



**UNIT 1:  
FOOD AND CULTURE**

L.7

**FOOD AND  
IDENTITY: THE  
SOUTHERN U.S.**

## Note to Teachers

Any conversation about identity should begin with a definition. In their contribution to the *Handbook of Self and Identity*, Daphna Oyserman, Kristen Elmore and George Smith define identities as:

the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past—what used to be true of one, the present—what is true of one now, or the future—the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become. Identities are orienting, they provide a meaning-making lens and focus one’s attention on some but not other features of the immediate context (Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b).<sup>1</sup>

We can speak of identities as belonging to an individual or group. They may be religious, ethnic, or national, and may derive from more than one belief system. They serve to ground our sense of self—the way we understand who we are and the place from which we see the world.

In part because we all must eat—and because until very recently, our diets were defined in large part by what grew around us—food has likely always been a key way to build and express identity. History offers countless examples. The importance of purity in Hebrew food laws, according to scholar Mary Douglas, highlighted the historical threats to the Jewish community by conquest and exile. The historian Jeffrey Pilcher described the struggle between Spanish and native identities in Mexico as expressed in a battle for wheat over corn. Scholars have mapped the myriad responses to the global spread of fast food, from the resurgence in popularity of traditional convenience foods to the appropriation of fast food restaurants for culturally meaningful practices. The examples go on and on.

<sup>1</sup>) Copyright 2012 from *Handbook of Self and Identity*, 2nd Edition by Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney. Page 69. Used with permission by Guilford Press.



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Please use this margin to notate how to best adapt this curriculum to your students.

The key here is to identify what meanings a culture ascribes to its food, and how those meanings reflect larger interests and understandings of the group. The example here is the American South. This lesson focuses on a particular attempt to preserve the traditions of Southern cuisine—to acknowledge their roots and the agricultural system that enabled them, and to restore the complexity and diversity of this cuisine from its most common modern manifestations: foods as beloved as they are “fatty, bland, and simple-minded, long on fried meat and short on vegetables.”<sup>2</sup>

The other term used in this lesson is cuisine. Here the term is used as a shorthand for a style of cooking that emerges out of the resources available and practices associated with cooking in a given region. Unlike the term “identity,” it may be a concept that students have not encountered frequently.

A cuisine emerges out of a particular set of geographic, climactic and cultural circumstances and is characterized by particular techniques of preserving and cooking food, combinations of flavors, and social practices of cooking and eating that are unique to the culture in question. In his global history textbook, Craig Lockard notes that China was the first culture to create a cuisine. In doing so, he suggests that China was the first society able to produce sufficient food and specialization of labor to enable the extensive development of techniques and flavors.<sup>3</sup> The use of the term “cuisine,” however, is not a term without controversy, as its use has generally elevated Western European cooking traditions and, until recently, mostly ignored food traditions developed by non-white cooks or in the Global South. In such a usage, a “cuisine” is circumscribed and differentiated from a cooking tradition that is somehow less elevated or deliberate. No such connotation is intended here. The term “cuisine” also takes on added complications as it attempts to encompass wide variations under a single umbrella (that of Mexican or Chinese cuisines). For more information on these ideas, a great source is Aruna Appardurai’s writing about the development of an “Indian” cuisine in the post-colonial era.<sup>4</sup>

### Goals *In this lesson, students will*

- understand how the selection of foods and the development of styles of cooking and eating both reflect and generate cultural and ethnic identity.
- learn that a cuisine is the expression of that identity.
- understand the forces that helped to create the cuisine of the American South.

2) Burkhard Bilger, “True Grits: In Charleston, a quest to revive authentic Southern cooking,” *New Yorker Magazine* October 31, 2011, pg. 41.

3) Craig Lockard, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions*, 2nd edition (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 75.

4) “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30:1 (January 1988), 3-24.



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## Objectives

- Students will explore the concepts of identity through a series of short writing exercises, and discussions based on them.
- Students will use excerpts from a profile on an American chef to identify the conditions and practices that shaped Southern U.S. cuisine.
- Students will discuss, organize, and share what they have learned, and weigh the quality of the evidence.

## I. IDENTITY AND CUISINE: THE CONCEPTS

### A. Identity

1. **FOCUSED FREE WRITE #1:** Let's begin with a bit of writing. Ask students to complete the following prompt: "I identify as..." (2 minutes)

Their responses can take the form of a list or a paragraph. They can explain or simply name those identifiers.

2. Ask students to look back over what they have just written. Then: **FFW #2:** Using your Focused Free Write to help you, how might you define the concept of "identity"? What is it and where does it come from?

3. Ask a sampling of students to share their second FFW, then open the floor for discussion.

Record their ideas on the board, then highlight particularly useful terms or responses and fill in any needed blanks using the Note to Teachers above to help guide you.

4. Then, in a Focused Free Write or discussion, ask students to answer the following question: What connections might they then see between food and identity?

*Their responses here are for brainstorming purposes – there is no intended end point or conclusive insight. It is simply useful here for students to see that there may indeed be a relationship between food and identity.*

Encourage students to keep this question in mind as you begin to discuss one cuisine and culture: that of the American South.

### B. "Cuisine"

1. The other term on which today's lesson depends is "cuisine." Have your students heard that term, and do they have any idea what it means?
2. Scholars will typically describe a cuisine as dishes, ingredients, and techniques that characterize a style of cooking. One can, therefore, speak of Mexican, Turkish or Chinese cuisine. A cuisine will emerge, at least in part, from the advantages and limitations of a given geographic area: the plants and animals that thrive there as well as other resources available. (Does the area make extensive use of drying or salting because of a lack of wood for fire? Are water resources plentiful or limited?)



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Students may have some trouble understanding the roots of a cuisine, since they regularly eat food that is out of season and trucked from across the country or world.

At the same time, they may be able to begin to identify some of the characteristics of a cuisine with which they are familiar: Common ingredients? Common cooking techniques? Common flavors?

- The common use of beans and rice in Latinx cultures
- Quick cooking over high heat that is characteristic of some Chinese food cultures
- The combination of sweet and sour, or sweet and hot, in Thai cuisine

Again, you do not need to arrive at a certain set of claims here. The goal is to simply understand that cultures have, over the course of centuries, created complex, creative, and distinct culinary traditions that rely heavily on foods that grow well in the region.

Now, let's turn to our case study!

## II. THE SOUTH AND IDENTITY

1. Please distribute the reading.

Ask a student to read the first two paragraphs of the handout out loud, and discuss any responses they might have.

*[Is there only one American tradition that is sufficiently articulated to call it a "cuisine"? Southern cooking traditions are fairly well understood, but we still have a lot to learn from scholars about Native American food traditions that will help us to offer a better answer to that question.]*

2. Excerpts from this 2011 *New Yorker Magazine* article are divided into three sections:

"On Pigs"

"On South Carolina as the Epicenter of Southern Culture"

"On Seeds and Southern Identity"

Divide the class into three groups (or multiples of three), and assign each group one of the sections of the reading.

3. Ask students to first work independently to read their section carefully—annotating or highlighting as they go. (Give students roughly 15 minutes to read, depending on your particular group's need.)

Encourage them to go back and re-read if they have time.

4. Now, distribute the Questions to Consider.

5. Ask students to work with the other members of their group on the attached worksheet (approximately 15 minutes). Encourage them to struggle toward the best answers they can write, and to discuss their ideas before they write them down. Remind them to avoid their first responses and to push themselves to reconsider and improve their answers.



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Ask each group to use their responses to these questions to teach their section to the other groups (20-30 minutes). If you have more than one group working on the same section, divide teaching duties between the groups so that they can each add something unique to the conversation.

6. Open the floor for discussion. What stood out most in their section and in their responses? What is their takeaway? What ideas really intrigued them? Do they feel skeptical about other ideas?
7. End this section of the course by emphasizing the important ideas you have heard.



*This program is made possible by generous support from Unilever.*



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### CORN GRIDDLE CAKES

YIELD: Makes about 16  
Griddle Cakes

#### Equipment List

- 1 griddle
- For melting butter: 1 induction burner and 1 small saucepan
- 1 big bowl
- 2 small bowls
- 1 whisk
- 1 rubber spatula
- 1 dry cup measure
- ½ teaspoon measure
- 1 teaspoon measure
- 1 tablespoon measure
- 1 fry spatula
- Plate for finished cakes

### SPICY KALE IN TOMATO-ONION SAUCE

8 Students

#### Equipment List

- 8 cutting boards
- 8 knives
- 1 strainer
- 1 wooden spoon
- 1 pot with lid
- 1 can opener
- 1 induction burner
- 3 medium bowls
- 1 large bowl
- 1x 2 liquid cup measure
- 1/3 cup measure
- 1 x 1 tablespoon
- 1 x ½ teaspoon



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### CORN GRIDDLE CAKES

*From The Gift of Southern Cooking  
by Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock*

#### Ingredients

- 1 cup cornmeal
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 eggs
- Between 1 to 2 ½ cups milk (depending on the cornmeal you're using) at room temperature
- 2 tablespoon melted butter
- 1/3 cup grape seed oil to grease the griddle

#### Directions

1. Put the cornmeal, salt, and baking powder in a bowl and mix.
2. In a separate bowl, beat the eggs lightly and stir in the milk.
3. Stir the eggs and milk into the cornmeal mixture and blend thoroughly.
4. Meanwhile, heat butter in small saucepan until it is melted, NOT browned, and set aside.
5. Add the melted butter and blend.
6. Spoon to tablespoons of the batter onto a hot, greased griddle. Cook until bubbles appear on top, then turn and cook for about 20 seconds longer. Transfer cooked griddlecakes to a warm platter, and cover loosely with foil until all of the cakes are cooked. Serve hot!

### SPICY KALE IN TOMATO-ONION SAUCE

*From The Gift of Southern Cooking  
by Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock*

#### Ingredients

- 2 pounds kale
- 3 cups vegetable stock
- 3 cups water
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1 large onion, small dice
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 38 oz. canned whole peeled tomatoes, drained, preferably San Marzanos

#### Directions

1. Wash and drain the kale. Remove the stems and discard. Cut the kale crosswise into 1-inch strips.
2. Bring the water and stock to a boil in a covered pot, drop in the kale, and cook until tender. Drain the greens but RESERVE cooking liquid.
3. Heat the oil in the pot. Add the onion and cook, stirring often, over moderate heat for 10 minutes, until the pieces are translucent and tender.
4. Add the garlic and crushed red pepper, ½ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper. Stir well to distribute the seasonings, and cook for 5 minutes.
5. Add the drained tomatoes and 1 ½ cups of the cooking liquid from greens. Simmer gently for 15 minutes.
6. Taste and adjust seasoning as needed.
7. Add the drained greens and simmer for 5 minutes. Taste again for seasoning.





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**BURKHARD BILGER**  
from  
**TRUE GRITS: IN CHARLESTON, A QUEST TO REVIVE AUTHENTIC SOUTHERN COOKING**

*NEW YORKER MAGAZINE*  
(October 31, 2011), 40-41, 42, 44, 48-49, and 53.



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- Use the space below to note key ideas, themes, or surprising takeaways from the reading.

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An ossabaw boar



Food is a key way to express who we are and where we come from. An immigrant family cooks the food of its homeland to remember and honor its home culture. A vegan rejects a food system that treats animals inhumanely. Even our language reflects the importance of food as an expression of identity. In China, a common way to say hello is “Have you had your rice today?,” while we describe things and people as “American as Apple Pie.”

Regional, national, or ethnic identity can be reflected, generated, and shared through food. While food traditions in the United States are as varied as the immigrants who make it up, our most clearly recognized national tradition, according to many scholars and chefs, comes from the South. Excerpts from “True Grits” will help you explore how and why.

## On Pigs

No man loves pigs more than Homer Sean Brock. He has bred them, raised them, and played with their young, roasted them, braised them, and smoked them whole in a pit. He has deep-fried pigs’ ears and turned lard into caramel, freeze-dried pork fat and grated it onto funnel cakes. At McCrady’s and Husk, the two restaurants in Charleston, South Carolina, where Brock is the executive chef, every spare shelf and walk-in has been commandeered for pork. His country hams, hung for a minimum of eighteen months, are guarded, like a twelve-year-old’s comic books, by a scrawled cardboard sign: “Don’t \*&%! Touch.”

Brock is a Southern chef, so his obsession is understandable. The South is a land of “bacon stomachs,” the Portuguese diplomat Abbé Correia declared, after touring Virginia and the Carolinas in the early eighteen-tens. And, despite war and industrialization, diet fads and the Great Migration, not much has changed. Pork fat is still the irreducible quantum of Southern cuisine—“that precious essence,” as one Virginian wrote in 1822, “which titillates so exquisitely the papillae of the tongue.” When Brock first gave me a tour of his kitchen at McCrady’s, he held a blackened lump of some kind under my nose. “Smell this,” he said. “It’s awesome.” I closed my eyes and took a deep whiff, but smelled only soot. “It’s a pork bone,” he said, grinning. His cooks had turned it into charcoal the day before and would use it to grill still more pigs that night. Pork-roasted pork: what could be better?



Ossabaws are Brock’s favorite pigs, and a key to his culinary predilections. Their ancestors were brought to the New World by Spanish explorers in the fifteen-hundreds, dumped on the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, and left to fend for themselves. With too little food to sustain them, they were downsized by natural selection—a process known as insular dwarfism—and their metabolism was repurposed for stockpiling calories. Five centuries later, they’ve grown into ornery, genetically suspect beasts. Their hides are mottled and hairy, their





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heads crowned by raffish Mohawks. (“Now, that’s how a pig should look!” Brock said.) Their only real attraction lies beneath the skin: Ossabaws produce more lard per pound than any other pig. Their torpedo-shaped bellies, propped on toothpicky legs, are surmounted by a thick ridge of the finest fatback, sweetened by congenital diabetes. Brock likens it to cotton candy.

Pigs like this are what Southern food has been missing, he says. Where most modern breeds are engineered for maximum meat at the expense of fat and flavor, the Ossabaw is blissfully unimproved. Its pork tastes like pork, not some chewier version of chicken. Granted, we’ve heard claims like this before. It’s hard to find an espresso bar or bistro that doesn’t proclaim the provenance of every artisanal bean and heirloom pork chop. But Brock has deeper concerns. In his kitchens, breeds like the Ossabaw are just the beginning of a grand culinary reclamation project—a painstaking revival of what was once America’s greatest cuisine, all but lost in the twentieth century. In the past few years, Brock and a small group of local historians, plant geneticists, and farmers have reintroduced dozens of heirloom greens and grains, many of them untasted since the eighteen-hundreds. “We need to be eating this stuff,” he told me. “It needs to be in every chef’s vocabulary. I want people to see how beautiful Southern food is—whatever it takes. I feel like I was put on earth to preach that gospel.”

### On South Carolina as the Epicenter of Southern Cuisine

The nineteenth century was the great Age of Experiment in American agriculture. Three hundred years of immigration had brought over every conceivable crop—rice from China, quinoa from South America, groundnuts from Africa—and farmers found ways to grow them all. “We have this vision of antebellum agriculture as a kind of Never Never Land,” David Shields, a professor of Southern letters at the University of South Carolina, who has become one of Brock’s closest advisers, told me. “But it was actually a frenzy of research. They took the carrot culture of Flanders, the turnip culture of Germany, the beet culture of France, and tweaked them to create this extraordinary myriad of vegetables and grains.” Before the first land-grant colleges were established, in the eighteen-sixties, Shields said, every successful farmer had to be a breeder and agronomist, and many farmers published their work. “That was the literature that probably produced the most total words in the first half of the nineteenth century. It wasn’t politics; it wasn’t religion. It was agriculture.”

The South made an ideal laboratory, with its rich earth and abundant sun. But its principal crops—cotton, tobacco, corn—were a tremendous drain on soil nutrients. By the eighteen-twenties, many farmers had exhausted their fields and had to turn to unusual plants and elaborate rotations to restore them. On the Sea Islands of South Carolina, some rice growers began to follow a seventeen-year sun cycle: they planted different crops every year, keying the sequence to their ideas about the earth’s eccentric orbit and the changing lengths of the seasons. Theirs was “the most elegant farming system on the planet,” Glenn Roberts, the owner of Anson Mills, in Columbia, South Carolina, and another of Brock’s advisers, told me. They found that rice tastes best when planted after field peas, sweet potatoes after collard greens, and barley after butter beans. They found



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that kale absorbs the salt in coastal fields and that a rotation of cereals, legumes, and oil seeds builds up remarkable fertility and flavor. Roberts calls this the Holy Trinity of Southern agriculture.

Two centuries later, our food is bred largely for the convenience of producers: vegetables that ship well and tolerate cold storage, grains that resist insects and can be mechanically harvested, animals that fatten quickly on minimal feed. But, in the eighteen-hundreds, taste mattered most. A farmer might grow a leggy strain of corn, prone to blowing down in a storm, if its kernels made the heartiest grits. Or a finicky strain of spelt with a flavor that lingered long on the tongue. To rank the relative deliciousness of crops, farmers studied “the delectation of beasts,” Shields said. They would feed a cow a mouthful of food and measure how much saliva it produced. The scale ran from juniper berries, at the bottom, to white May wheat, at the top, passing through Carolina Gold rice, with its velvety texture and hint of hazelnuts, and Sea Island white-flint corn—“the finest, as food for man, of all the known varieties,” according to the U.S. Census of 1880. Even sorghum, a grain now used mostly as fodder, became a delicacy in the nineteenth century. Its syrup had a bourbon softness more subtle than any molasses.

If the South was a laboratory, Charleston was its test kitchen. The city sat at a cultural and agricultural crossroads. It was home to Europeans, Africans, Native Americans, and Asians. It had ocean and farm, pasture and rice paddy, tropical fruit and temperate grain. A housewife wandering through its market stalls could find Italian olives, Seville oranges, Jamaican sugarcane, and Mexican chayote, all from local orchards and farms. Along the docks, she could choose from oysters, terrapins, sheepshead, and bastard snappers, among more than fifty kinds of fish. It was an American version of the scene near the end of Brillat-Savarin’s “The Physiology of Taste,” Shields said, where the Parisian gastronome sits sampling the world’s bounty from the comfort of his table. Except that Paris had to import its delicacies. In Charleston they grew all around you. “These were the real locavores,” Shields said. “This is where the food was generated. Rice grew better here than anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere. Benne grew better than in West Africa. So this is where the cuisine came together.”

And then it fell apart. . . . And with those crops went much of what had been Southern cuisine.

### On Seeds and Southern Identity

“When we lose all these things, we lose their stories along with them,” Brock told me. “If the Sea Island red pea were to disappear, no one would be able to tell the story of how that lowly little cowpea landed in a bowl of Carolina Gold rice in the big house. That pea was what the slaves ate; it’s what the animals ate; it was a nitrogen fixer. It wasn’t this glamorous thing like Carolina Gold. But when they found their way into the same bowl, people realized that it’s a delicious dish. That is Hoppin’ John. When you put it together, you can taste the past. And we deserve to taste that again.”

Southern food once owed much of its variety and agricultural vigor to wild plants. One of the most valuable slaves on many plantations was the huntsman, who would forage in the woods every morning and afternoon. “He’d bring back



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herbs and plants to grow in the kitchen garden,” Roberts explained. “There was this constant interchange between feral and domesticated foods.” Sea Island red peas, for instance, were first grown from domesticated seed brought over from Africa. Invariably, though, a few of the plants at the edges of the fields went feral, mutating into varieties better suited to the local soil and climate. When the huntsman brought these wild cowpeas back to the garden, they hybridized with the domesticated plants, creating still more varieties for the farmer to select. Little by little, the crop grew hardier, tastier, more prolific. “You hunt for genetics in the margins—those are the characteristics you want,” Roberts said. “That’s why cowpeas can outcompete kudzu.”

In 1997, Roberts was walking through a bootlegger’s field near Dillon, South Carolina, when he came upon a patch of Carolina white gourdseed—an all but extinct variety of corn once famous for its floral aroma and creamy texture. Although Roberts was born and reared in California, he had often heard about such lost delicacies from his mother, who grew up in South Carolina. Within a year, he had sold his restaurant-design business, rented a six-thousand-square-foot warehouse in Columbia, two hours northwest of Charleston, and bought three nineteenth-century stone mills. He began by planting thirty acres of the gourdseed, then he moved on to rare varieties of oats, wheat, rice, and cowpeas. He now counts Thomas Keller and other top chefs among his customers and contracts farmers in more than thirty states to grow his crops. “Eighty per cent of what I put in the ground is from Glenn,” Brock told me. “He’s the godfather of it all. He’s the Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Roberts gets most of his seeds from a network of private collectors, agricultural research stations, and seed banks such as the International Rice Research Institute, in the Philippines. Like the antebellum farmers on the Sea Islands, he lets his plants mutate and hybridize naturally, then brings in feral plants from wherever he can find them—ditches, crop margins, empty lots. “The roadside is now the field site,” he says. Conventional breeders know exactly what qualities they want in a plant before they get them, but growing “landrace” crops is all about serendipity and surprise. “We work in epiphanies,” Roberts said. “If the taste isn’t remarkable, you won’t get anyone’s attention. It has to be astoundingly good.”

Southern food is more than a collection of recipes and seeds. It’s a distillate of memory and hard-won experience, of ocean crossings and forest clearings, turnip winters and radish springs. “I have no interest in sitting at a hearth and making sure my heritage apples are sputtering properly by the fire,” Shields said. “I see no need to sort of Williamsburg ourselves back. But the communal response to Husk has been extraordinary. There is just a presence of place here.” Over the next few years, more and more heirloom crops will come back into production: American chestnuts and Ethiopian blue malting barley, China black rice and Sea Island cream peas. And with those crops and the careful tending they require, a little of the nineteenth-century landscape will return as well. “First the earthworms come back, then the bees, then the wild animals,” Shields said. “On some of these Carolina Gold rice fields, even the bobolinks are returning—and they were considered one of the two tastiest birds in the nineteenth century.” He laughed. “It’s great when your ethics and your hedonism converge.”



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## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Excerpts from Burkhard Bilger's "True Grits" have been arranged into three sections. Each of you will be assigned one of those sections. Please read it carefully. Feel free to underline or highlight, and to make notes in the margins.

Does your section include key words that your fellow students need to know in order to understand the passage? (Please identify each term along with a definition of that term.)

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Summarize your section in your own words. What ideas and claims do you hear in it?

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Does your section refer to history? If so, to what periods of history and why?

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The article also emphasizes the importance of breeding. What does your section tell us about animal and plant breeding as it is practiced today or in the past in the South?

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