

Her three cookbooks bend under the weight of celebrity anecdote—usually jibes about the weight she and her pals gained while writing them—and too often dipped into the trendy and tacky in a Junior League-like attempt to stay true to the times in which they were written: “Oriental” shrimp with ginger, scallions and peanut oil, dips with more canned ingredients than a country club potluck. They were excerpted, not in *Saveur* and *Gourmet*, but in tactless tabloids like *Star* and *National Inquirer*. She even put sugar in her cornbread, for crying out loud.

What she did have, however, was personality. She was wise enough to take as her unofficial theme song “Someone’s in the Kitchen With Dinah,” a song that has been variously thought to be a verse to “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” a late 1800s work song, or, as some say, an utterly salacious ode to infidelity. (Some versions of the original even have the line “Someone’s making love to Dinah”).

She was a shameless flirt who still maintained credibility with women and men, young and old alike. She was as home in an apron as après-skiwear, and that versatility was her hook: you could be this too.

So yes, she likely wasn’t any more at home at the range than any other moderately skilled Southerner of her era. At the same time, there’s no denying her impact. My own parents bought curry powder for the first time due to Dinah, much as they did olive oil after a recommendation on *Emeril Live!*

Her gift was the ability to personify subtle gradations of what it meant to be a woman, a singer, a Southerner, a star, in ever-changing times. Keeping her own star ascendant until her death was a trickier task than it appeared. If “In the Kitchen With Dinah” had a message, it might have been this: Girls, you don’t have to stay at that stove if you don’t want.

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Pardis Stitt

READS UPTON SINCLAIR



By Ashley Hall

Much ink has been spilled on behalf of Frank Stitt, the toque behind three Birmingham restaurants, Highlands Bar & Grill, Bottega, and Chez Fon Fon. Not enough trees have been felled in the name of Pardis Stitt, his wife of nearly 14 years.

The dining room is Pardis’s domain. When asked to speak of herself, Pardis turns girlishly shy. Maybe that’s a natural response for a front-of-house savant, who reminds her colleagues that, when it comes to service, “It’s not about you.”

On a nightly basis she and her troupe (some of whom have worked at the restaurants for 20-plus years) curate an energy that is both professional and joyful, exciting and homey, confident and warm.

All of these labels could also be attached to the lady of the house. Born and raised in Alabama by Iranian immigrants, Pardis is a disarming and inviting hostess, whose style might be labeled as much Parisian as Persian.

She also happens to be a vegetarian, married, counterintuitively, to this region's crown prince of pork. Though she occasionally sops the glistening juices that collect beneath a roasted haunch of pork, and she relishes the aroma of a freshly grilled beefsteak, she has not eaten flesh since she was 14, when she read *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair's muckraking exposé of the meatpacking industry.

Pardis is not a hectoring vegetarian. In fact, she admits, "I'm kind of in the closet about it." What's more, she understands how her choices impact her husband. Of Frank, she says, "It's hard for him when we get the rare chance to cook at home together. I mean, paella for one is not a lot of fun."

Yet her passion for food remains, no matter such self-imposed restrictions, unbridled: "I blame this whole restaurant thing on my mother, who is incapable of cooking for fewer than 20 people. I learned to set the table early."

A onetime newspaperwoman, Ashley Hall of Atlanta sells juice for Kermit Lynch.

PUTTING THE "FAIR" IN GOOD, CLEAN, AND FAIR



By Judith Winfrey

Throughout the South, we are witnessing a renewed interest in local food and small farms. Folks who are hungry for good eats and meaningful community are thronging weekly farmers markets. In response, such markets are popping up in parks, town squares, and church parking lots. Paradise, it seems, may not be paved over yet.

But has the revolution bypassed the underserved?

One of the tenants of this good food movement is that the harvest should not only be delicious and safe. It should also be fair.

The meaning of "fair" in this instance is two-fold: Farmers have a right to a sustainable return for their crops. And all eaters, regardless of purchasing power, have a right to good, clean food.

How can we pay farmers a fair price for good food and put that good food in the hands, and on the tables, of our friends and neighbors with the smallest food budgets?

The US Department of Agriculture has a program that may help. Most of us know this program, in existence since the 1930s, as Food Stamps. Here's the thing, though. Stamps are a thing of the past. Funds are now disbursed through debit cards, known in the jargon-heavy social services world as EBT cards, as in electronic benefit transfer.