

## What You Need to Know about Benne

Benne was an essential medicinal and kitchen garden plant during our colonial and Antebellum Eras. All great Carolina kitchen gardens contained them, in particular the forbidden subsistence gardens of African slaves who brought benne to Carolina and introduced it to the region's nascent rice culture and cuisine. Planted between field peas, corn, and other human food crops in late spring—and harvested in late summer—benne provided near magical enhancements by improving soil quality and protecting nearby plants from harmful pests. In those days, benne was grown specifically for its extraordinary oil, its vital nutrients, and its culinary versatility.

When rice plantations transitioned their kitchen benne to commodity fields for commodity oil production, benne became sesame. As sesame, benne did not escape heavy pressure for yield, and Southern growers drifted away from an interest in the seeds' culinary diversity, focusing instead on oil production exclusively. In time, raw benne seeds became nearly flavorless, and they were only slightly more interesting when toasted. In fact, modern American sesame bears no resemblance to Antebellum benne.

Much of benne's unique flavor profile and nearly all of the extraordinary derivative foods associated with the seeds have been lost. Here are some examples: Benne leaves were cooked as soup greens and, if pounded prior to adding, worked as a thickener. Benne seeds, raw or toasted, were tossed into stock or water, their oil adding enrichment. (The flavor impact in this application was thought to be extraordinary, by the way.) A handful of benne seeds were simmered in water, and then the water poured into a pot with dry rice. The cooked rice possessed exceptional flavor--served with benne greens it was nearly perfect food. After the oil and water was poured off, the remaining seeds were dried and pounded in a mortar. This resulting flour was called *bennecake*. There were "benne cakes," benne bread, and benne biscuits—all made with bennecake (the term bennecake by definition meant flour made from benne seeds after oil extraction). Bennecake flour is powerful, reminiscent of toasted peanuts, but intertwined with a wildflower tang, and a sensation of verdancy and vigor.