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Black History Month menus upset college students

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 02, 2014

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Dining halls at several colleges served fried chicken and collard greens to celebrate Black History Month, raising complaints from some about racial and cultural stereotypes and the proper place of food in such observances.

Several students at Lasell College in Newton said including

menu fare that at times has been used to depict and demean African-American culture perpetuates hurtful labels.

“The foods that were served have nothing to do with Black History Month,” said Shanique Reid, an 18-year-old Lasell freshman from Hartford who is studying communications and human rights. “It was very stereotypical and offensive.”

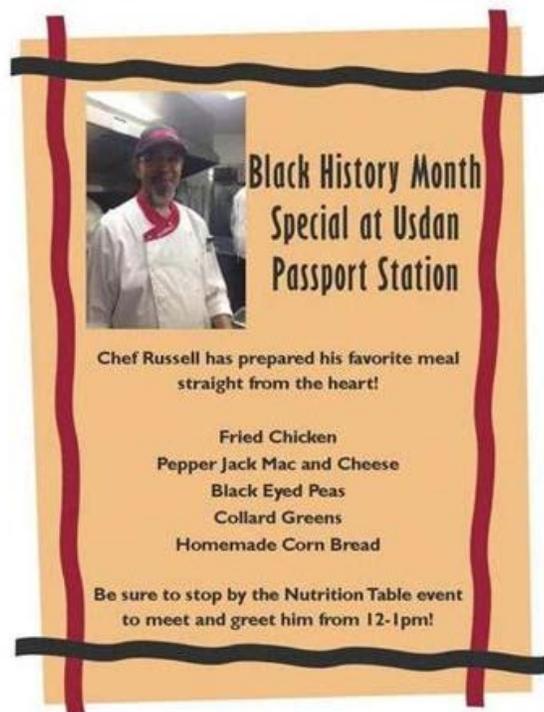
“They might as well have put out Kool-Aid and watermelon,” Reid added.

A similar menu was offered at Brandeis University, although no complaints appear to have surfaced there as Black History Month wound down last week.

Both colleges share the food-service contractor Sodexo and say the French company independently plans dining hall menus. Sodexo came under fire on at least two other campuses in other states for serving similar menus during February. The company issued an apology in those instances.

In a statement to the Globe, the company said meals that showcase cultural culinary traditions have proven popular, and students look forward to them each year.

At Lasell College, “one of our chefs on campus created a special meal for students representing a traditional



The menu offered at Brandeis drew no apparent complaints as Black History Month wound down last week.



Sunday meal with his family,” the statement said. “Our chef was excited to be sharing the same food his parents cooked for him with the campus community.”



At Brandeis, pictures of the menu — which also included black-eyed peas — were posted on the university dining department’s Facebook page, which also recognized the lengthy career of the African-American chef who prepared the meal.

“I think the way it was done here was celebrating a particular staff member who’s been here for 29 years, and it was his own menu,” campus spokeswoman Ellen de Graffenreid said. “This campus is very sensitive to these kinds of issues, so I imagine it was handled very respectfully and appropriately.”

Reid, a member of the Multicultural Student Union at Lasell, and Jazmine Jackson, the group’s president, said Sodexo reached out to their group last month and said it wanted to work with the students to create a special Black History Month menu.

“We were hoping to focus on dishes from Africa, Haiti, and other countries around the world,” said Jackson, a 20-year-old junior from Laconia, N.H., who is studying business management.

But both students said the group never heard back from Sodexo representatives. Instead, they said, students arrived for dinner about two weeks ago to find a spread of fried chicken, collard greens, and mac and cheese along with signs saying the meal was being served to honor Black History Month.

They said that almost every student, whether they were black or not, avoided eating the meal and many expressed that the menu was offensive. About 6 percent of the private college’s undergraduate population identify as black or African-American.

Lasell spokeswoman Michelle Gaseau said the college is “very concerned about anything that makes students’ experiences less than wonderful . . . and is committed to responding to any concerns that students have.”

Earlier this month, students at Drake University in Iowa said they felt embarrassed and patronized by a menu of fried chicken and collard greens that Sodexo served at their campus, prompting an apology

from the company and a promise that it would work with a black student group to create a menu for another dinner, the Associated Press reported.

Sodexo also apologized after it sent students at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas an e-mail detailing a Black History Month menu featuring fried chicken and collard greens that it planned to serve there, according to KATV, an ABC affiliate news station in Arkansas. The company canceled that event in response to concerns, the station reported.

However, the company served similar foods — also associated with Southern whites — on other campuses without drawing controversy.

At Binghamton University in New York, the Black Student Union collaborated with Sodexo to create a Black History Month menu that included fried chicken and collard greens, according to the campus's independent student-run newspaper the Pipe Dream.

Tufts University professor James Jennings, an expert in race relations, said using stereotypical foods to celebrate black history shows “racial insensitivity and ignorance.”

“It insults black students and does a disservice to white students and their education, particularly white students who do not have significant contact with black people,” Jennings said. “These colleges should use this as an opportunity to have students learn more about who they are and who their fellow Americans are and the contributions that everyone has made to this country.”

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