

Here was a restaurant, named after an all-black town, serving a menu calculated to appeal to a black clientele. “For the first year,” Shallal says, “the question most frequently asked the servers was ‘Is the owner black?’”

“I wanted to incorporate the traditions of a community into a restaurant, and it took a while to get it right,” recalls Shallal. He was determined to make his African-American clientele feel that their traditions were being respected, not exploited. But that did not go as planned. He hired an opening chef who created a menu of gussied-up versions of the foods that Shallal had envisioned as the menu’s core. (Chef and owner parted ways before the restaurant even opened.)

By chef two, Shallal got it right. On chef Rusty Holman’s current menu, gumbo, fried green tomatoes, hushpuppies, catfish, grits, and collards take center stage. “Often the adjustments I made were as simple as keeping a bottle of hot sauce on the table,” Shallal says. “I didn’t realize it at first, but that seems to signal that African-Americans are welcome.”

“The choice of music, even the art on the walls,” Shallal says, “plays a part in getting the community to trust you.” He has organized a series of Food & Folklore dinners at the restaurant, evenings that pay homage to Hurston’s training as an anthropologist as well as her literary accomplishment. These have included an evening with Valerie Boyd, one of Hurston’s biographers, and a night with Camille Akeju, director of the Anacostia Community Museum. Scheduled for January, 2010, is an event with Annette Gordon-Reed, author of *The Hemingses of Monticello*.

Andy Shallal’s is determined that his restaurants be places in which community is as important as food. As an eleven-year-old Iraqi immigrant—with darker skin and curlier hair than most of his white classmates—he found it easier to identify as African American than as white. What’s more, his training as an artist played a part in forming his vision of an integrated life in which individual creativity and community, tradition and innovation, art and food—all play an important part. The success of his restaurants—particularly of Eatonville, which now has a clientele that nears 60 percent black—seems to show it’s a vision shared by many.

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JUST SHOOT ME

by Hanna Raskin





BAMBOO is the armadillo of the plant world.

The tastiest bits of the fast-growing grass are shielded by a tough outer casing that only a machete can penetrate. Eaters in places where bamboo is popular, such as Nepal and Indonesia, tend to harvest bamboo shoots when they're young and pliable, opting not to mess with the ossified old stalks.

But when a single plant smuggled home by a W.A.C. stationed in Panama blossomed into a bamboo grove in Wilkes

County, North Carolina, the women there set about finding a way to put bamboo on their dining room tables. For most cooks, the experimentation ended in exasperation.

"We tried the stir fry, and it didn't work too well," sighs Babe Walsh Faw, whose late mother Johnsie Walsh was given seven bamboo sprigs by her aunt in 1970. Still, the Walshes kept at it, adapting a bamboo pickle recipe Faw's great-aunt had developed.

"It was a pickle, but it wasn't the pickle we wanted," Faw recalls. "It had too much salt."

That pickle, perfected, is now available to the public under the label Bamboo Ladies, a small-scale venture that Faw's daughter Carla Squires began in 2006. Faw says the tangy bamboo rings have been a tremendous hit with most everyone who has sampled them.

The bamboo harvest begins in early May, when the family starts checking their bamboo for hints that it's time to start cutting. "Cutting bamboo is hot, and it's physically demanding," says Squires, who wades into her family's four-acre bamboo forest clad in boots and a plastic raincoat to protect her from ticks and snakes. Like her mother and grandmother before her, she cuts down the ripe bamboo shoots and drags them to the edge of the grove for slicing.

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"I can hire college students or people who aren't working to help me pack, but you can't just hire someone and teach them how to slice," Squires says. "It took three or four years for me to learn."

It takes a practiced slicer like Squires about an hour to slice 10 bamboo stalks; at the harvest's peak, she pulls more than 100 tender stalks each day. When customers pay \$7.50 for an eight-ounce jar of bamboo pickles, they're buying, by extension, the long, sweat-drenched day Squires spent carving stalks into slices suited for an antipasto platter.

"I'm trying to figure out if there's anything we can do to make it easier," Squires says. "If I could figure out a way to speed up slicing, we could take it to the next level."

Even before Squires shifted the pickling operation from her grandmother's garage to a shared-use commercial food facility in Asheville, Faw says her family pickled and packed assembly-line style.

"We had it set up like a production thing," she says. "The neighbors would come and just sit and talk. The year mother died, we pulled her wheelchair out in the garage, and she oversaw everything."

Annual output under Walsh's supervision hovered around 300 jars, nearly all of which showed up in housewarming baskets and Christmas stockings. "We have a large family," Faw says. "There were probably 40 in the extended family, and there was just a few that didn't like the pickles. I say try it with your black-eyed peas or pinto beans."

Squires now produces 2000 jars a year. She sticks to her grandmother's recipe, but she wonders what "Meemaw would think if she saw us running around with these pickle jars."

Bamboo Ladies bamboo pickles are available at specialty retailers across North Carolina, and online at www.bambooladies.com.

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