



Moon's Grove Baptist Church members stir fifteen-gallon cast iron pots to keep chicken mull from burning.

STIR FROM THE BOTTOM

One church, one recipe,
and a beloved tradition

BY TRACY N. COLEY

WINTER CLOUDS CAST A COOL, blue, Olan Mills haze on the leafless oaks that encircle the Moon's Grove Baptist Church gym. It's tucked into rolling Madison County farmland, northeast of Athens, Georgia. Four men sit in metal folding chairs at midcourt, straddling fifteen-gallon cast iron pots set over propane burners, stirring with the synchronicity of rowers. Hand over hand, they grip narrow oak paddles, stirring from the bottom to keep the chicken from scorching. Each winter, they raise more than \$3,000 to fund youth outings and summer camp fees. Each year, they keep alive something important that Gene Seagraves began a long while back.

Seagraves joined the mullers when he

Photographs by Austin Steele



married his sweetheart, Hassie Rice, in 1955. A large-framed man who worked as a lumber salesman, he learned to cook rabbit mull from Hassie's father, Roy Rice. For church homecomings, Seagraves cooked like Rice taught him. But he also cooked for Hassie, and she didn't like rabbit. Sometime in the 1960s, he began cooking chicken mull for church homecomings. By the late 1960s or early 1970s, Seagraves cooked that same mull to raise money for the church. In time, his mull became the stuff of legend.

Mull traces its roots in northeast Georgia and the western Carolinas, back when most of the folks here worked on family farms. Nile Faulkner, a Madison County native who owns Butt Hutt Bar-

B-Que in Athens, recalls that everybody had chickens, as well as cows for milk and butter. "All you needed was crackers. You could feed a lot of people for very little."

By definition, mull is ground. A mull made with shredded chicken is stew, says Dwight Carey, a lifelong resident of Madison County. When he cooks mull, he follows Gene's recipe because that's what he knows. And because it works. "It has to be ground to distribute the flavor," he says. "Otherwise, the chicken will fall to the bottom. That's the secret of mull."

Everyone knows the basic ingredients in a mull: chicken, milk, butter, broth, salt, pepper, and saltine crackers. But cooks closely guard ratios and techniques and cook times. By the 1980s, Seagraves'



Crackers—and not just any kind—are key ingredients for the mull, which church members pack for their annual sale.

When Gene Seagraves shared his mull recipe with another church, that didn't sit well with the elders. "I just told 'em what was *in* it," Gene said at the time. "I didn't tell them *how to make it.*"

mull had become so famous, and so bankable, that the church printed "Cooked by Gene Seagraves" on the tickets they sold. When Seagraves shared his recipe with another church, that didn't sit well with the elders. "I just told 'em what was *in* it," Gene said to his son-in-law and fellow mull maker Mike Burroughs at the time. "I didn't tell them *how to make it.*"

Gene Seagraves died in 2011, but his recipe, with its specific ingredient list, remains sacred: hens (not chickens), Nabisco brand crackers, Blue Bonnet margarine, broth, whole milk, and a seasoning mix that might have some thyme in it. That specificity is very important. One year Seagraves allowed people to choose their own brands. The stew was off that year. People lost confidence. "From that point on, Gene said we had to use all the same ingredients," Burroughs remembers. "Just because Ingles has Keebler crackers on sale, you couldn't get 'em. You had to have Nabisco Premium crackers."

Mull sounds like an old food. And it is. But this old food still draws. Burroughs remembers years when so many gathered to eat that he had to politely ask them to leave once they finished socializing.

Chicken mull sales do more than fund church needs. They give friends the chance to break crackers over hot bowls and ask the most important question of all: "How's your mama and them?"

Moon's Grove quickly sells out of its mull tickets each February at \$8 each. Each ticket gets the holder a quart of mull, a half-sleeve of saltines, a bowl of peach cobbler, and a foam cup of sweet tea. More important, that mull connects the ticket holder to Gene Seagraves' legacy. And to the history of this farming community where neighbors aid neighbors. 🐔

Tracy N. Coley writes about community, grief, and human resilience.

IS THE BIRDMAN'S "SOUTHERN" STORY TOO MUCH FOR NEW ENGLAND?

"Just be quiet, give me my chicken, and let me pay and be on my way."

BY MARK JOYELLA

THE PIZZA PLACE WITH ITS BACK to the tracks shakes as Amtrak's Northeast regional rumbles by on its way from Boston to New York. My young daughters watch the train for a moment, but it's cold, so the girls, my wife, and I go inside and ask for a table upstairs. There, model trains loop and lovingly-detailed miniature towns suggest daily life along the Connecticut shore in the 1940s and 1950s. Tiny plastic people hail cabs and fish from bridges. A hand-painted woman glued to a tiny dock paints a watercolor of the Long Island Sound.

Real life here on Connecticut's Gold Coast—a ribbon of seaside suburban towns with good schools, artisan cheese shops, and farm-to-table restaurants that occasionally land a paragraph or two in *The New York Times*—is at times as idyllic as the diorama in the pizza joint. And often, just as fake.

We've stopped in for a pie before going

shopping, and I note that the menu boasts three different pizzas topped with fresh clams, sourced from a nearby fish wholesaler that's been in business since 1930. The clams remind me of a conversation about oysters I'd had weeks earlier with a local historian, Ramin Ganeshram.

I was sitting with Ganeshram at a long table in her office on the second floor of the Westport Museum for History and Culture, housed in a home built in 1795. Light poured through a twelve-paned window as we talked about food, specifically how willing anyone really is to learn the origin story of the food they eat or the history of the people who harvested it.

"Oysters are a great example," she said, marveling at the upscale rebranding of oysters, despite their tradition as subsistence food, easily foraged at the waterline in towns like this by indigenous people and enslaved Africans who once walked the same beaches where my daughters