

HAITI

# After a year of tragedies, Haiti finally gets good news: UNESCO recognizes its freedom soup

BY JACQUELINE CHARLES  
UPDATED DECEMBER 16, 2021 3:30 PM



UNESCO recognizes Haiti's soup journou after unanimous decision  
Haiti's soup journou, a pumpkin-heavy soup, widely regarded among Haitians as a symbol of freedom and dignity, was added by the United Nations to its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.  
BY UNESCO VIA YOUTUBE

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Haiti has experienced a series of crises this year, from the middle-of-the-night [assassination of its president](#) to a [devastating earthquake](#) to [kidnappings](#) by warring gangs and now a [deadly fuel tanker blast](#) in its second-largest city.

But just as the country's beloved *soup journou* — pumpkin soup — warms the soul on New Year's Day in celebration of Haiti becoming the world's first free Black republic after enslaved Africans defeated their French colonizers, there's a story that helps to balance out the horrible news in a nation still reeling from all its tragedies.

On Thursday, the pumpkin-heavy soup, widely regarded among Haitians as a symbol of freedom and dignity and inextricably linked with their Jan. 1, 1804, founding as a nation, became the latest tradition to be added by the United Nations to its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list. Soup journou will now join dishes such as last year's couscous and 2017's [art of Neapolitan "pizzaiuoli,"](#) or pizza makers after the general assembly of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, meets in six months.

The decision to add the soup to the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity was approved after a meeting of UNESCO experts and then received the unanimous blessing of its ambassadors Thursday after a lengthy virtual debate over procedures. With competition always tight among submitting countries, they met to weigh if the tradition should be considered. Soup journou made the cut after it was agreed that the dish is part of Haiti's cultural and gastronomic tradition.

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## Haiti's soup journou, a celebratory dish symbolizing freedom, vies for UNESCO recognition

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Haiti's entry, its first to the global cultural organization, was the brainchild of its UNESCO ambassador, Dominique Dupuy. [She made the submission in March](#) just as the Caribbean nation found itself once more steeped in political and social turmoil.

"This is the perfect signal of hope, reminding Haitians of their dignity and that they contributed to the history of the world," Dupuy said from Paris, describing the recognition as "a new torch that can revive our common fervor to stand together and restore our faith in a better tomorrow."

UNESCO's recognition after a year of tragedies in her homeland belongs to the people of Haiti, said Dupuy, who is originally from Cap-Haitien and this week watched with sadness as her beloved city was covered in smoke after a [gas tanker explosion claimed at least 77 lives](#). The Haitian people, she said, have safeguarded and transmitted soup journou, which "is the ultimate symbol of the fight against slavery, the fight against racism."

"I hope that all Haitians, of all ages and wherever they may be remember today," Dupuy added, "that their contribution to the history of the world, that their voice and their dignity will never again be made invisible."

Forbidden during slavery and reserved only for slave owners, the soup was the first meal shared by the freed Blacks after they proclaimed Saint Domingue independent on Jan. 1, 1804. They called the new republic Haiti, its Taino Indian name.

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Linked to the battle for independence and national identity, the dish has become a unifying force among Haitians while strengthening the country's cultural identity, no matter what ingredients are added. It has survived centuries by being passed down from generation to generation, often with no written instructions.

It is often infused with Scotch bonnet chili pepper and thyme, and its base is the squash known as *calabaza* in Latin America. It gives the soup its orange coloring and unique taste. Added ingredients vary by region and personal taste but can consist of malanga, yams, turnips, carrots, plantains, potatoes, cabbage, meat and pasta.

In South Florida, local chefs have been known to add their own twist, which includes seafood.

But for UNESCO, the recipe wasn't important. It's the technique associated with the making of the soup and what it says about Haiti's cultural contribution to humanity.

Normally it takes two years for a submission to be considered by UNESCO's experts. But after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise and the Aug. 14 earthquake in the country's southern peninsula five weeks later, Haiti asked that its submission of journou soup be considered during this year's session on an exceptional basis, rather than next year under a rule allowing for exceptional considerations during times of emergencies.

"This is a strong file that many, many, many Haitians fought to put together and that earned five out of five of the criteria... based on the merit of the Haitian people and merit of their heritage," an emotional Dupuy said after the unanimous decision.

During the debate, some Middle Eastern countries were not happy with the secretariat for allowing Haiti to get fast track on a decision to put journou soup on the world list. Others, such as the representatives of Djibouti, Switzerland and Botswana, argued that the fast tracking was the only exception to the process, and came to Haiti's support.

Brazil's ambassador, Santiago Irazabal Mourão, was the first to speak out in favor of the submission during the committee, telling fellow diplomats, "you cannot abandon Haiti." The South American country said it was strongly and enthusiastically supporting the proposal.

"Journou soup plays a very important role in terms of the identity of Haiti and its resilience; its cohesion and resilience, which are necessary in order to overcome disasters," the diplomat, who is president of the general conference for UNESCO said. "Solidarity has always been part of UNESCO's spirit. You cannot leave Haiti to its fate, definitely not."

This story was originally published December 16, 2021 11:32 AM.



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Jacqueline Charles has reported on Haiti and the English-speaking Caribbean for the Miami Herald for over a decade. A Pulitzer Prize finalist for her coverage of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, she was awarded a 2018 Maria Moors Cabot Prize — the most prestigious award for coverage of the Americas.