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Bill to Determine USVI National Dish Through Territory-wide Survey Moves Forward

Culinary / **Published On June 24, 2023 06:13 AM /**

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Fish and Fungi is one of the most popular dishes in the U.S. Virgin Islands. By. SAVEUR.

In a bid to cement the culinary identity of the Virgin Islands and bolster its gastronomic tourism, Senator Angel Bolques on Friday presented Bill 35-0078 to the Senate Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks, proposing a territory-wide survey to establish an official dish and dessert for the region.

This initiative, underscored by the vital role of food in society, tradition, culture, and economic stability, drew robust support from both the Department of Tourism and key culinary figures in the Virgin Islands. However, it also sparked a thoughtful debate over the diversity of cooking

styles across the islands, authenticity, and the influence of evolving cultural factors on local cuisine.

Alani Henneman, assistant commissioner of D.O.T., testified in support of the bill on behalf of D.O.T. Commissioner Joseph Boschulte. She highlighted that a national dish and dessert would elevate the already thriving culinary and agriculture tourism in the Virgin Islands. Henneman proposed a digital strategy for the survey, including targeted ads on social media, a digital survey platform, and localized digital ads throughout the territory.

Culinary ambassador Julius Jackson, a local author, business owner, and chef, expressed his agreement with the bill, stating, "I think a survey should be held throughout the entire USVI, and it would be a great way to decide the official dish and dessert of the Virgin Islands." He emphasized the importance of hearing from all generations in the U.S. Virgin Islands to gather input on the national dish and dessert.

Meanwhile, written testimony from culinary ambassador Sandra Gerard-Leung was read into the record. She shared her understanding of the Virgin Islands' culinary heritage and expressed support for the territory-wide survey. "We are a melting pot of people who descended from many places, and we all share some commonality in our foods," she noted. Ms. Gerard-Leung emphasized the need for the survey to encompass the perspectives of the young, middle-aged, and seniors to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the local preferences.

During the discussion, Henneman assured Senator Samuel Carrion that the survey would fairly capture responses across a representative cross-section of Virgin Islands society, including all demographics in a multi-faceted approach. In addition to the online survey, there are plans to utilize in-person dropbox voting and a call-in number. D.O.T. would also target senior homes, senior groups, and churches to ensure the participation of the older generation, recognizing that not everyone has access to social media. She described an initial gathering of people's responses, followed by a territory-wide voting exercise on the most popular finalists, including a write-in option to ensure that everyone was guaranteed to have a say.

Carrion also inquired about the criteria used to evaluate the survey responses and determine the official dishes. Henneman stated that their contractor, Public Strategy Group, who already has experience conducting surveys for the department, would employ an intricate format that balances variables such as age and gender to ensure a fair representation.

Senator Franklin Johnson, who noted that his mother was an award-winning chef, expressed his concerns about the diverse cooking styles on the three major islands and how the dishes would be judged. He mentioned variations in cooking techniques and ingredients, emphasizing the need for authenticity. He also questioned whether the contractor had knowledge of the local cuisine.

Henneman clarified that Public Strategy Group was local and had individuals familiar with the campaign. In response to his question about variations of a particular dish, she shared an example from a recent culinary event where upscale versions of traditional dishes like fish and fungi were served, attracting a large number of people who eagerly voted for the USVI. She emphasized that once the dish is identified, it is up to the community to define how it is presented to the world.

Jackson, the USVI culinary ambassador, in response to Sen. Johnson's concerns, acknowledged the changing times and the influence of different cultures on local cuisine, noting that it was a large part of the reason he supported the survey. He said it would gather information from all generations and measure what dishes are currently popular among locals and visitors. He emphasized the survey's ability to capture the evolving preferences and perspectives of Virgin

Islanders, leading to an outcome that most accurately reflects the sentiments of the population today.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger recalled a prior effort to make fish and fungi the national dish, but noted that the measure introduced by Senator Marvin Blyden did not gain much traction at the time. Wondering whether the proposed legislation could not have taken the form of a simple request to the Department of Tourism, Francis Heyliger asked what the cost of the survey would be. Henneman clarified that it would fall under the existing scope of work of the contractor at no additional expense outside of sums related to marketing and outreach efforts.

Francis Heyliger also clarified, through an inquiry to legal counsel, that the survey results would be submitted to the Legislature, which would then move (through the second portion of Bolques's draft bill) to enact a law declaring an official national dish and dessert. Bolques's measure is two-part, or bifurcated, a strategy criticized by Francis Heyliger.

In asking his colleagues to support the measure, Bolques reiterated the importance of data-driven policymaking, and noted that the survey would provide that needed information to ensure quality decision-making by the legislation. He spoke about how new developments surrounding food in the territory, which is such an integral part of the culture, would serve as an economic and tourism driver. "As simple as food may sound, it attracts people, it brings us together," Bolques said.

When it came time for a vote, the measure passed over the opposition of Senators Francis Heyliger and Johnson, who indicated that they did not believe the bill was necessary, when a simple request could have been made of the Department of Tourism. Bill 35-0078 now moves to the Committee on Rules & Judiciary for further consideration.