad’s house in Houston for Thanksgiving, there were ten to twelve dishes on the table and only two of them were meatless.

CHOYA WEBB JR: Even rice they added bacon to, which, I mean, I thought was hilarious.

RENEE GROSS: There are reasons that his family didn’t want to acknowledge his diet, says Choya. He assumes his family’s thought process went something like this:

CHOYA WEBB JR: Choya is hanging out with a bunch of white friends that he has who are also vegetarian, who just go to Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s all the time. And go to, you know, restaurants and spend money on, you know, organic, like, I don’t even know how else to word it, but organic food, or, you know, high quality food. As opposed to my family that, that doesn’t seem in reach to them or something they would be interested in doing.

RENEE GROSS: To Choya, it felt like not eating meat fit with his family’s image of him as different.

CHOYA WEBB JR: This seemingly Queer Black person who happens to be skinny, of course, size is completely involved in this. This skinny Black gay person who isn’t eating meat. Of course, that makes sense, I got it now.

RENEE GROSS: Choya stood out in his family as the only one not eating meat. But there are plenty of other African Americans in the South and beyond who have made this choice.

DR. AMIE BREEZE HARPER: Vegetarianism and veganism is not a new thing for Black people. It’s not; they’ve been doing it for a very long time. You just don’t see it in the mainstream. And that’s because the mainstream is dictated by images and values of whiteness.

RENEE GROSS: That’s Dr. Amie Breeze Harper. She is the author of the book *Sistah Vegan* and the director of the Sistah Vegan Project. She became a vegan in the early 2000s. At the time, she was struggling with her health and that made her research the bigger historical picture of how diet is related to how Blacks have been treated in this country.

DR. AMIE BREEZE HARPER: Colonialism and slavery have had such a horrible impact on our health and our eating ways.

RENEE GROSS: She echoes Choya in saying that veganism and vegetarianism isn’t always in reach to people of color.

DR. AMIE BREEZE HARPER: So, one has to understand that not everybody has access to, you know, fresh produce, or, you know, whole grains, the way that white middle-class, upper-class population does in this country.

RENEE GROSS: Of course, what you eat is also based on what your family eats. And if you eat something different, it's almost as if you're turning your back on your family. Harper says she's seen this happen.

DR. AMIE BREEZE HARPER: So, this could be even some person who is an omnivore and they’re eating their cultural foods and then they go away to the industrialized city and maybe they go to college, and they start eating different food there, but they're, but they're still omnivore.

RENEE GROSS: When they come back home, they may not want to eat the food they were raised on.

DR. AMIE BREEZE HARPER: They upset their, their parents, their family, ‘cause their parents and family think that, “Oh you, you, you think you're better than us because you're picking up these food waves from the city.”

RENEE GROSS: With new food waves also comes new appearances. Your weight can change when you eat in a new way. This can make things more difficult. And for reasons that are culturally specific.

DR. AMIE BREEZE HARPER: You know, why is it a lot of us in the Black community consider women not to be “healthy” if they're not more curvy and that when we lose a lot of weight, why are we considered unhealthy? But then we move to the white mainstream and we lose a lot of weight, our friends and parents say we look healthy.

RENEE GROSS: And Harper says there's also a hope that men especially will grow up to be robust by eating meat. This means that men who choose to be vegetarian can face a lot of skepticism.

DR. AMIE BREEZE HARPER: A lot of them do experience, “Well, you know, I don't understand…that's not really a ‘manly’ diet and that's not going to make you strong ‘cause a real man is strong…he can only be strong by eating animals.

RENEE GROSS: I wondered if this was Choya’s experience. I wanted to talk to his parents and see how they felt. What was it like for them when Choya told them he was not eating meat? Did they see it being related to his masculinity? So I gave Choya a call.

[Phone call]

RENEE GROSS: Hey!

CHOYA WEBB JR: Hey, how are you?
RENEE GROSS: I’m good, how are you?

RENEE GROSS: Basically, I told Choya about wanting to interview his family.

[Phone call]

CHOYA WEBB JR: Uhhh, let me think about it for a second.

RENEE GROSS: Yeah, for sure.

CHOYA WEBB JR: It's interesting because, um, as you know, I'm primarily estranged from my dad.

RENEE GROSS: Choya hadn't really been in touch with his dad since Thanksgiving. It was April now. We also talked for a bit about how the interview might go. It was food I wanted to talk to his dad about, I told Choya.

[Phone call]

CHOYA WEBB JR: It’s very obvious…clear…that you don’t plan on, like, really referencing my sexuality in any way which is good because I’m not out to him yet. I actually just wrote him a letter that I haven't sent. And I feel quite urgent about this issue because...I have…they’re coming for graduation. They’re about to meet Nick.

RENEE GROSS: Remember that Nick is Choya's boyfriend. He was planning a gathering with Nick and his whole family when they came into town for graduation. I perked up when I heard that. I asked Choya if I could interview his dad on graduation day.

[Phone call]

CHOYA WEBB JR: Like, I don’t think that would be a problem. Um, especially by that point, because by that point, ideally on May 3rd, he’ll know, he’ll be okay with it, he’ll meet Nick. Everything will be fine.

[Coming up next and small break]

RENEE GROSS: I knew I was gonna wait to talk to Choya’s dad till graduation, but his mom said she would be willing to talk to me anytime.

BENITA COMES: I am Benita Comes.

RENEE GROSS: Benita is half Black and half Mexican. She raised Choya among her Mexican family. She says in her family, everyone relates to each other with food.

BENITA COMES: Food, in our household was definitely its own language…dialect even, I mean, if you want, I mean, you know, again, because if somebody wanted to tell you they loved you, but could not put it into words…guess what? They stuffed your face.

RENEE GROSS: People didn’t just use food to say I love you. They used it for every emotion, including anger. Benita knows this from firsthand experience.

BENITA COMES: I mean, it became a push-pull and a, a rebellious stage for me, especially in my teen years. “No, I don't wanna eat that, just ‘cause I don't feel like it.” And the person get mad, but that was the goal.

RENEE GROSS: So, if you’re angry at somebody else, you turn down their cooking. Benita was clear that people only refused food to express their emotions, not because they were on a specific diet. Nobody made different dishes. It was either you eat what I make you or you don’t eat at all. So, when Choya said he wasn’t going to eat meat, it was a big ordeal.

BENITA COMES: Such-and-such is probably going to get upset. That he’s not eating. And then they’re going to comment on the fact that he’s skinny…skinnier than cousin such-and-such and we’re going to a whole big spiel. I mean, you could talk for hours with some of these people.

RENEE GROSS: The situation would get so uncomfortable that Benita would sometimes warn Choya not to come to family events.

BENITA COMES: So sometimes you might have to hide Choya out. You know, you might have to say, you know, such-and-such is coming over today and they’re gonna bring over a, you know, a tray of beef nachos. You might wanna make yourself scarce or maybe even go visit a friend.

RENEE GROSS: Benita says most men in their family will go out of their way to eat meat. Even when it’s not supposed to be in the meal.

BENITA COMES: I mean, don’t get me wrong…the cheese and onion enchilada, right? It’s meant to be just cheese and onion. However, you might find Uncle Ralph throwing on cubed beef on top of this cheese and onion enchilada dish. Why? Because I eat meat. You know, I gotta have somethin’...I gotta have some cubed beef. Meat, in that household, oozes machismo.

RENEE GROSS: If eating meat means masculinity, then not eating meat means the opposite. Benita doesn’t think the connection between being vegetarian and dating men would be lost on anyone in her family.

BENITA COMES: It all makes sense. You know, if, if they were to really think about it and think about when Choya stopped eating meat or when he started to alter things, they would definitely say, see, we woulda known then.

RENEE GROSS: Benita used to worry about her relatives' reactions. She was scared when Choya came out as gay.

BENITA COMES: It was what everybody else thought. And not even just so much so being in the ethnic household, but the single parent household.

RENEE GROSS: Benita was afraid that people would see Choya's sexuality as a reflection on her. If only she had a husband. If only Choya had a bigger male influence growing up. Then maybe he wouldn’t be gay. But once she realized that her worries all had to do with other people, things changed.

BENITA COMES: You know, I sat myself down and once I made peace, I was fine with it. I’m very supportive. You know, Choya was happy, I liked who he was.

RENEE GROSS: Benita’s not afraid anymore to tell her family that Choya’s gay, but she says for some relatives, she may start by telling them he’s vegetarian.

BENITA COMES: In joking with some of my uncles or something like that, I might say well, you shoulda known something was, you know, abound because he would, he stopped eating meat at fourteen, you know, just because again, it’s easier. Um, you can joke about the no meat. But you know, when you speak about sexuality, you can only joke so far.

RENEE GROSS: Sexuality was still a tense issue. At least, I knew it was with Choya and his father. Graduation was a couple days away. I still hadn’t heard from Choya about what was going on yet.

[Phone call]

RENEE GROSS “Hey, Choya.”

CHOYA WEBB JR: “Hi, how are you?”

RENEE GROSS: Choya gave me an update. Things with his dad were still unclear.

[Phone call]

CHOYA WEBB JR: I came out to him and he didn’t really respond.

RENEE GROSS: Oh…

CHOYA WEBB JR: So I really don’t know, like, how he, like…

RENEE GROSS: Yeah…
CHOYA WEBB JR: Where he’s at. It’s okay.

RENEE GROSS: Yeah…

CHOYA WEBB JR: I just don’t know where he’s at mentally.

RENEE GROSS: I didn’t wanna push for a private interview with Choya’s father. So, I asked if there was another part of graduation that I could come and record.

[Phone call]

CHOYA WEBB JR: Ummmm, so, we’re going to dinner actually after graduation. That’ll be in Ypsi, so it won’t be nearly as crazy. Um, I would not mind if you came at all. That actually would be the most neutral situation, I think.

RENEE GROSS: Later, Choya texted me the details. I got ready to meet all of his family at their celebratory dinner.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA WEBB JR: Can I get just the flauta special please?

WAITRESS: Excuse me?
CHOYA WEBB JR: Flautas?
 WAITRESS: Chicken or bean?

CHOYA WEBB JR: Bean, please.

RENEE GROSS: I arrived at La Fiesta Mexicana around 1 PM to celebrate Choya’s graduation. I realized very quickly there were two sides to the table. Benita explained it for me.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

BENITA COMES: We’re separated but not segregated. There you go.

RENEE GROSS: On one end of the table was Choya's mother’s side of the family.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA’S MATERNAL AUNT: I’m his Aunt Alex.

CHOYA’S MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER: I’m Grandma Pat.

NICK: I’m boyfriend Nick.

RENEE GROSS: And on the other end was Choya’s dad’s side.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA’S PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER: I’m Choya’s grandmother. His dad’s mom.

CHOYA’S PATERNAL COUSIN: I’m Fred Irving. I’m his cousin.

RENEE GROSS: Finally, I got to Choya’s dad.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA WEBB SR: I’m Choya Webb Sr. I’m his dad. And yes, I eat meat.

RENEE GROSS: They all do. When I asked why, his cousin jumped in.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA’S COUSIN: I mean, because, we’re, we’re, we’re healthy and that’s why. Some…it’s an enjoyment. Not eating rabbit food, but it’s, not taking nothin’ against it, but I enjoy a healthy meal…to fill ya up.

RENEE GROSS: As for Choya Sr, being a vegetarian never crossed his mind. It didn’t fit with his image of himself.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA WEBB SR: When you say vegetarian, I think of somebody that’s skinny. Somebody that’s a little eccentric. Somebody that just abhors the very thought of their teeth tearing apart flesh or eating anything that once had a mother.

RENEE GROSS: To be fair, he says he doesn’t meet a lot of vegetarians where he lives.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA WEBB SR: If you drive down some of the major streets in Houston, Texas, there’s meat grazing on the side of the street. I promise you. Like, on the side of the mall, it’ll be a field of cattle grazing. Brisket, steak, you name it. They love meat in Texas.

RENEE GROSS: Choya Sr says his love for eating meat can be traced back to his mom, Lucille, who just happened to be sitting right beside him.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA’S PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, LUCILLE: I guess, I'm the guilty party with the meat for every meal. And sometimes two meats.

RENEE GROSS: Lucille seemed to pinpoint what everyone else was hinting at. Choya’s reasons to stop eating meat came from outside of the family.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA’S PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, LUCILLE: Well, I felt that it was because of the environment he was in. The school that he attended, those…the kids in that school…a lot of ‘em were eccentric. They were different. They, you know, these are the people he was around all the time. It didn’t bother me. I didn't think it was gonna last. But it’s been years now.

RENEE GROSS: Why didn’t you think it would last?

CHOYA’S PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, LUCILLE: Because we cook meat all the time.

RENEE GROSS: And here’s where it gets interesting. Lucille starts talking about that one Thanksgiving. She mentions how much meat they had.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA’S PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, LUCILLE: Like, we were at his dad’s for Thanksgiving and uh, we had everything, didn’t we? Everything. I didn’t know he didn’t eat any meat that day. We had everything.

RENEE GROSS: But then Lucille starts talking about her admiration for Choya’s willpower. That’s the moment she gets emotional.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA’S PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, LUCILLE: He’s really, uh, disciplined himself so I’m proud of him. I’m really proud of him.

RENEE GROSS: I knew Lucille wasn’t just talking about Choya’s ability to forego meat at Thanksgiving. She was talking about her pride for him graduating. And maybe that was the point. It was Choya’s willpower that allowed him to be a vegetarian. The exact same willpower that made him succeed as a student. And his dad saw it the same way.

[Recorded restaurant conversation]

CHOYA WEBB SR: And I, um, commend his discipline to abstain from eating meat.

RENEE GROSS: Choya showed that his decision to go meatless wasn’t a fluke. Similarly, being gay was not a phase. He feels like he finally convinced his family of that.

CHOYA WEBB JR: I think they were ready to believe me. Or they were ready to really take what I had to say seriously in how I identify and how I kinda perceive myself.

RENEE GROSS: His family always assumed that he wasn’t ready to make those types of decisions about himself. They didn’t think Choya could be sure he was gay.

CHOYA WEBB JR: I think the whole narrative for them was, “Oh he’s just confused,” and I think a lot of other people growing up in that kind of context hear that throughout their whole life, like, “Oh, they’re confused and they’ll eventually get there,” but I knew that now it wouldn’t, it wouldn’t seem like confusion, it would seem like, “Oh, he knows, he’s, he has known, you know? He’s an accomplished person, so he knows what he wants and who he is.”

RENEE GROSS: It seemed to Choya that his dad accepted his sexuality. But that doesn’t mean his dad ever brought it up during the time that he was in town.

CHOYA WEBB JR: I feel like his way of talking about it was being nice. Being loving. Being himself. And that was enough.

RENEE GROSS: Choya was especially touched by the way his dad introduced himself to Nick. It happened right after the graduation ceremony. It was the first time Choya and his dad had seen each other since Thanksgiving

CHOYA WEBB JR: And um, you know, I hugged him, and I hugged my stepmom and my little sister. And then after hugging all them, he went right over to Nick and said, “You must be Nick.” And shook his hand. And it was like the most relieving feeling ever. And even my mom, like, raised her eyebrows and was like, “Oh, wasn’t expecting that at all.”

RENEE GROSS: After graduation, his dad invited Choya and Nick out to ice cream. Choya said it’s actions like these that let him know that everything was alright. Talking about his sexuality and all that had happened between father and son may have been too hard during graduation. But it reminds me of what Benita said earlier. Sometimes, when you don’t have the words to tell someone you love them, you do the next best thing. You stuff their face.

[Background information on the Southern Foodways Alliance and brief summary of next episode]

**Reference:**

Antolini, T. & Gross, R. (Hosts). (2015, September 10). Coming out meatless. In *Gravy* (No. 21) [Audio podcast episode]. Southern Foodways Alliance. <https://www.southernfoodways.org/gravy/coming-out-meatless-gravy-ep-21/>