# GRAVY

FALL 2020 • NO. 77

# FUTURE OF THE SOUTH

2020 FALL SYMPOSIUM

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOUTHERN CULTURE

UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

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# GRAVY

ISSUE NO. 77 • FALL 2020

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EDITOR'S NOTE

# LITTLE FUTURES

## Looking ahead, one story at a time

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

Brent Gnagey via Unsplash

AS RECENTLY AS THE FIRST WEEK of March, it seemed completely unremarkable to contemplate the future. When March began, news reports of COVID-19 clusters on the West Coast seemed far away and overblown here in Oxford, Mississippi. At the SFA office, we polished our plans for a Spring Symposium in Birmingham on the Future of the Restaurant. Speakers would talk about delivery apps and ghost kitchens, living wages and childcare. My colleagues looked forward to spring break trips: Seattle. San Francisco. Disney World.

I was just beginning to emerge from a winter of post-traumatic stress and postpartum depression. Just after Thanksgiving, at three weeks of age, my newborn son had contracted respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV. You might not have heard of this virus, although you've likely experienced it yourself as a mild to moderate cold. In babies, it can be critical. The day after Kirk was diagnosed, after two sleepless nights taking turns holding him upright on our chests as he struggled to breathe through his congestion, he was admitted to our local hospital.

Three nights later, Kirk's condition had worsened. He needed a transfer to a children's hospital. It was after midnight when a team of three emergency transport paramedics from Le Bonheur Children's Hospital arrived to initiate the transfer. Kirk and I couldn't bring ourselves to watch; we thanked them and stumbled to a waiting area in the hall. We compared trembling hands, racing hearts, hollow stomachs. *This is shock*, we said. Meanwhile, the paramedics hooked our son up to oxygen and IV fluids and loaded him—methodically, expertly—into a stretcher-mounted incubator for the seventy-five-mile ambulance ride.

We left for Memphis at two in the morning, driving through the thickest fog we'd ever seen. Though we couldn't have been more than ten or fifteen minutes behind the ambulance, we arrived to the Le Bonheur emergency department to find a team of eight doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, and other technicians already at work on our son.

Nine days later—nine days of counting respirations and heartbeats, of hitting the call button, of pumping breast milk and eventually figuring out how to nurse my son without disturbing his nasal canula—we were released to go home. That night, we saw our daughter, Sally, for the first time in nearly ten days. We had missed her third birthday.

The month that followed was more frightening, more agonizing than our time in the hospital. I was still counting little Kirk's respirations when they seemed too rapid, unzipping his pajamas to watch

his chest rise and fall, holding him next to the shower to breathe in congestion-clearing steam. Only now there was no nurse outside the room. And there was Sally, who wanted her mother to put the baby down *right this second*, pause *Frozen*, and help her put on her Elsa dress so that she could sing "Let It Go."

In those days, my husband and I couldn't see very far ahead. We were still driving through fog. Most mornings, I held my baby and dozed off in the rocking chair while he slept. Many afternoons, I held him and cried. I feared the germs Sally would bring home from preschool. I feared the germs I would bring home every time I left the house. We changed clothes. We washed hands. We sanitized light switches.

"Remind yourselves that this is temporary," people told us. "Little by little, it will get better. And eventually, it will be behind you." Christmas became New Year's. January became February. I went back to work and remembered what it meant to me—the projects, the colleagues, the mood-altering power of simply leaving the house. February became March.

Remember March?

Here in August, we're still driving through fog. We all are. Across the country, millions of stories begin with trauma or suffering or loss and end with "and then this hit." They are like mine, and not like mine. So many people have it so much harder. This is not fair. It's not right. I wish I could believe that we're all in the same boat right now, but I know better.

In the absence of a clear future, I've been feeling around in the fog, looking for meaning. (Ask me for my notes on such lodestars as *Frozen II* and the Headspace meditation app.) I have laughed, and rolled my eyes, and smacked my forehead at our choice of the future for SFA's 2020 programming theme. In another year, in another world, the stories in these pages would come to life at our annual Fall Symposium. In that fantasy world, we'd ask not just what futures await our region, but what roles we can take in shaping them. As I've read and reread this issue, I've asked myself what lessons it might offer. Here's what surprised me: When asked to imagine the future, nearly every writer began by looking to the past. And when asked to project out, nearly everyone began by turning in.

Maybe, in this fog, that shouldn't be surprising. Maybe, if any of us could see a little farther ahead of this moment, our imaginations would work differently. I can't know that for sure. But instead of drawing a bleak conclusion, I've chosen to offer a hopeful one, if you'll accept the challenge that accompanies it.

We don't know what's ahead. Even if we try to imagine the future, it's nearly impossible to do so without drawing on some reservoir of lived or narrated or passed-down experience. But if we limit our understanding to our own experiences, and to the experiences of those like us, we limit where we can go together. I believe that stories hold promise and possibility. Can we read and listen with open minds and open hearts? Can we sit with discomfort? Can we push past the temptation to dismiss the truths that bring us pain?

I've edited this journal for ten years, and our companion podcast for six. I've attended eleven Fall Symposia and dozens of other SFA events. The day I cease to believe in the power of stories, and in their capacity to build empathy, will be the day I stop doing this work.

My son was nine months old yesterday. He crawls. He pulls up. He cruises the length of the couch. He says "Da-da," to my frustration and delight. We got through that fog. And we'll get through the next one.

VIRGINIA WINE

SFA DOES NOT OFFER SYMPOSIA FREEBIES, and we do not take them. But staffers and collaborators do enjoy the occasional ancillary benefit. A couple of years back, a few bottles of Virginia wine remained after the Saturday night Symposium finale. As a token of thanks, we shared them with event volunteers and staff. John T. Edge took home a bottle of the 2015 Adagio from Williamsburg Winery, a Bordeaux-style blend of petit verdot, merlot, tannat, and cabernet franc that tastes of black tea, tobacco, and chocolate. As this issue of *Gravy* went to press, he reported that he planned to open it on October 2, the night before our 23rd Fall Symposium begins. That's a long-winded way of saying that, although we are not able this year to pour Virginia wines for 300 attendees in Oxford, Virginia wines will be on our minds and on our palates as we begin this month of presentations and reflections.

**Lauren Beltramo** created the art for this year's Fall Symposium, including the cover of this issue. A designer and illustrator who specializes in custom lettering, she lives in Montana, where the natural world inspires her. She previously worked as senior graphic designer for Yellowstone Forever, the official nonprofit partner of Yellowstone National Park.

**Safiya Charles** reports on race and ethnicity for the *Montgomery Advertiser* in Alabama, where her stories have examined racial justice, poverty, and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on local lives and businesses. She previously covered news and politics in the New York metro area and Southeast Asia, and her work has also appeared in *The Nation* and *The New Republic*.

**Oscar Diaz** trained in West Coast kitchens before landing in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he's now chef of Cortez and Jose and Sons, two restaurants that meld his Mexican heritage and new Southern home. In 2019, the James Beard Foundation honored him as a semifinalist in the Best Chef: Southeast category. When he's not in the kitchen, you can find Diaz sipping a La Fin Du Monde at his favorite beer shop.

Top to bottom: Lauren Beltramo, Charles Mitchell, Katie Bailey

**W. Ralph Eubanks** is the author of three books, including the forthcoming *A Place Like Mississippi* (March 2021), which guides readers through the real and imagined landscapes of the Magnolia State. His memoir *Ever Is a Long Time* was named one of the best nonfiction books of 2003 by *The Washington Post*. A former editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Eubanks is currently a visiting professor of English and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi.

**B. Brian Foster** teaches sociology and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi, where he studies race, culture, and inequality with attention to post-1970s Black cultures in the rural South. His forthcoming book *I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life* (December 2020) explores the attitudes and sounds of Black life through the homes, memories, and worlds of Black folks in contemporary Mississippi.

**Silas House** is the bestselling author of six novels, including 2018's *Southernmost*, which grapples with the limits of belief and infinite ways to love in a small Tennessee town. *Southernmost* was longlisted for the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. In 2016, he cowrote *In These Fields: A Folk Opera* with Sam Gleaves for the Sunday performance of SFA's 19th Fall Symposium.

Top to bottom: Ed Croom, Viviek Patel, Charles Mitchell

**Caleb Johnson** is the author of the 2018 novel *Treeborne*, a celebration and reminder of how the past tangles with the future. *Treeborne* received an honorable mention for the Southern Book Prize. An Alabama native, Johnson has worked as a newspaper reporter, janitor, middle-school teacher, and whole-animal butcher. He currently teaches writing at Appalachian State University.

**Ada Limón**, a current Guggenheim Fellow, is the author of five poetry collections, including *The Carrying,* which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. Her fourth book, *Bright Dead Things*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, a finalist for the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She serves on the faculty of Queens University of Charlotte Low Residency MFA Program and lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

**José R. Ralat** is the taco editor for *Texas Monthly* and is sought after for his authoritative and expansive knowledge of local, regional, and national taco scenes. (*The New York Times* called him “an expert on the folklore of the taco.”) His book *American Tacos: A History and Guide*, which explores the evolution and diversity of the United States taco landscape, was published in 2020.

Top to bottom: Irina Zhorov, Lucas Marquardt, Robert Strickland

**Chandra Ram** edits *Plate*, an award-winning food magazine for chefs, and has authored cookbooks including *The Complete Indian Instant Pot Cookbook*. She studied journalism, culinary arts, and wine, and has worked as a writer, cook, server, and bartender. Her writing has earned her nominations from the James Beard Foundation and the IACP, as well as an Association of Food Journalists award.

**Claire Sprouse** grew up in Houston, where she began mixing cocktails for extra cash. In 2014 she cofounded the Tin Roof Community to spotlight green bar initiatives and earned the Tales of the Cocktail Foundation Sustainability Spirit award. Four years later, she launched Hunky Dory, a low-waste, all-day café and bar in Brooklyn. Her latest project is Outlook Good, the organization behind *Optimistic Cocktails,* a collaborative e-recipe book featuring drinks that utilize food waste.

Top to bottom: Geoffrey Smith, Brittany Herbert, Sandy Noto

**Erick Williams** is the owner and executive chef at Virtue Restaurant & Bar in Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood, where he combines fine dining, Southern cuisine, and his studies of the Great Migration. A Chicago native, Erick previously worked as executive chef at mk The Restaurant. Virtue has received national recognition since opening in 2018, and in 2019 *The New York Times* named Erick one of “16 Black Chefs Changing Food in America.”

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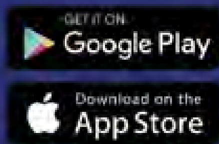

Ed Scott Jr. with catfish, Leflore County, Mississippi, 2001.

Maude Schuyler Clay

# THE LONG SYMPOSIUM TAIL

What begins here does not end here.

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Before Ed Scott Jr. fried a mess of catfish filets and a few buckets of hushpuppy mix on a May evening in 1998, he and Richard Schweid shared a gazebo stage on the fringe of the University of Mississippi campus. They spoke of Scott's career move from raising soybeans and cotton to digging catfish ponds and raising channel cats in the Delta clay.

Schweid, who wrote about Scott in his book *Catfish and the Delta*, prompted his old friend to talk about the power a Black man wields when he works land that he owns. Scott relished the conversation and the opportunity to connect that big idea to his work as an activist, marching with John Lewis across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965 and feeding protestors on James Meredith's March Against Fear in 1966.

After the family moved from row crops to aquaculture, Scott said that he could not find a reliable local processor for the catfish he raised. When catfish processors shut him out, Scott built his own plant in the backyard of his Drew, Mississippi, home, beneath the roof of an old tractor shed, on land his father had owned and worked before him. Later in his life, when the USDA tried to shut Scott out, he would show the same courage, the same determination. And he would inspire his children to act with the same boldness.

That conversation and that meal were highlights of the first Southern Foodways Symposium. Staged a year before the Southern Foodways Alliance formed in the summer of 1999, those moments proved catalytic over the next two decades, connecting SFA beginning beliefs in the power of food narratives to the aspirations of the mature organization we are now.

For 2020, we gather in new ways to host a different sort of Symposium that relies on various platforms—from digital to print to podcast. In the run-up, I've been thinking about the moment at the end of the night at the first Symposium when Scott stood to receive applause for his words and his fish. Something important had happened. We could hear it in the sustained applause that followed Scott and Schweid's conversation. We could taste it in those filets. But we did not yet know how our time with Ed Scott Jr. would resonate.

That's the way it goes when we gather for Symposium: Someone does something brilliant. Someone says something brilliant. Sometimes those things are profound. Sometimes those things are goofy. (Raise your hand if you remember the bacon forest Melissa Hall installed in 2007, or the pimento cheese fritters that John Fleer and John Currence deep-fried in 2003.)

Those somethings hang in the air for a few moments. Sometimes they diffuse. Other times, they gain new meaning when an inspired attendee or collaborator carries them forward. We don't know what dividends presentations and meals will pay. But we trust the process.

John Partipilo

Author and songwriter Alice Randall

Over the past decade, Alice Randall has prodded SFA audiences toward hard truths and generous outlooks. In 2009, when SFA staged a symposium on the interdependence of music and food, she spoke of Black contributions to country music and led the audience in a sing-along of "Will the Circle be Unbroken."

In 2013, she stood behind a stove podium alongside her daughter, Caroline Randall Williams, to talk about kitchen rape and unheralded Black women. Randall returned in 2015 to tell the story of Mahalia Jackson's fried chicken business, which leveraged gospel celebrity to sell drumsticks and Soul Bowls.

Last year, SFA released a *Gravy* podcast episode, inspired by that Mahalia Jackson presentation, featuring Randall's clarion voice. This October, SFA partnered for the second time with the Southern Festival of Books to present our John Egerton Prize. And for the second time, Randall, who hatched the idea of our partnership, spoke of the inspiration Egerton's life and work has offered.

In the gap between those two moments, Randall published her latest novel. If you got to know Randall during a Symposium, here's your chance to get to know her better. *Black Bottom Saints* is a damn good literary novel that reads like a page-turner. It's set in the Up South: Detroit, Michigan, when that city was, as Randall describes it, a "self-perpetuating cauldron of sepia excellence." Each short chapter concludes with a cocktail.

The drinks serve as toasts to characters. My favorite comes late in the book, in a chapter that entwines labor organizer Marc Stepp and the Black superstar Eartha Kitt. The Union Card calls for a jigger of bourbon, a sugar cube, half a pony-glass of water, and six or seven mint leaves, served in a julep cup or jelly jar. You might recognize the drink as a julep. The characters in Randall's book suggest, among other things, that the payoff of a union card in the Black Bottom of Detroit was sweeter and stronger than a julep.

On October 8, 2015, Ed Scott passed away. He was ninety-three. Nine days later, following a homegoing service at First Baptist Church in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, his family laid him to rest on the family farm, in the family cemetery, alongside his father. His funeral took place during our eighteenth Symposium, at about the time Alice Randall stepped to the stage to talk about Mahalia Jackson.

That night, as his family gathered in Drew, 300 of us gathered in Oxford to toast his bold life. And to commemorate the struggle and success of his daughter Willena White, who helped lead the effort to buy back the farmland the Scott family had lost due to predatory USDA financial practices.

What began at that first Symposium, when Scott stepped to the stage to talk and later stepped to the fryer to cook, still reverberates. The ideas Alice Randall shared at our Symposium in 2015 continue to find new audiences via our *Gravy* podcast. That's the point. What begins at our Symposium does not end here.

Even in a moment like this, when SFA communicates with audiences in new ways, especially in a moment like this, the work we do pays the biggest dividends after the Symposium, when we take those stories home. When we take those stories to heart. I trust the presentations we share here will benefit from long tails, and that they will move you in the ways that stories shared by Ed Scott Jr. and Alice Randall continue to move me.

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*John T. Edge is the founding director of SFA and the host of* TrueSouth *on the SEC Network/ESPN.*

# MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS NO MORE

## Reckoning with justice while on vacation

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

I DUG THROUGH MY LIQUOR CABINET to find the bottle of Evan Williams 1783 bourbon.

My wife and I bought it years ago at the brand's distillery in downtown Louisville. We vowed to open the high-priced booze only for a truly special occasion. Life-changing moments came and went—our wedding, the opening of my wife's market, the death of my mother. The bottle remained sealed.

Coronavirus broke the dry spell.

This is the first year since 2007 that we have not spent two weeks in the South. No breakfast at Rick's White Light Diner in Frankfort, Kentucky, where the wisecracking owner remembers us each year as the crazy couple from California. No transformation of my Yukon into a rolling rickhouse from all our visits to distilleries and liquor stores.

No chance for a reckoning.

That's why I was about to drink.

I poured the small-batch bourbon into a vintage coupe glass that we bought at a yard sale in Alabama. "To becoming a better vacationer," I toasted to myself, and knocked back a shot. Then another.

To confronting our complicity with white supremacy in the South once and for all.

I HAVE STRIVED in this column to tell stories of *el Sur* as it relates to the area's Latinos. It's a population that the national media tends to overlook, and Southern media still often casts as sojourners instead of residents. I'm proud of my work, and look forward to telling these tales as long as I can, as limited as my perspective may be.

I do it because, as a reporter, I try to highlight and elevate unappreciated stories and voices. But part of it is penance for how I usually enjoy the

Illustrations by Delphine Lee

South: as a privileged tourist.

Whenever my wife and I travel, we stay at hotels where the final bill is more than what we pay in rent back home. We eat at fine-dining restaurants, visit museums and distilleries, and live like entitled Americans in a region wrenched with inequities.

I'm smart enough to know that those inequities exist. That the South I encounter during my leisure time is as big a PR fabrication—the whole moonlight and magnolias myth—as what my native southern California has pulled on the rest of the world—eternal sunshine and surf—for over a century.

And still, I participate.

I've fashioned all sorts of justifications to absolve myself of moral responsibility. I earned the break, I'd say. My writings on the scene brought money and attention to a region that requires it. Can't I just turn off the political id in my head and relax, for once?

I did for years, a privilege I acknowledge Black Southerners can't do so easily, if ever. But I can't anymore.

As I saw nights of protests in Louisville this spring and summer in the wake of the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, I cringed.

Activists faced off nightly against police in the city's downtown, where my wife and I always set up camp to explore the rest of the South.

Their chants indicted my complicity in the problems Black and Brown residents sought to solve.

I have strived my entire journalistic career to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and stand on the right side of history. I largely have lived my personal life according to this maxim.

But I can always do more. I must do more.

I will do more.

The Black Southern experience is a blind spot I've long sought to fix, but just never knew quite how. I've known this for years, ever since a friend who moved to Alabama about a decade ago confided to me she loved everything about the South except Blacks, who number less than 5 percent in Orange County, where we're from.

The remark sickened me, but I didn't know how to respond then except to stop talking to that person.

Silence doesn't cut it anymore.

> Destinations with a story to sell will never tell you the whole story. Yet I turned off my reporter's skepticism when I vacationed in the South.

IN 2016, my wife and I decided to stay at a bed-and-breakfast in central Kentucky. It was something out of *Gone with the Wind*: a historic main house replete with Greek columns and rocking chairs on the front porch, set on a large estate. For dinner, I wore a sports coat, and Delilah, a hip floral-print dress with black high heels that neither of us could remember when she had last worn.

As we sat in the backyard and watched fireflies up close for the first time in our lives, we vowed to make this stop an annual tradition. We had fallen for the romanticized South—and ignored the slave labor that made it possible—like true gullible tourists.

Our next visit started off even better. More fireflies. A relaxing massage for my wife. A night out at the inn's tavern with locals, who warmly received us even though, by their own admission, we were the first Mexicans they had ever seen enjoy bourbon.

We were making plans for another stay when on the way back to our room, I decided to scope out the decorations of the bed-and-breakfast's common area.

A lot of it was fussy period pieces, or artwork devoted to horses. But in plain sight was a mini-shrine to the Confederacy.

In the corner was a gray uniform. On the walls were a portrait of Jefferson Davis, and a reproduction of an 1896 lithograph titled OUR HEROES AND OUR FLAGS. It featured Lee greeting Stonewall Jackson and P.G.T. Beauregard, ringed with mini-portraits of other major Confederates.

I went back to my room, too upset to tell my wife what I had seen.

The following morning, I got up before her to load our bags. On the way to our Yukon, I saw a display case with photos. One of them was of an elderly Black woman, with the caption "Mammy." No actual name given.

Once on the road, I told my wife about everything I saw.

We've never returned. And we felt like fools for not doing our research. Reviews I found with loaded terms like "Southern heritage" and "simpler days" should've been the first clue. But photos of the bed-and-breakfast's interior with the offending artifacts that are easily found on travel websites should've been the deal-breaker.

Destinations with a story to sell will never tell you the whole story. I'm a reporter, so I know this.

Yet I turned off my skepticism when I vacationed in the South.

I hope that the innkeepers heard the cries of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others this summer and tore down their homage to the Lost Cause.

I doubt it.

I wonder if the inn's visitors in years past looked at those relics, and asked themselves like I did how their tourist dollars support something that's the antithesis of the New South.

I doubt it.

This willful amnesia reminds me of how California remains awash in romanticized remembrances of the state's brutal Catholic missions. Sites where Spanish priests forced Native Americans to convert under penalty of torture now persist as tourist destinations. Fourth graders in California still visit them on field trips.

My wife and I will return to the South next year, if this pandemic finally leaves us. We look forward to reconnecting with friends who are fighting the good fight. But we also look forward to putting our money in places we might've overlooked. Places that once didn't fit our definition of a Southern vacation.

Places run by people who are writing a new narrative of what a Southern stay can be.

Like Uncle Nearest Distillery in Shelbyville, Tennessee, a Black-owned company named after Nathan "Nearest" Green, the formerly enslaved man who taught Jack Daniel how to make liquid magic.

Because I want my revolution to have whiskey, too.

---

*Gustavo Arellano is* Gravy*'s columnist and a columnist for the* Los Angeles Times.

# POETRY

BY ADA LIMÓN

## *In the Company of Ghosts*

Mainly in the square raised garden
kneeling over the new inky seeds

of California poppies I've planted
in the Bluegrass State, rainbow chard,

Chioggia beets, chocolate sunflowers
already half eaten by the screaming jay,

mainly, with the encroaching weeds
creeping in the curated earth, I think

I hated the way you'd waste our bright
weekends meticulously uprooting

the dandelions and vines, your obsession
with clean lines and variations of color,

mainly I remember you most in
the garden off Arnold Drive how

you were happiest controlling
something small and leaving your expert

mark on the land, how you wanted me
to help even for extra chore money, but

I never liked to kneel with you, never
wanted to be so still, so quiet, so ordered

with free hours, until now, when I speak
to you and bury and unbury and bury.

Lindsey Bailey

## *The Light that Brings the Missing*

The last of the day's sunlight is stuck

in the mimosa tree, a clean light, something

out of a movie made in the seventies or a music

video where someone falls in love or hits a slow

motion home run. Back when we could predict

the future, a delight to make a plan, take a road trip,

see the ocean, your brick-red bridge, see your mother

and your stepfather, your mother's white kitchen

with that same clean light over the yellow hills

of your hometown. A place where she is always

cooking onions in a cast iron and there is cornbread,

and she makes a dry joke your stepfather laughs at

while he turns from the news to take a plate to

the table, a table in the first home they finally own,

a blossoming orange tree in the front, and blooming

hydrangeas too big for bees to even wrap

their whole buzzing heads around, and somehow you

can hold them there for as long as you can hold

one breath, until just like the light they are gone,

and the future goes dim with the enormity of the sky.

Lindsey Bailey

## *The Recipe*

In the middle of your worn maroon scrapbook
where you kept the recipes you cut or ripped
out of *Bon Appétit* and *Saveur* and some
other slick mags I didn't recognize, where I was
desperately looking for your simple coleslaw recipe,
panicked and over-tired, pulled apart and splayed
on the hard slab of life, in the middle of your
scrapbook, I find the note from Swedish Hospital
and the instructions on how to increase
your iron levels. I remember how we'd make you
eat beet greens, and that time, anxious and older
than we should have been, my youngest brother
and I ordered steaks from the fanciest restaurant
we knew and together ate them with you in your
hospital room. We took photos and grim-smiled
because it was proof, proof of our love, proof
that after all of our work of fine food and provisions,
of lists and recipes, you would get better. That was
the agreement. We follow everything to the letter,
you do what is called for, and you live. I can't find
the recipe anymore, thrown away or never there
to begin with, all this to say, the scrim is thin today,
I miss you, I managed to make coleslaw, though I
had to make it up, all on my own.

---

Lindsey Bailey

*Ada Limón, a current Guggenheim Fellow, is the author of five poetry collections, including* The Carrying, *which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. She serves on the faculty of Queens University of Charlotte Low Residency MFA Program and lives in Lexington, Kentucky.*

FUTURE OF THE SOUTH
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# A CROWDED TABLE

For dancers, squirrel hunters, and everyone else

BY SILAS HOUSE

I FIRST KNEW THE TRUTH ABOUT our neighbor Michael when he was nearly beaten to death. He was thrown over a cliff behind our trailer and his cries for help awoke me in the blue hour, when the sun had not risen but the birds had started morning prayers. After I woke everyone, we stood on the high bank together until they, too, heard his guttural moans. My father hustled down to pull Michael up through the tangled briars toward where we had all gathered—my mother, along with my aunt and first cousin, Ann, who lived in a trailer right next to ours.

Michael leaned, weak and addled, against my father as they struggled to us, his head down. Then the teenager raised his face and all of us could see his two blackened eyes, the deep gash across his right cheekbone, his badly busted lip. But we could not see the bruises beneath his shirt where they had kicked and punched him while they called him a faggot. When Michael saw Ann, his best friend since childhood, he collapsed in tears. My father turned away, ashamed to see the young man weep.

My mother and aunt went into action. "I'll make some biscuits," my mother said, cinching the belt around her housecoat. My aunt took a hard draw on her Winston Light and marched inside to start sausage for the gravy. After my father had done his best first aid on Michael, we sat at the round table in the small kitchen of my aunt's trailer and ate together. Cathead biscuits, gravy, and sausage, fried eggs, fried apples, and fried potatoes. My aunt and mother, true to our culture in southeastern Kentucky, never cooked a small meal. The silver sound of forks replaced the raucous conversation that usually sang out at our table.

That night at supper, I realized that my parents knew why Michael had been

Illustrations by Molly Brooks

beaten. Because, my father said, he was "a queer," "a sissy." My parents had most of it figured out, and Ann would fill in the details later: The boys had come up on Michael when he was walking home. They had beaten him mercilessly and then thrown him over the bank right behind his best friend's home. My mother said that she loved Michael and hated to see him treated like that, but he needed to learn "to act like the other boys." They likely figured their six-year-old wouldn't know what any of this meant. But I did. In just a few years, these words and phrases would come to identify me.

By the time I was ten, my father, uncles, cousins, and classmates regularly called me a sissy, too. Even my phys-ed teacher—a miserable, track-suited woman whom I now suspect was closeted herself—called me this height-of-all-insults in front of the entire class. What could be worse than for a boy to act like a girl? I walked like a sissy, threw a ball like a sissy, sat like a sissy. I liked to read, which was sissified. I loved to dance and refused to squirrel hunt. I wanted to be in the kitchen, washing dishes and helping my mother and aunt cook. All sissified. That word was a brand that burned deep into my skin.

The first person to release me from all this was my aunt, Sis. She was also a grandmother, a second mother, a protector who spoiled me. She let me cry when I needed to. Sis was a melancholy person who had a good cry every few days and swore by them. "I've got them old blues again," she'd say, dotting a pink Kleenex to her eyes. "Hand me my cigarettes."

When I asked to help in the kitchen, Sis didn't turn me away. She taught me to fry eggs, string green beans, peel potatoes. "Always eat one raw slice for luck," she said.

Sis showed me how to fix the two most important things of all: biscuits and cornbread. She told me that bacon grease and buttermilk make just about everything better. Sis and I would sometimes sing and dance to records in the kitchen. She'd shuffle her feet to Bob Seger or Prince or Loretta Lynn as she peeled potatoes, a cigarette clenched between her teeth. One time I noticed there were tears in her eyes as we danced. She turned away so I couldn't see. Perhaps she had already figured out how much I was like Michael and how, someday, I might face the same violence for simply being who I am.

RECENTLY THE Highwomen put out a song called "Crowded Table." The chorus goes, in part, "I want a house with a crowded table/And a place by the fire for everyone."

My family always believed in the concept of the crowded table.

*Won't you eat with us?*
*The more the merrier.*
*Now hush, there's plenty.*
*Y'all come on and eat.*
*Say the blessing.*

Throughout my childhood, especially in summertime, we were always getting together to eat at our house or my aunt's, the two centers of activity in our large family.

White half-runners cooked with salt pork and new potatoes, freshly pulled green onions, tomatoes so red and ripe the sight of them made my mouth water, peeled slices of cucumber, corn on the cob (called "rosheneers" in my family—a distortion of the words "roasting ears"), cabbage fried in a cast-iron skillet with lard, salt, a lot of pepper.

And cornbread. Always cornbread, the queen of every meal.

For dessert, blackberry dumplings or banana pudding or cherry cobbler. Perhaps a Better than Church cake, pineapple upside-down cake, or Pig-Eatin' cake. Sometimes there was cold watermelon or cantaloupe ("mush-melon," in my family's parlance), always raised in my daddy's garden and heavily salted.

Friends attended these feasts as well as family. They were usually folks who did not have much family to speak of, or had been turned away by their own. People like Michael, whose father never stopped taunting him for how sissified he was.

To hear my family's pedigree—poor to working class, Appalachian, white, evangelical, all self-identifying hillbillies, some self-identifying rednecks, most staunch Republicans—a lot of people would be surprised to see who gathered at their tables. People of different orientations, gender identities, races, ethnicities, cultures, beliefs, and sensibilities have

marveled at the crispness of my aunt's fried chicken, the miraculous density found in my mother's chicken-and-dumplings, the balance of crunch and softness that distinguish her buttermilk biscuits.

But here is the part I have dreaded telling you.

While my parents and my aunt always welcomed guests to the table, I am sure they would not have readily set a place for Michael if he had insisted on bringing a boyfriend. They would not have been so keen on pulling out extra chairs for the many people of different religions and cultures who have joined us if those folks had talked too much about worshipping different Gods or no gods at all. Any conversation about Black lives mattering or a grandchild complaining about deadnaming—the hurtful act of calling a trans person by their former name—would have been shut down immediately. They were always fine with people joining in, so long as those people were *quietly* different.

Throughout my childhood, I witnessed tremendous homophobia from both of my parents. My aunt Sis, so open-minded and loving to me, was quick to allow casual racism to rear its head in disgusting language. This habit led to the only true arguments she and I ever had. Many of my cousins who have welcomed so many different kinds of people into our family gatherings are vehemently anti-immigrant and proud to openly condemn anyone who protests, whether it be for women's rights or racial equality. The sharpest blade of my life has been this dilemma: How to reconcile the fact that people I love, and who love me, possess such hatefulness, often defended by Scripture.

I still don't have the answer, but I do have hope. Here's why.

There is no monolithic Southern family. Mine is the one I know best, and I have witnessed great change occur within us. My parents, who once chatted at suppertime about rounding up and forcing all gay folks onto an island, now welcome my husband and me to their table as a couple. They buy us joint Christmas presents, go on vacation with us, and refer to us as a coupled entity: y'all. They support and adore our son, their grandchild who has transitioned to male over the last couple of years. Sometimes when we are at the lake or dining together in a restaurant, I stop to marvel that we are all out together, my parents laughing and unafraid of how people might see us.

Over the past decade, my parents reluctantly began an anguished self-examination. They started to listen. They laid down their pride. This is the way forward for the South, for all of us. To listen. To possess humility. To look at ourselves. And ultimately to change. The future I imagine includes everyone who is willing to love. To gather all at a crowded table. And it includes letting the hate-filled ones know that they will always be welcome—but only if they get themselves sorted.

I can go on loving them, but it will be a quiet love—because there is a thin line between grace and enabling. I can sit at a table with those whose opinions differ from mine. I *will* sit at the table with anyone who is willing to be open-hearted. But I will no longer subject myself to filling my plate beside those who actively endanger the lives of others, who vote to take rights away from women and LGBTQ people, who refuse to admit that they, too, must work to help heal the wound of racism in our country. I can no longer pour glasses of sweet tea for those who believe the environment doesn't matter, that immigrant lives are inferior, who wrongly insist there is already justice for all.

Over the past few years I have had to disrupt too many family gatherings by calling out my cousins or others. When they spout their disgust for differences, I'm considered the bad guy for defending myself and others. They lean into each other, laughing, and tell me I'm too serious, that I've allowed politics to divide our family. Once again, I'm just the sissy who thinks too much. Once again, I'm left to simply be thankful that at least my parents have been willing to do the work of self-examination.

EARLIER THIS YEAR, I saw Michael for the first time in decades. He had moved to Florida when I was a teenager. A cousin of mine passed away, and Michael came back home to pay his respects. Not much has changed for him. He never really came out and has never had a public gay relationship. Sometimes a place and a people do damage that can't be repaired. Michael has moved through his entire life afraid that if he isn't quiet about who he is, then he'll be beaten again. Negating and shunning have left their scars, too.

After the funeral we went back to a family member's house, where a local church had prepared a feast for the mourners. Michael and I piled our plates with ham, fried corn, hashbrown casserole, sweet potato casserole, and macaroni salad. We sat together at one of the long tables on the porch. I asked if he ever missed home. "I never thought I would," he said. "I thought I'd never look back. But I have, every day." All these years later, and he still wanted to be accepted in the South where he had grown up. I do, too, but so far, I've only found that acceptance at my parents' table. There's a small county-issued sign where I grew up: HOMETOWN OF SILAS HOUSE, AUTHOR. A few years ago someone spray-painted FAG across it. My father took down the sign, scrubbed the paint away, and put it back up. There are few things that have broken my heart more than this image of him.

My mother came to sit with us. She ran her hand down Michael's arm, and there was an apology on her face. Before long, my husband and my father joined us. And we ate together.

I believe in forgiveness and giving grace. I do not believe in offering myself up for a beating, whether physical or spiritual. To set a welcoming table in a truly New South, we must actively work to nurture others and aim toward justice together, for everyone who is being oppressed and belittled. We must listen. The South of my dreams is a crowded table of many different colors and accents. Stacked on the table are platters full of the food I grew up with and delicacies I have never known before. My husband and I will be treated like everyone else. My cousins will be there. Their hearts and minds will have opened up to new songs and new dances. Everyone won't think the same way, but they will all bring love, first and foremost. That's the table where I want to break cornbread together.

*Bless this food.*
*Love your neighbor.*
*Amen.*
*Pass the butter.*

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*Silas House is the New York Times bestselling author of six novels, including* Southernmost *(2018). His writing has recently appeared in* The Atlantic, Time, The New York Times, *and* Ecotone. *With Sam Gleaves, he co-wrote* In These Fields, *a folk opera that debuted at the 2016 SFA Fall Symposium.*

*This is a work of nonfiction. The author spent two months reporting the details: talking with nearly two dozen members of his family, reading oral histories and reviewing archival documents and items, and spending significant time in each of the places that are mentioned. Each section is rendered as a note from a different person and a different time. The recipient of the collection of notes is unnamed, save the sole mention of "you," which comes at the end. The style has elements of ethnopoetry, which here means, among other things, that the way that language is presented is as much a part of the story as the characters, places, and scenes.*

# HOW WE GOT HERE

## Four stories from a Mississippi family

BY B. BRIAN FOSTER

Harry "Slim" Foster shows off a slab of ribs during a hog killing in Shannon, MS, circa 1994.

Photos courtesy of the Foster Family Archives

### 1
### HOW WE GOT HERE?

WE TRAVEL. UNDER NO DAY AND cotton in the back of a freight wagon, no different from the tree wood. Pap come first. Took his hands but left the gun. Say why he need it ran out. Ma Fanny and us, the children, left quick, too. But not with Pap. Killing take its own time.

It come 100 miles from Alabama to Mississippi, that ole wagon, like a boat without a head. Road like ocean when God sleep. We left a place they took for one that's stole. My memory still. Ma dress bunched up at the back, blood clotted at the hem. Seem like I kept hear a moan, like here. Can't been us 'cause we don't breathe and can't talk. We just sit. Wonder is we ate? Cottonseed poison. Pulpwood splinter. Rat teeth cut. We just ride. We met back with Pap in a town where the name fit: Plants'ville. That's where we planted and growed. And Picked. Plowed. Trumped.

I never say all what I saw, but the smell in my grave. Cast iron, sweat, sorghum and butter biscuits, fresh kill. When it rain, the blood come back thick and sticky like sap. I see it off the porch still. It don't drip it just sit, smell like all the ones that died come back to meet the ones that did't, to say how. A bullet between they eyes. A rope in a noose knot. The men wore work shirts that's dirty, they face empty. The ladies kept the little ones. When they leave, they stay, like buzzards. They call.

*Somebody else's—*

They quit before they stop.

Pap and Ma was born before they say we people, after they stop saying *slave*. Ma died when Deac went in the war. Pap did after Q come back. I think he know Q was me. All mine had his hands and Ma Fanny eyes. Q had something different though, my mind. He saw work like me, like the sun, and everything up under it his. Pap knowed. Verlene, Vivian died, he ain't cry. He don't fuss. Yella couldn't get the city out, he just sit. Pap know.

Him and me watch Q listen. Watch him walk out over the place, hear the ducks, one his dogs run by, stop on the killing spot, pass the cutting table. Q get low in the garden 'tween the okra and the snap beans, touch his hat, pick up the dirt and pinch with his fingers like they rain. Stand look for a long time, hold his hands 'hind his back like they gold. He know, too.

That's how we get here. Build a world on a briar bush, our place at the top, all Pap's and mine in the bottom by the slough hunting bullfrogs. Take 'em for the legs, take turns at the pear tree, bust pecans with they fist. Growed apple trees from a dirt road. My Johnnie walk in that orchard come back with a lemon icebox pie or peach cobbler. Faye pass the strawberry patch where the shadow come off the honeysuckle. Tempie in the house, ain't no sink 'cause all the greens. Lue with cans of scufadine preserve sittin'

on purple hull peas that took the born and dead to shell all the way. Muscadine so strong, my son's son's son blow in the wind, three or four sheets, talk like he come before and after.

Mo' tomatoes than family.

Time a run out fo' we do.

## 2
## OUR HANDS?

THEY TALK. HOW WE GET HERE. Talk family. Talk land, who sold and who stole. Pap's place was Creek, then Chickasaw. A white man stole ours before Daddy and Uncle Yella stole his, with a trick and a grin.

My wife *Mama*, build her a place that's hers, with a smokehouse off the side, a barn for the tractor that we take part and put back whole, and dig. And Haul. Pull. Bush.

We killed.

First time I 'member was '36. I was fourteen. I know 'cause that was after the one what happened in Oxford. Talk it come a hundred fifty, tricked him woke. Dragged him to the woods, a big Oak, made him like that ole cheap cowhide. They different from us. We kill on Saturday. They to see dead. So cold, it feel through wool, like that ice storm after the last time. Don't gotta touch shit to know it's shit.

'Fore the sun, I walk out just to look, touch my hands close to it, the fire. The ashes. I seen Daddy used to put some in the pot. He say that make the hair come loose. *It ain't time yet*. I watch when I was here before. The water boil. The skin swell and peel back slow, like morning daylight. Wonder why the ashes stay, like a tick, why least one don't leave and come back like Pap and Daddy say everything do, like the bo' after he hung.

It was eleven a us, two died, and seven

Scenes from a Foster family hog killing circa February 1994. TOP: Quincy Paul "Q" Foster; BOTTOM (l to r): Joe, Arthur, "Q," and Benny Foster

of mine. All them hands? Don't say shit 'bout tired! Two tote the wood. Three pump the water. My oldest come with a young'n that won't watch. He me.

*It ain't time.*

I call.

*HereHere. Huh.* It see me. *HereHere. Huh.*

I kill.

Ain't that many birds out here, 'bout the only good from that bypass 'side the money. Only way to know it's done is the rest run back. The trees hold they breath. The cold stretch out and stay. We take the water from the pot to a barrel, take a butcher knife big as two hands, take both of 'em to scrape, so sharp come blood just from looking at it. Need eight for the next.

*Jook*.

*Jook*.

*Jook*.

My boy kept a straight back. *Not yet*.

*Jook*.

*Two get that leg*, two get one leg, four get the back. I bring the tractor I built my first time. Sometimes that tractor a tree. It hold the biggest and the littlest, both dead. I hold my nose when it rain 'cause I know. Time keep the dead.

The straight back cut from tail to where the head missing. *That's my boy.*

The ladies take the guts. Wanna see a stank get clean? Cut one. Watch 'em work. I seen 'em soak the guts in a milk churn filled up with salt, water, and something else. They say it was like it always is, but it won't. It touch different, like magic. Seen 'em pump the well to it go dry, then whisper and call the water back. Like magic.

*Jook*.

Take the little ones from the big gut, pull lights and liver and heart. The rest of the inside be clean, yeah. Mama fry the brain down in a skillet—with eggs from Daddy chickens.

## 3
## 'BOUT THE LAST TIME?

MORNING NIGHT. AND COLD. WE had a pretty sombitch spread out on that cutting table. Big Daddy come in the room, say the time, the year, was right come a bad winter, a ice storm. I knowed what he wanted 'fore he finished. I beat him to it. I took his .22 on the way, straight back in my ass pocket.

He the kill man. I'm the gut man. Anybody a say, I was the fastest and strongest one on the place when I was a boy, both times. I make a muscle. It make a muscle. I catch the chickens. I run the guineas. I wrestle with the devil and won, know Big Daddy want the mount oysters. My nephew don't. He cut 'em fo' three weeks. Tractor ran off in the bottom, I picked up the front end with my hands, ain't need my back.

I lost a side my last trip come. My right side. Seen Chief's son's son. He showed me me from now. I run laughing.

I tell 'bout his daddy, we call him Dirty Harry. Sombitch. One day he out with Big Daddy 'n'em, go to patch. I come out, see his Opel Kadett, lime green I never forget. He must'a left the keys! *Vroom.* When they come, before they got out good, he come. Dirty. *Mufucka been in my car! I kill y' mufuckin' ass!* He Chief the second time, say the whole part quick in one. *Killy'goddamnmufuckinass.* Next thing, he come got a .44. *Skyow! Skyow!* He shoot four, five times. I run laughing. Run so good, all hunnid fifty scatter. It take all of them, just six a us.

We caught the first one, it was night. Finished it fo' day. I don't care 'bout no cold. That sombitch cut rough though, made my knife bend. The second one we worked—me, Benny, all us. After Big Daddy hatchet and spread him open, we went to dressing. We chopped the first one, so we rib that one. Cut enough ham and bacon to last two Junes. Take a hand grinder for the sausage—sage and black pepper to taste, like Kool-Aid.

Joe take the cracklins. His knife ain't sharp like mine, but it's hot, make the skin peel back quick. Put 'em in the pot like my grandaddy. The ashes flare up. They a bat.

See slick no good ass coming, just like Uncle Phillip was. Just like they say Yella was. He come and talk. He look. Might hold the knife. But that sombitch won't

cut shit. Ain't worth a damn, but he know good. He come with a stick in his hand a Salem on his lip. That's all he smoke, like he still up North. Tell that mufucka this ain't Chicago. He know good though. He do like us, cut a piece, wrap it up in some 'luminum foil with some pepper, inch it off in Big Daddy ashes that come back.

## 4
## HOW I KNOW?

I SAW. WHEN I WALKED IN THE smokehouse, the meat was still hanging—a slab and bacon—still saw loose salt in the salt box. I picked it up and pinched it. I stepped and nothing moved, stood and the wood cracked like it was some fire under it. That house a wagon with no front. Everything smell like nothing. I was glad it didn't rain, and it wasn't no sound, except some wasps kept buzzing, remind me of them damn mosquitos by the lake with the big croppy.

Savannah grandaddy say how long. *Six to eight weeks, sometime longer.* LL daddy say everything. *Sugar-cured salt, put the ham out there, sometime ya bacon, everything else in the deep freezer with everything else.* Everybody say why. Everybody—my first cousins, second cousins, aunts and great uncles, Dex, Grandpa and Momma, Pap and Ma Fanny, Big Daddy Rob and Ma Johnnie, the land. Uncle Bob watching something he can't name, like where Pap left the gun. The lemon trees by the house Uncle Q built, his "Mama" sitting where she always do. Why.

To live.

We travel. They talk. We plant. Grow. Dig. Shoot. Run. And we kill.

To live.

Our people drank they whole life, and they eat, and they talk shit, and we bitter, and we wish we ain't see, and people hope they can't remember so much; but we not looking. Why would we look for something—call it *traces of history*—that's inside of us. *In our blood I guess.*

The place ain't space. The road ain't ocean. God ain't sleep. It's us. Ours—a nightmare, but ours. Great Grandaddy Rob and Yella passed. We worked, from generations back to the next, and the next, to the futures. That Junior on the fo' wheeler? All us still on the hill? Aunt Anne still watching. *Don't forget about us.* We always do? Soybeans still down at the bottom? We was in the woods too? We came in the wagon too?

How do we imagine ourselves?

How do we hope for us?

How they ain't kill Ma Fanny? How Deac ain't die fighting to help somebody else keep what they stole? How daddy ain't kill at least two men? How the men kill the boy, but his family still here? How everybody got a smokehouse? How we say the same thing?

And this still *somebody else's*?

What was

Cannot

Come again.

What's here ain't gotta worry 'bout coming.

The world a run out before we do. We put back for you.

*B. Brian Foster is a writer and storyteller from Mississippi whose first book,* I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life *is forthcoming from UNC Press in December 2020. He works as an assistant professor of sociology and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi. Visit* southernfoodways.org *to read a note from the author on the family history and Afrofuturist themes that inspired this piece.*

Photos by Molly Milroy

# CAN A DINNER SERIES CATALYZE CHANGE?

The possibility of Brown in the South

BY CHANDRA RAM

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Chefs Vishwesh Bhatt, Meherwan Irani, Samantha Fore, Maneet Chauhan, Farhan Momin, Asha Gomez, and Cheetie Kumar outside the Brown in the South "Holi Grail" dinner, Raleigh, NC, March 2019

The first Brown in the South dinner at Chai Pani in Decatur, GA, January 2018

Dishes from Brown in the South at Chauhan Ale & Masala House in Nashville, August 2018

THEY DIDN'T EXPECT AN HOUR SPENT TALKING ABOUT MEXICAN FOOD to change everything. But late one afternoon in October 2017, Meherwan Irani and Vishwesh Bhatt emerged from an SFA Fall Symposium session, turned to each other, and asked: *How did we get here?* They had just listened to a presentation on Latinx identity and were struck by how much the questions raised mirrored their own: How did two men from different regions of India come to live and work as chefs in the South? Why had the region attracted so many other Indian expats and chefs? What was their role in the modern South? And how did the South become their home?

Whether you fit in the place where you live is integral to identity. That sense of belonging feels especially fraught when you are a newcomer in a region that often celebrates tradition and family legacy. I know this feeling well. Growing up in Kentucky a first-generation American with an Indian father and an Irish mother, I didn't know where I belonged. I was Brown enough to field questions about where I was "really" from, but with my clumsily draped half-sari and inability to perform traditional dances, I didn't fit in with the other kids at the Bluegrass Indo-American Civic Society events.

Kentucky was home, but those caveats kept me an outsider, even after I grew up, moved to Chicago, and became a writer, editor, and cookbook author. Some people assumed I was an expert on all Indian food, not grasping the vastness and diversity of the cuisines cooked across the subcontinent. They expected me, with my foreign-sounding name and brown skin, to know all.

They asked if I learned to cook in my grandmother's kitchen. If only they knew that my blue-eyed, red-haired Irish mother cooked most of the dosa and aloo gobi I ate growing up. Like many third-culture kids, I craved a sense of belonging. I found it—or something that felt like a path toward it—in cooking and writing. I could work out my confusion on a blank page or cutting board.

Food was also a refuge for Irani and Bhatt. Both were living in the South, pursuing other careers, when they began to work in restaurants. After moving from California to Asheville in 2005, Irani quit his real estate career in 2009. Lacking restaurant experience but seeking a business opportunity that resonated, he opened Chai Pani that same year. The restaurant is centered around chaat, the Indian snacks eaten in homes, on the street, and at train stations. Irani says he loves chaat because it belongs to everybody: "There are no rules; it transcends religion and regionality." Bhatt learned to cook as an undergrad at the University of Kentucky, desperate for something better than dining hall spaghetti and inspired by memories and the packets of garam masala, turmeric, and mustard seeds sent by his mother. As a graduate student at the University of Mississippi in the early 1990s, he realized that he enjoyed cooking for friends more than political science classes. Eventually he became the executive chef at Snackbar in Oxford. Food informed their search for identity: Seeing the okra and beans they grew up eating in India grow in Southern garden plots made them feel at home.

Irani and Bhatt kept their conversation going after the Symposium. Since moving to the area, they agreed, they had become Southerners. Refer to Bhatt as an Indian American and he will gently but definitively clarify: He is an American who came from India, *ma'am*, the edge in his voice and word choice exemplifying the

polite tone heard when someone from either locale feels the need to correct you. Meanwhile, Irani, who was born in London and lived in Maharashtra, India, and San Francisco before settling in Asheville, says that he's lived in the South longer than anywhere else, and thinks of himself as someone from both India and America: "It's easy to hang onto the idea of being from somewhere else, but this is my home."

With that cultural mapping in mind, they asked each other how they could build on their experiences as Southerners to help make their home a better place for natives and immigrants, as well as the next generation. We "integrate our food the way we do our family and our lives," Irani says.

They asked friends to help them cook through the conversation for a dinner series they called Brown in the South. On the roster was Atlanta chef Asha Gomez, a native of Kerala and author of the cookbook *My Two Souths*, about melding Indian and Southern flavors. And Cheetie Kumar, who grew up in Chandigarh and is the chef and co-owner of Garland in Raleigh. From Nashville, the effervescent Maneet Chauhan of Chauhan Ale and Masala House and other restaurants joined in.

The chefs crafted menus around ingredients like cornmeal, peanuts, and rice that are claimed by both cultures. At the first dinner in January 2018 at Chai Pani in Decatur, Georgia, themed "Desi Diner," guests dug into the group's take on a meat-and-three. They enjoyed Irani's shrimp and grits made with upma, shrimp, and tomato pathia; Kumar's speckled trout fritters with chutney and piccalilli tartar sauce; Bhatt's pork meatloaf with apple achaar; Gomez's Kerala fried chicken; and Chauhan's garam masala–spiced hot chocolate topped with a rose-scented marshmallow.

I was there that night. Giddiness filled the room as we marveled at the trick they pulled off. The aromas of toasting cumin seeds and Kashmiri chili powder floated from the kitchen, as did the sounds of Bollywood music. That night the restaurant felt mystical, a Shangri-La, where bhangra and banjos lived side by side, and everyone was welcome.

The chefs continued to explore that kinship between Indian and Southern cuisines, inviting others to cook with them. Later that year at the "Indian Summer" dinner in Nashville, the Atlanta chef Farhan Momin toasted curry leaves, mustard seeds, and coconut in ghee and poured the mixture over cornbread, which he served tableside in cast-iron pans. The following year at a dinner during Asheville's Chow Chow Festival, Samantha Fore of Lexington, Kentucky, served tomato pies vivid with turmeric and tangy with tamarind-cooked onions, uniting her North Carolina upbringing and Sri Lankan heritage.

In tableside chatter and at panel discussions, the chefs drew connections between the sweet and slightly bitter flavors of Carolina barbecue and Goan pork vindaloo, recalled their mothers using jaggery the way Georgians pour cane syrup on a biscuit, noted that the rice and tea grown in India had traveled the Earth to find a new home in the South. They spoke of how the culture of hospitality in India and the South makes it impossible to get out of a visit without "just a small bite" of something that often turns into a feast, and how that welcome had made them at home in the South.

I would leave Brown in the South events with a smile on my face, thinking about food that spanned the chasm between my Kentucky hometown and my grandmother's kitchen in Andhra Pradesh. Those nights proved how far we had come from my parent's attempts to jerry-rig a chaat out of roasted peanuts, Rice Krispies, and chili powder.

Place settings at the first Brown in the South dinner in Decatur, GA, January 2018

Brown in the South cofounders Vishwesh Bhatt (l) and Meherwan Irani

I wasn't the only person aglow with ghee and goodwill. Brown in the South became a media darling, celebrated in the pages of major food publications, proof that Indian food had shaken off the its curry buffet past. But truly fitting in isn't as easy as that. If you are fully welcome at the table, your whole self is welcome, not just the part of you that smiles and feeds others. Irani and Bhatt wanted to do more than serve food; they wanted to affect change.

Chefs and restaurants are more than sources of food. They have long been leaders in political and social justice movements who feed protestors, rally for the environment, and donate their food and time to charities. Why not learn from them? For Brown in the South to become as meaningful as Bhatt and Irani imagined it to be, chefs and guests needed to push past what felt good to address deeper and more relevant issues.

As they wove cardamom into Southern culinary traditions, they had to address this time in history. In a moment when people of good conscience march in the streets to proclaim that Black Lives Matter, tear down Confederate statues, and pull back the curtain on chefs who treat their employees poorly, then Brown in the South suggests we all have a responsibility to do more than bask in a lovely meal.

How do you transform a dinner series into a catalyst for action? Priya Parker, author of *The Art of Gathering*, says we create meaning and consequence in gatherings by marking what is important and identifying what we need. At Brown in the South, the chefs already do the work of creating context in their food. How do they go deeper, and explore the difficult truths behind those cultures and their commonalities? How do they use the power of a shared experience for a change of behavior and heart?

As a kid, I sat at school cafeteria tables with people who didn't look like me. On the days my lunch box stank of cumin and asafoetida instead of the safe blandness of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, I felt embarrassed and misunderstood. Today, those same people might ask me about the dishes on my plate and even want to try them, but I still don't want my lunch to be an exhibit at the zoo or othered by the mainstream.

We need to address the racism and anti-immigration sentiments that threaten to tear the United States apart. Southerners have a jump on people in the rest of the country who have often been able to avoid taking ownership for their role in systemic racism. Owing to recent immigration patterns, the face of the new South is brown-skinned. The Indian population in America grew by almost 40 percent between 2010 and 2017, and the South was a magnet for much of that growth. Irani describes the South as one of the most diverse, progressive parts of the country. But are the Vietnamese refugees who work fishing boats along the Gulf Coast, and the Kurdish who work bakeries and cafés in Nashville afforded the same welcome given to Irani and his kin, the highly educated, well-paid Indian executives in the tech and telecom industries in Atlanta and Dallas? Or does the classism in America more closely resemble the caste system in India than we'd like to think?

This group is uniquely poised to tackle these questions. As Americans grapple with their roles in social justice and injustice—and the vice-presidential candidacy of Kamala Harris prompts a fresh look at the relationships between Black and Indian-descended Americans—a conversation between between these groups adds nuance to the larger conversation and exposes the complexities of race relations in America and India. It disabuses people of the assumption that people of color cannot be racist, and points out hierarchy of skin color within shades of brown. It asks the bigger question: Can the Brown people of the South become allies with Black people?

There is plenty to connect us, but it's facile to talk about the curry powder that seasons a chicken salad at a church picnic without acknowledging that it made its way to America with the indentured South Asians who were forced to work for early settlers in the seventeenth century. We can do more than debate the cultural appropriation of turmeric, chai, and chana masala. We can talk about what happens to authenticity when people with a strong food culture make their homes elsewhere. In India and the South, places steeped in traditions, change is familiar. Both places suffer when people insist their cultures must remain suspended in memory behind glass.

Brown in the South will become more meaningful as the chefs plumb the nature of identity, and address how it shifts when immigration renders you an outsider. That 2017 SFA Symposium got Irani and Bhatt thinking about racism and belonging. They took action to align that conversation with their community through the dinners. Seeing the need to add context, they expanded the events in the second year to host discussions that challenged participants to take action.

"This is what it's like if everyone stands up and is counted, and not kept separate," Irani said. "My daughter asks me what Southern means, and I tell her that it means her. She needs to contribute to the South growing and evolving. We all need to be part of it."

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*Chandra Ram is the editor of* Plate *magazine and a cookbook author living in Chicago.*

# *Dinner as Dialogue in the Up South*

## A meditation and a menu

*by* **ERICK WILLIAMS**

*Erick Williams is the Tabasco keynote chef for this year's virtual Fall Symposium. He is the owner and executive chef at Virtue Restaurant & Bar in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, where he combines fine dining, Southern cuisine, and his studies of the Great Migration. Visit poetryfoundation.org to read "Harlem" by Langston Hughes.*

Virtue Restaurant & Bar

## "What happens to a dream deferred?"

Can the poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes apply to the contemporary Southern culinary experience?

Confronting bigotry and racism through my practice as a chef, I bring attention to the deep hatred Black people have suffered in America. As a Black citizen, I confront the hypocrisy of our country's founders, who oppressed Black people while touting standards of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

My goal is to encourage dialogue about decency, integrity, and respect as it relates to the people of the African diaspora. Through my cooking, I aim to ask questions that connect to the questions Mr. Hughes asked.

Each generation is born with a moral and civic responsibility to make America a better place than they received it. I often hear the cry to our government to make the changes we need. I believe it is the responsibility of citizens to use our God-given rights to make those changes. A quote that my father drilled into my head as a young man comes to mind: "If not us, who? If not now, when?"

My greatest resource is food. Eating is a biological necessity that offers possibilities for building trust. My greatest talent is cooking. Service and hospitality set the table to resolve disputes, tear down generational barriers, and forge lasting bonds.

"Harlem" references questions asked then and now. While the poem's title, of course, takes its name from New York City's famous historically Black neighborhood, these questions resonate in the land of the free that has yet to be. "Harlem" speaks to a potential renaissance of equity and empathy and a balancing of the scales of opportunity. Like this imagined menu, "Harlem" reminds us that the American dream is a dream deferred. No matter how delicious food looks in a dream, it only becomes real when we can taste it.

Sandy Noto

## THE MENU

*Inspired by the questions posed in the 1951 poem by the late Mr. Hughes, I've used some ingredients that speak to the stigmas of being Black in America. And to the joys of being Black in America. The notes that follow speak to those inspirations.*

Seeking to answer the question "Or does it explode?" I use Tabasco sauce throughout as a metaphor to catalyze thought and amplify flavors.

**Watermelon and Cider Reduction with Tabasco Sea Salt** is a bright and refreshing appetizer. I have juxtaposed summer deliciousness with the negative, stereotypical assumption that "Colored folk love watermelon."

**Smoked Turkey Wraps** are petite lettuce packages stuffed with pulled turkey, spiced with the heat that Tabasco sauce affords.

A **Salad of Cucumbers** is a nostalgic take on salted cucumbers, marinated in vinegar, chilled, and shared with my mother on hot summer Chicago days.

**Catfish and Chow Chow with Tabasco Mustard Greens and Honey-Poached Turnips** is a progressive take on scrap cookery that challenges misconceptions about premium ingredients. (*See insert for greens recipe.*)

Finally, I reject the insults lobbed at African American food choices and channel the age-old combination of chicken and hot sauce with **Tabasco-Brined Cornish Hens** (*see insert for recipe*).

Enjoy.

TOP: Chef Erick Williams plates Tabasco-Brined Cornish Hen; BOTTOM: Cucumber Salad

This page: Sandy Noto; Opposite: Katie Bailey



SFA FUTURE OF THE SOUTH 2020 FALL SYMPOSIUM

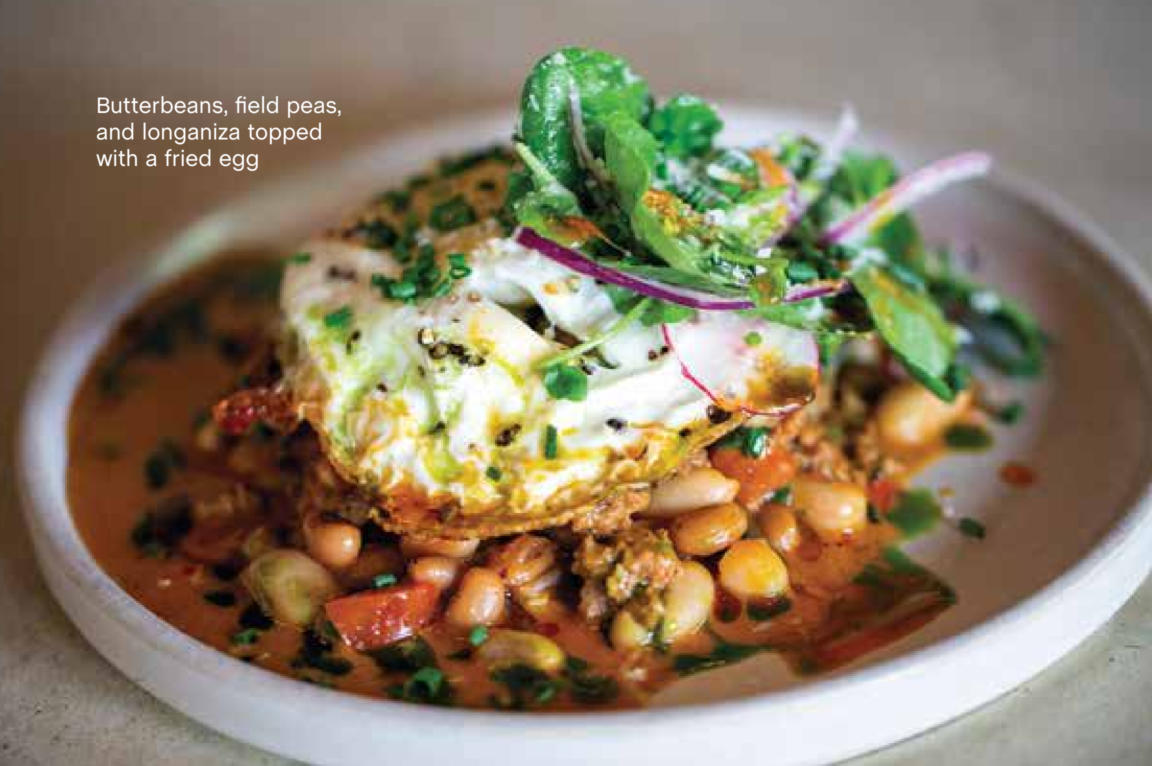
# *South by Sur*

## A BrunsMex stew in every pot

*by* **OSCAR DIAZ**

LODGE CAST IRON

*Oscar Diaz is the Lodge Cast Iron chef for this year's virtual Fall Symposium. He is the chef of Cortez and Jose and Sons, two Raleigh restaurants that meld his Mexican heritage and his Southern home.*



Butterbeans, field peas, and longaniza topped with a fried egg

“We are all very excited to have you be part of this event for our Latinx community.”

“We are putting on an event for Hispanic heritage month and we just knew we wanted you. It would be great if you could cook one or two dishes—but like nice dishes, you know. Not Mexican... something *more exotic*.”

As a Brown chef in the South, I am often fortunate to take part in community and corporate pro bono events that champion what makes us great: diversity. The premise seems simple—we come together symbolically and physically to display our embrace of new arrivers to the South through food, one of the region’s strongest cultural products. But what my nine years in the South have shown me is that what can start off as a simple request can often become a disheartening transaction in which one’s identity gets mutated into a shiny, neatly packaged narrative. I didn’t get into cooking to claim expertise on *Latino*. I did get into the business to be myself.

*We see you, we invite you take part, but we need to package you to our liking for this to work*. All too often, immigrants and second-generation Americans hear that refrain.

To envision a better South, let’s start understanding more about the people who live here, respecting where they come from, and reminding ourselves that many voices make up this collective pot of stew. Like a Twitter timeline on steroids, this can be hard to keep up with. But a request for performative work can rob a person’s pride in their food and its meaning. I will not cook in service of drama and spectacle. A request for fetishized food imposes stereotypes. It can feel like being shoved into a box that I never agreed to climb into, and can never climb out of.

Let’s envision a South that is unapologetic about tomatillo potlikker, bulgogi smoked beef ribs, or a BrunsMex stew rich with Mexican goat birria. A South where you can enjoy a vegan barbecue that pushes boundaries. A South where Black chefs get to redefine the cuisine their ancestors created with dignity. In this new South, cultures and traditions intertwine, unified by a continuous dialogue about differences and commonalities. That South will be a place of deep and intricate beauty, where all voices are heard. The result is growth, both personal and collective. A united South is a better South. A better South is the future South.

Or maybe aliens will invade us and conquer the Earth.

Katie Bailey

## THE MENU

### SHARING PLATES

**Okra & Cactus Salad**
With Cherokee Purple tomato, onion, garlic, cilantro, lime, oregano, queso anejo, and tostadas

**Farmer’s Market Ceviche**
With cherry tomatoes, cauliflower, serrano, lime, avocado, leche de tigre, and fried tajin-dusted saltines

**Tetelas & Foraged Mushroom**
Local corn masa tetela, huitlacoche, sautéed mushrooms, vegan crema, fresh truffle

**Butterbeans, Peas, & Longaniza***
Butterbeans and field peas, cotija cheese, butter, fried egg, longaniza, lemon juice

**Pimento Queso and Heirloom Corn Totopos**
Cheddar cheese, roasted peppers, creamy queso, Southern tortilla chips

**Diablo Shrimp & Grits Taco**
Classic grits folded into masa, corn tortilla, guajillo glazed shrimp, sautéed onion, poblano pepper

### LARGER PLATES

**BrunsMex Stew***
Smoked goat birria, salsa molcajete, corn, black beans, potato, butter beans, carrot, pickled onion, crema, cornbread

**Verde Potlikker Tlayuda**
Local corn masa tlayuda, tomatillo salsa braised collards, sautéed mushroom, shredded quesillo, heirloom tomatoes

**Pulled Cochinita**
Marinated smoked whole hog, local corn tortilla, spicy chow chow, charro style black-eyed peas

**Chicken & Mole**
Cornmeal fried chicken, Mama's mole, pickled onions, charred kale, mashed potatoes

### DESSERTS

**Choco-mole taco**
Corn waffle taco, mole ice cream

**Omaigaa So Corny**
Grilled pound cake, corn ice cream, cream of corn, blueberry compote

*See insert for recipes

FUTURE OF THE SOUTH
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2020 FALL SYMPOSIUM

# *Raise a Glass to the Future*

## Three cocktails for climate heroes

*by* **CLAIRE SPROUSE**

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*Claire Sprouse is a bartender and the owner of Hunky Dory in Brooklyn, New York. She also founded Outlook Good, which addresses climate change and climate justice in the hospitality industry.*

Brittany Herbert

## "Human beings don't have a pollution problem. They have a design problem,"

write William McDonough and Michael Braungart in their 2013 book *The Upcycle*. Choosing to be inspired by the challenge of sustainability has been my guiding star behind the bar for the last decade. I have redesigned my cocktails to be climate-smarter by using resources more efficiently. Through advocacy and education, I encourage my industry to examine its role in climate change.

I am a bartender and a child of the Gulf Coast. When I look into the future, there is no way to talk about cocktails without talking about climate change. And there is no way to talk about climate change without centering Black lives. In our country, Black people and communities suffer the most from the effects of climate change. Despite and because of this, they are the first to fight on the frontlines. This is especially true in the South.

The three cocktail recipes that follow honor Southern Black women and men whose work builds resilience and awareness around issues of climate change and sustainability. One or fifty years from now, I hope that all Southerners will know their names and remember their work.

PAULETTE RICHARDSON and Valencia Gunder are longtime residents of Miami, Florida. Miami is considered the most vulnerable city in the world to rising sea levels caused by climate change, projected to lose twelve to eighteen inches of land elevation over the next fifty years. Homes will be ruined, and residents will be displaced. Richardson lives in Liberty City and Gunder in Little Haiti. Both neighborhoods are historically low-income and predominately Black. These populations have been generationally marginalized by redlining and segregation, which have moved them farther and farther from the beachfront. However, climate change–related issues are disrupting these dynamics. While increased hurricane activity has hammered down on more affluent properties with a view of the water, Richardson's and Gunder's neighborhoods are relatively well-protected by their inland locations and high elevations. Likewise, these geographical features win out flood zone projections. In recent years, this has drawn the attention of real estate developers, who are moving in to purchase and develop more elevated, inland neighborhoods, including Little Haiti and Liberty City.

Richardson calls this phenomenon "climate gentrification." She and Gunder have helped create land trusts to protect the home and dignity of their neighbors. Gunder's nonprofit organization, The Smile Trust, collaborates with The Miami Climate Alliance and The Black Collective to elevate consciousness of climate change and provide mutual aid in response to associated issues.

Watching the rising waters compels awareness of water conservation. Even as Miami faces rising tides, the city reckons with the need to conserve fresh water to

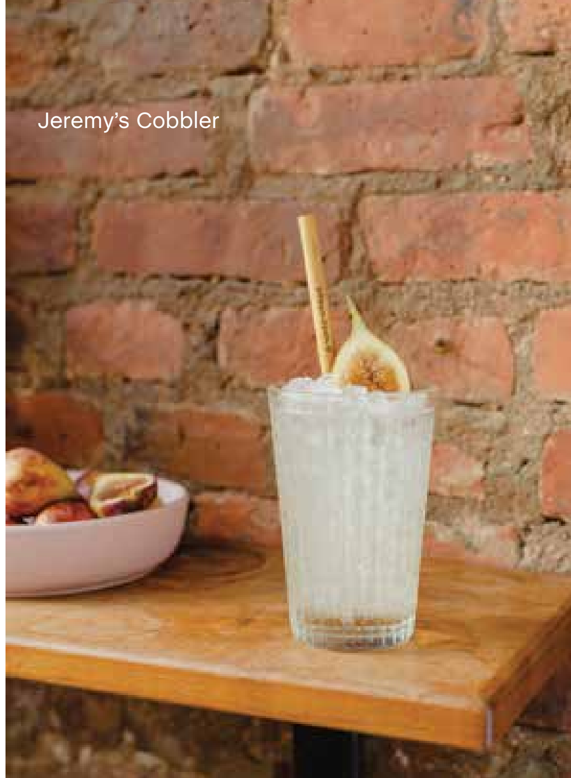
protect its aquifers and minimize reliance on resource-intensive water processing.

I am an advocate for addressing climate change. I am also an advocate for well-made martinis. A cocktail of this nature can traditionally use up to one full liter (33.81 ounces) of water. This happens through the production and use of ice, which chills and dilutes a martini to optimal temperature and taste, as well as the washing of tools and vessels to make it. Over the years, I have redesigned my recipes to balance my values with the principles of a great-tasting drink. By pre-batching and pre-diluting cocktails in the martini family, I can eliminate almost a full liter of fresh drinking water per serving. These savings add up, even at your home, but especially in a bar that serves hundreds or thousands of drinks a night. The accompanying Gibson recipe outlines this very simple method of conservation. It substitutes Haitian pikliz for the traditional Gibson garnish of a pickled onion, in honor of Valencia's Little Haiti neighborhood.

COLETTE PICHON BATTLE'S work stretches from Florida to Texas. As the executive director of the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, she addresses climate change in the region using a multi-pronged approach.

Pichon Battle's work draws connections between racism and climate justice. In her home state of Louisiana, the area between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is nicknamed "Cancer Alley," due to the large presence of petrochemical plants and the byproducts of their processes.

Their proximity to Black communities is not coincidence; there is a long history of environmental racism across the country, which has led to Black-populated areas being exposed as "sacrifice zones"—a term coined by Dr. Robert


Jeremy's Cobbler

Brittany Herbert

Bullard in 1993 and defined as the discriminatory practice of choosing BIPOC communities as sites of toxic dumping.

In a recent talk for The Movement for Black Lives, Pichon Battle said, "We are part of this ecology. It is our duty to maintain the natural resources around us." She asked, "How can we individually and as a community develop to economically survive climate change?"

Agriculture, which accounts for 10 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States, will be part of the answer. Can we reimagine a system of food that relies on and celebrates the crops and food sources that help us in this fight?

Like Pichon Battle, the red mulberry tree is a native of Louisiana, and its potential as a delicious ingredient in food and cocktails is matched by its ability to positively impact the environment. They typically grow wild in hardwood forests, though some orchardists cultivate them. Their bright red fruit is edible and mature enough to pick from April to June. The mulberry is a highly efficient carbon sink, meaning that it absorbs more carbon dioxide from the air than it produces, helping to lower the concentration of this greenhouse gas in the atmosphere. It also absorbs other toxic pollutants from the air, and its roots absorb carbon and heavy metals from the soil.

When we use mulberries, we celebrate plants that do their part to help us work against climate change.

I'VE LIVED IN cities and towns along the Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida, but Houston is where I lived the longest and where I am most proud to be from. It is also where Jeremy Peaches founded Fresh Life Organic (FLO) in 2016. His mission is to provide fresh produce and agricultural consulting. Only 2 percent of our nation's farmers are Black. Twenty-eight-year-old Peaches is one of them.

FLO focuses on aquaponics and hydroponics and on regenerative and organic practices. Organic is an ideal that ultimately emphasizes land and water protection, as well as food security. To begin to think about a future fifty years from now, I believe we must prioritize organic farming, along with investing in Black and Indigenous farmers' stewardship of our lands.

BIPOC have historically not had the privilege to view land as disposable or food as something to waste. They also know that such unsustainable thinking leads to lost flavors and lost opportunities to learn. In the nonalcoholic cocktail featured here, I heed these lessons and look to organic fig orchards. These fruit-bearing trees grow well in Texas. Often overlooked are their leaves, which go unplucked and unused. They lend a grassy coconut profile to this drink and are a perfect example of what we can do by reexamining our relationship to the land while questioning what so many of us don't typically value as flavorful or "worthy" of our plates and glasses.

I LOOK AT everything I do behind the bar through the lens of sustainability, and I challenge my peers to do the same. I believe in the productive power of visioning to work toward transformative changes in the hospitality industry. In doing so, we also acknowledge that there are some changes that cannot wait to be gradually addressed. We have to start holding ourselves accountable to make these changes now. The authors of the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement declared 2020 to 2030—right now—as the "critical decade" for mitigating climate change. Meanwhile, we now confront other long-needed changes at the intersection of race, gender, hospitality, labor, and agriculture. Let us center the needs and experiences of Black people and other marginalized communities as a necessity to redesign our present and look toward a truly sustainable future.

## THE MENU

**Paulette and Valencia's Gibson**
*A twist on the traditional Gibson, made with Bristow gin or Cathead vodka and garnished with spicy Haitian pikliz.*

**Colette's Julep**
*Maker's Mark bourbon tempered with a sweet-tart syrup of red mulberries.*

**Jeremy's Cobbler**
*A refreshing, nonalcoholic fig leaf soda.*

*See insert for recipes

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# FUTURE OF THE SOUTH

## 2020 FALL SYMPOSIUM

## *Cook (and Pour) the Future*

WITH

ERICK WILLIAMS — OSCAR DIAZ — CLAIRE SPROUSE

Photos by Sandy Noto (Williams), Katie Bailey (Diaz), Brittany Herbert (Sprouse)

Bring this year's Symposium recipes to life in your very own kitchen.

Tear along perforations, staple or paper clip, and stash somewhere handy. *Voilà!* Instant cookbook.

## Erick Williams' Tabasco-Brined Cornish Hens

*Serves 4*

**INGREDIENTS**

**½ gallon water**
**1 cup brown sugar**
**½ cup kosher salt**
**½ cup Tabasco sauce**
**½ gallon ice**
**4 Cornish hens**

**DIRECTIONS**

**1.** Place water, sugar, and salt in a very large pot and bring to a boil. Turn off heat and when mixture stops boiling, add Tabasco and stir. Add ice to cool the brine.

**2.** When ice melts, submerge birds in brine.

**3.** Cover and transfer the entire pot to the refrigerator. Brine overnight or for about 8 hours.

**4.** When ready to cook, preheat oven to 400°F. Remove birds from brine and dry them completely. Allow them to come to room temperature, about 30 minutes.

**5.** Place the hens in the oven on a roasting pan with a rack. Rotate the pan halfway through cooking.

**6.** Check hens 40 to 50 minutes into roasting and see if juices between the thigh and leg run clear (absent of blood). If not, cook an additional 10 minutes or until they run clear. If they do, remove from heat and allow to rest for 5 to 10 minutes.

Sandy Noto

## Erick Williams' Tabasco Mustard Greens

*Serves 4*

**INGREDIENTS**

**5 medium bunches mustard greens**
**2 tablespoons canola oil**
**3 tablespoons granulated sugar**
**2 teaspoons seasoned salt**
**¼ cup white wine**
**¼ teaspoons garlic powder**
**¼ teaspoons paprika**
**2 tablespoons mustard**
**1 cup finely chopped onion**
**4 teaspoons Tabasco sauce**
**½ teaspoon cider vinegar**

**DIRECTIONS**

**1.** Start by pulling and tearing greens away from stems. Working one handful at a time, roll leaves up and cut rolls in half horizontally, resulting in medium-size pieces.

**2.** Add greens to clean, empty sink and wash them under cold running water. Rinse all grit, sand, and debris thoroughly until water becomes clear.

**3.** Heat canola oil in a large pot. Once the oil is hot, add onions and cook, stirring, until they are soft. Add greens and about 2 cups water.

**4.** Add all other ingredients except Tabasco sauce and vinegar to the pot. Cover and cook on medium-low heat for 40 minutes, removing the lid to stir every 10 minutes. After 40 minutes, raise heat to medium-high and cook until greens are completely tender and excess liquid has cooked down (most of liquid should be gone).

**5.** Add Tabasco sauce and vinegar and stir well to combine. Allow greens to settle for about 10 minutes before serving.

## Oscar Diaz's BrunsMex Stew

*Serves 6 to 8*

*Brunswick stew has nearly endless variations, and this birria-inspired spinoff is no exception. Oscar Diaz developed this recipe with smoked goat shoulder. With his blessing, we tested it in a home kitchen with an oven-roasted chuck roast. Both methods and proteins result in a deeply flavorful stew. Diaz says lamb shanks or a lamb shoulder would also work well, and you could braise the meat instead of smoking or roasting. In other words, make this stew your own. We have a feeling you'll make it again and again.*

**For the meat:**

**10 dried guajillo chiles**
**6 dried ancho chiles**
**5 dried pasilla chiles**
**2 tomatoes, roughly chopped**
**½ teaspoon cloves**
**1 teaspoon whole black peppercorns**
**1 teaspoon cumin**
**4 whole allspice berries**
**½ teaspoon ground ginger**
**1 white onion, roughly chopped**
**2 bay leaves**
**8 garlic cloves**
**¼ cup white distilled vinegar**
**4 pounds bone-in goat shoulder or boneless chuck roast**

**DIRECTIONS**

**1.** Devein and deseed the chiles. Working in batches, toast chiles in a hot, dry skillet for 30 seconds per side.

**2.** Add toasted chiles, tomatoes, and ½ cup water to a pot. Simmer, covered, over medium-low heat for 20 minutes.

**3.** Add tomato-chile mixture and all other marinade ingredients to a blender and purée until smooth. Strain through a mesh strainer. With gloved hands, rub the marinade all over the meat. Place the meat on a wire rack over a sheet pan and allow to marinate overnight. Transfer leftover marinade to a jar and store in the refrigerator.

**If smoking the meat:**

**1.** Prepare your smoker with hickory wood chips (or your preferred wood chips). When the smoker reaches 225° F, add the marinated goat shoulder. Brush on some of the reserved marinade periodically over the first three hours. Keep the smoker at 225–250° F. After three hours, brush the meat liberally with marinade and wrap it in butcher paper or banana leaves. Return meat to smoker and allow to cook until the internal temperature reaches 185° F. Depending on the type of smoker, this may take anywhere from 6 to 9 hours.

**2.** Remove meat from smoker and allow to rest for 45 minutes. Shred all meat, reserving larger bones.

**If oven-roasting the meat:**

**1.** Preheat oven to 375° F. Line a sheet pan or roasting pan with aluminum foil and place the marinated chuck roast in the pan. Roast for 30 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 225° F and continue to cook until meat is falling apart. (Begin checking for doneness after 2 to 2 ½ hours total cook time.) Remove from oven. Shred the meat when it has cooled enough to handle.

**For the salsa molcajete:**

**7 ripe tomatoes**
**4 garlic cloves**
**4 fresh serrano chiles, stems removed**
**Salt, to taste**

Char tomatoes, garlic, and chiles in a dry skillet over medium-high heat or under a broiler, turning occasionally. When the garlic has dark brown spots on both sides, remove it from the heat. Let the serranos and tomatoes continue cooking until charred all over and soft all the way through. Allow everything to cool

slightly before transferring to a blender. Add a generous pinch of salt and blend a few pulses at a time. Taste and add salt as desired. Do not overblend—you want a thick and chunky consistency.

**For the stew:**

- **2 tablespoons neutral oil, such as canola**
- **½ cup diced potato**
- **½ cup diced carrot**
- **½ cup diced white onion**
- **½ tablespoon minced garlic**
- **6 ounces tomato paste**
- **1 cup cooked fresh butter beans (or thawed frozen butter beans)**
- **1 cup fresh corn kernels (or thawed frozen corn)**
- **½ cup cooked black beans (rinse if using canned)**
- **3 teaspoons white distilled vinegar**
- **1 cup water**
- **1 recipe salsa molcajete (recipe above)**
- **Shredded meat (recipe above)**
- **Reserved bones from cooking meat, if using**
- **Salt and pepper to taste**
- **Cilantro leaves for garnish (optional)**
- **Pickled onions for garnish (optional)**
- **Tortilla strips for garnish (optional)**

**1.** Heat oil in a large rondeau pan or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add potatoes, carrots, and onion. Sauté until the onion is slightly translucent, about 5 to 7 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring often, for 2 minutes. Add tomato paste and cook, stirring often, for 3 minutes.

2. Add remaining ingredients. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook for 30 to 40 minutes. Taste and add salt and pepper as desired. The stew should be on the thicker side. If it is too thick, add water ½ cup at a time, stir, and let simmer. If it is too thin, thicken with a cornstarch-and-water slurry.

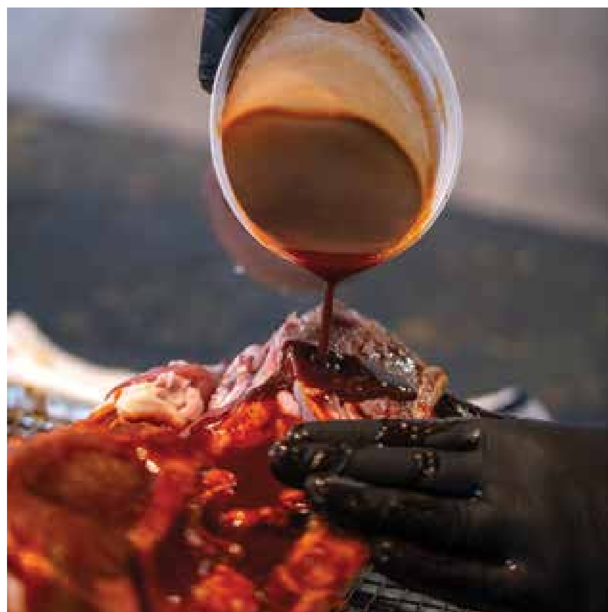
**3.** Ladle stew into bowls and garnish as desired with cilantro leaves, pickled onions, and thin fried tortilla strips.

## Oscar Diaz's Butter Beans and Field Peas with Longaniza

*Serves 4*

**For the longaniza:**

- **3 dried guajillo chiles**
- **1 dried pasilla chile**
- **1 dried chile de arbol**
- **1 ¼ pounds pork shoulder, ground (or packaged ground pork)**
- **3 cloves of garlic**
- **¼ cup chopped onion**
- **2 cloves**
- **½ teaspoon black pepper**
- **Pinch of ground cinnamon**
- **½ tablespoon cumin**
- **1 tablespoon oregano**
- **1 tablespoon smoked paprika**
- **1 ¼ tablespoons salt**
- **½ cup distilled white vinegar**



**DIRECTIONS**

**1.** Devein and deseed the chiles. Place them in a bowl of warm water and soak until softened, about 25 minutes.

**2.** Meanwhile, if grinding your own pork, cut the pork shoulder into cubes and place in freezer along with a ¼-inch (6-mm) grinder plate.

**3.** Remove chiles from water and add them, along with all other ingredients except pork, to a blender. Purée until smooth.

**4.** If grinding your own pork, remove meat from freezer once pork reaches 33°F and pass through meat grinder.

**5.** In a large mixing bowl, use gloved hands to combine ground pork with sauce until well incorporated. Transfer the mixture to a colander and place it over the mixing bowl. Refrigerate uncovered for at least two hours, or up to overnight, so that it dries out slightly.

*Note:* If you like to make your own sausages, skip the colander step. Stuff the longaniza mixture into natural casings and hang in the refrigerator to dry for at least two days.

**For the butter beans and field peas:**

- **2 cups fresh butter beans**
- **2 cups fresh field peas, such as purple hulls**
- **1 recipe longaniza (above)**
- **1 ½ teaspoons minced garlic**
- **2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice**
- **3 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- **4 tablespoons cotija cheese**
- **Canola oil for frying**
- **4 eggs**

**DIRECTIONS**

Katie Bailey

**1.** Cook beans and peas separately to ensure perfect doneness. Put two large pots on the stove. Place butter beans in one pot and field peas in the other. Add water to each pot to cover the beans—about 6 cups. Add salt to each pot, enough that the water tastes like the ocean. Bring both pots to a boil over high heat. Once boiling, lower heat to medium and simmer. Begin checking the beans for doneness after about 30 minutes. The centers should be smooth and creamy with just a bit of tooth. Drain and reserve the cooked beans.

**Putting it all together:**

**1.** Heat a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Add longaniza and cook, breaking the meat up with a wooden spoon. When the longaniza is almost cooked through, about 5 minutes, add the minced garlic and cook until the garlic is golden.

**2.** Add all the butter beans and field peas to the skillet. Add lemon juice and cook, stirring, for 30 seconds. Add the butter. As soon as the butter hits the pan, stir quickly to emulsify the lemon juice and butter. Once emulsified, add the cotija and quickly stir to incorporate. Turn off the heat.

**3.** In a separate nonstick pan, heat canola oil and fry the eggs to your liking—I like mine hard-fried sunny side up. (Depending on the size of your pan, of course, you may need to fry the eggs one or two at a time.)

**4.** Spoon a serving of beans and peas with longaniza onto each plate and top each serving with a fried egg.

## Paulette & Valencia's Gibson by Claire Sprouse

*This recipe works equally well with gin, which is the traditional Gibson base, or with vodka. Make it according to your preference. This is a great recipe to batch for a small gathering; below are ratios for making one drink or six.*

Brittany Herbert

**INGREDIENTS**

**For one drink:**
**1½ ounces Bristow gin or Cathead vodka**
**1½ ounces dry vermouth**
**1 ounce water**
**1 barspoon of spicy pickling liquid from Haitian pikliz***
**Haitian pikliz for garnish**

**For six drinks:**
**9 ounces Bristow gin or Cathead vodka**
**9 ounces dry vermouth**
**6 ounces water**
**1 ounce spicy pickling liquid from Haitian pikliz**
**Haitian pikliz, for garnish**

**DIRECTIONS**

**1.** Combine liquid ingredients in a small plastic bottle. There is no need for typical steps like stirring or shaking here. Seal your bottle tightly and store in the freezer for up to two months. Within just a few hours, your martini should be ice cold and can be poured directly into a coupe or martini glass, without the need for any extra preparation. Garnish with pikliz.

*Haitian pikliz are a combination of shredded and pickled carrots, cabbage, and peppers. They are a staple condiment in Haitian cuisine. A few small producers sell pikliz online, such as haitianpikliz.com. The Madame Gougousse brand is also available on Amazon.

## Colette's Julep by Claire Sprouse

**INGREDIENTS**

**2 ounces Maker's Mark bourbon**
**1 ounce spiced red mulberry syrup (recipe follows)**
**Mint sprigs for garnish**

**DIRECTIONS**

**1.** In a large rocks glass, combine bourbon and mulberry syrup and top with crushed ice. Use a spoon to swizzle the drink so the ingredients are fully integrated, adding some dilution from the melting ice. Pile more crushed ice on top into a small dome. Garnish with a large handful of mint sprigs.

To make the spiced red mulberry syrup, muddle 1 cup of red mulberries into 2 cups of sugar and 2 cracked nutmeg seeds. Let sit for 30 minutes, allowing the sugar to absorb the fruit juices. Add 4 cups of hot water and stir until sugar is fully dissolved. Let sit again for 15 minutes. Strain off all solids. Store in a sealed container and keep refrigerated, up to one week.

## Jeremy's Cobbler by Claire Sprouse

**INGREDIENTS**

**6 ounces fig-leaf soda mix (recipe follows)**
**Sparkling water to top**
**Fresh fig for garnish**

**DIRECTIONS**

**1.** Building in a highball glass, pour batched fig leaf soda mix over ice, top with sparkling water, and garnish with a slice of fig.

To make the fig-leaf soda mix, combine about ½ cup fresh or dried fig leaves and 4 cups of hot water. Let steep for 15 minutes. Strain off leaves and add 2 cups of granulated sugar to the hot fig leaf tea. Add 1 tablespoon citric acid (or to taste). Store in a sealed container and keep refrigerated, up to two weeks.



# SEE THE TRUTH

## Reading Southern photography

BY W. RALPH EUBANKS

Carrie Mae Weems

"At the Precipice" is part of Carrie Mae Weems' Louisiana Project.

ANYONE WHO KNOWS THE SOUTH UNDERSTANDS THAT THE REGION exists beyond stock images of rusted red pickup trucks in cotton fields or white-columned antebellum mansions surrounded by moss-laden live oak trees. Yet these traditional and sometimes romanticized tableaux are difficult to escape. The very idea of regionalism in America may be in flux, yet in the South we cling to outdated ideas even while we seek to transcend them. The prevalence of folk traditions drives a Southern desire to maintain the way we see our image as well as the very idea of ourselves. And those same myths are at odds with the idea of a changing and evolving South many of us embrace.

"Men, Janssen", 2006–2015 by Sally Mann. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.

In her photographs that depict Black subjects, Sally Mann confronts mythologies that she, a white woman from the South, has long wrestled with in her work.

John Edwin Mason documents drag racing culture in the modern South.

John Edwin Mason

Myths are tools that help us deal with contradictory elements of our culture and can help confront difficult things until they obscure what is real, what we can see every day. Telling stories makes us human. In the South, we are beginning to lift the veil of our cultural lore to see ourselves clearly. One way we can confront the stories we tell ourselves in order to survive is by engaging with images that challenge those narratives.

What contemporary photographers have realized is that there is great danger in maintaining a single story about the South, both visually and narratively. And in the prevailing idea of the South, visual and cultural narratives are tightly wound together. Rather than focus on sharp decisive moments that capture a single dimension of the region, all should seek images that embody ideas of this place that we cannot easily explain. By seeking a visual idea of the South that is complex and can't be reductively narrowed down, we can rethink the stories we tell and document.

The South is perhaps the most documented American region. The draw is its perceived authenticity as a place geographically and culturally distinct from

LEFT: Andrea Morales photographed Memphis police officers at the ribbon cutting for I Am a Man Plaza, 2018. RIGHT: L. Kasimu Harris documented Black-owned bars in New Orleans, including Benny's Sandpiper Lounge, shown here.

Andrea Morales

L. Kasimu Harris

> Changing the way we see the region, and changing our vision of the South, means building a new community.

the rest of the country. As historian Scott Matthews notes, images of the region seem to be caught between "enchanting primitivism and endemic pathology," with the two often blurred together. While some places, customs, and traditions in the region remain frozen in time, many have changed and evolved. The idea of Southern place and custom also changes depending on who is behind the camera. Take that pastime of drag racing, an activity that evokes moonshine running as much as it does whiteness, with lots of good old boys in fast cars. But as documented by African American photographer and photographic historian John Edwin Mason, the racetrack in the modern South is as diverse as the region itself.

We live in a moment that calls us to rethink the very idea of the South. Now that physical manifestations of the Lost Cause are being toppled to the ground, thrown into rivers, and placed in museums, there is an urgency to imagine anew the way we conceive the image of the South. The Mason-Dixon line has long existed as an artificial dividing line. That is especially true now that Southern symbols like Confederate flags are weaponized beyond the South—such as in protests against pandemic lockdown orders in Michigan and Ohio.

Somehow, all of us must reckon with how the South took a false idea of our history, enshrined the untruths in monuments and symbols—and sometimes in visual images—and allowed these erroneous representations to speak for the region and spaces beyond it. Americans must come to terms with how we ignored that these were symbols created by the powerful to retain dominance, as well as how we allowed a tangled mass of discontinuities and untruths about the past to force many Southerners into silence and submission.

While the South once found transcendence in a romanticized self-image, looking ahead we must take care to explore the realities of Southern place. The South must be captured in all of its complexity, and not just in the smell of magnolias and the soothing, deceptive songs of mockingbirds.

How do we achieve such a lofty goal? Moving toward a cultural narrative rooted in truth requires us to rethink how we frame the region. In America, social change has often originated in photography, whether it was Jacob Riis' depiction of New York tenement life, Lewis Hine's realistic view of the lives of child laborers, or the faces Dorothea Lange captured during the Great Depression. In images of decrepit tenements, child millworkers, and migrant mothers, these photographers brought about change. A photograph documents a past reality, and that reality lives on well after the moment a shutter closes.

Altering the image of the region is something photographers who document

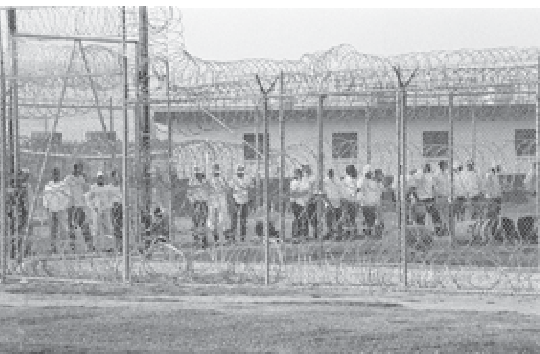
Telling stories makes us human.
In the South, we are beginning to lift the veil
of our cultural lore to see ourselves clearly.

Dialia Wooten walks home from church in the Baptist Town neighborhood of Greenwood, MS, in this 2010 photo from Matt Eich's long-term project "Sin and Salvation in Baptist Town."

the South think about each time they pick up their cameras. It is a heavy burden; photographic evidence has real power. A photograph can show a great truth yet contain within it an enormous lie. Photography can serve as a way to imagine our future and look at the past with clearer eyes. We can begin to see the truth when we understand the ways we have been deceiving ourselves.

The desire to represent reality, beauty, and truth at the same time remains one of the great tensions in the art of photography. The looming question the South has to face is, how do we look toward the future in a way that embraces what is real as well as what is aesthetically pleasing?

A few photographers are now helping us reimagine Southern place and space.



To imagine a future, they acknowledge the past without allowing it to overshadow the present.

Carrie Mae Weems explored the tension between romance and reality in her 2003 Louisiana Project, a series of photographs commissioned by Tulane University to commemorate the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase. Weems pushes against mythology and gets us to think about the Southern landscape in a new way.

Weems is both photographer and subject, placing her body in front of antebellum houses and spaces. She reminds the viewer that enslaved people once occupied these spaces. And she does this in the same cultural space that rendered slavery invisible and created social hierarchies built on power imbalances. These are photos of property that foreground a woman who would have once been property. Weems envisions a future for the region by making us rethink nostalgia-laden images of the mythological Southern past.

The job of every artist is to push against orthodoxy. In the South, that means pushing against tradition and exceptionalism. Sally Mann confronts the mythologies she, as a white woman from the South, has long wrestled with in her work. Never one to shy from controversy, Mann has started to develop a body of photographic work with Black subjects, particularly Black male subjects. Taking a photograph is an invasive act. Her use of the Black male body as a subject invites the viewer to explore their own vulnerabilities alongside the photographer. Mann has referred to these images as opening a doorway from "an immutable past to a future" she could not imagine in her youth in the segregated South.

In three photographs from her book *A Thousand Crossings*, Mann juxtaposes the images of her photographic subjects with those of the landscape of the Blackwater region of Virginia, a swampy area in the southeastern part of the state, a place tied to the Underground railroad and the idea of Black freedom. What I see in the pairing is how Blackness has survived and thrived in the South, in spite of threats and dehumanization. Conjoining the human body and landscape, Mann reckons with the past while asking the viewer to confront their own relationship with the South's history. This works because, as the critic Hilton Als has written, "Mann doesn't assume that she is speaking about the Black experience, but a Black experience."

Previous spread: Matt Eich; This page: Chandra McCormick

THIS PAGE: Marion Post Wolcott documented Latino farmworkers on Knowlton Plantation in Perthshire, MS, as part of her work for the Farm Security Administration in 1939. OPPOSITE: Chandra McCormick photographed prisoners at Angola, LA, on their way to work in the fields in 2004.

Marion Post Wolcott/Library of Congress

Photographic evidence and aesthetics must also confront preconceived ideas about the region. While regional identity in the United States is often characterized along a North-South binary, Southern identity is often framed by a racial binary. Yet the South has never existed solely within a Black-white framework. In 1939 Marion Post Wolcott documented Latino farmworkers on the Knowlton Plantation in Perthshire, Mississippi. Rory Doyle's photographs of Latino farmworkers today connect the past and the present, acknowledging the presence of Latinos in the South as workers and as people.

Like Doyle, Matt Eich pushes against a singular view of the Mississippi Delta in his series "Sin and Salvation in Baptist Town," which documents the Baptist Town neighborhood of Greenwood, a place that was once the home of bluesmen Robert Johnson and Honeyboy Edwards, a space imbued with mythology. During the filming of *The Help* in 2011, the Baptist Town neighborhood was used as a stand-in for Jim Crow–era Jackson, Mississippi.

Eich pushes against the mythologizing and the attempts to pathologize the people and the neighborhood. He removes the idea that the people captured in these photographs exist as an impoverished, ghettoized Other. Eich allows the viewer to see what exists in any community in this country: caring, intimacy, and a desire to support neighbors so that everyone survives and thrives.

In their documentation of the South, photographers confront the need to capture tradition. But whose traditions are deemed worthy of documentation? It's an issue L. Kasimu Harris explores

Changing the way we see the region, and changing our vision of the South, means building a new community.

in his series of photographs of vanishing Black bars and taverns in his native New Orleans. In these spaces, Harris writes, "tradition is paramount—and I fear what will become of my city if these traditions are lost." Harris captures the joy of the people who inhabit these bars, which originated as safe havens during segregation. He includes details such as photos of patrons that line the walls and posters commemorating distant celebrations as a way of acknowledging the people from the past alongside those who inhabit the space today.

Capturing tradition means connecting the past and the present and creating a new story. It is what Andrea Morales does documenting Memphis in the post–civil rights era. The aesthetic Morales embraces is contemporary. The linkage to the civil rights past exists in the frame of the image, whether it is policemen gathered for what appears to be a staged photo opportunity beside an "I Am A Man" sculpture, or a neighborhood parade with the destructive signs of gentrification as a backdrop. Morales rejects the detached point of view that characterizes much early documentary work in the South. "When we connect with other people and their circumstances, when we listen to the stories of each other's lives, we build community. I know I need that. I think we all do," she says.

Changing the way we see the region, and changing our vision of the South, means building a new community. Engaging with the image of the South, we see a connection with those captured in the frame rather than view them as separate and distinct from ourselves. That includes the South hidden from our view. Carrie Mae Weems reveals that world when she emotionally mines the African diaspora in the American South in her work. Similarly, Chandra McCormick recognizes the incarcerated people who are also part of this land.

McCormick's long-term work at Angola State Prison in Louisiana reminds us of what lies beyond the gates and razor wire that surround our prisons, places we often speed past in our cars without looking. McCormick's work reminds us that, as we begin the process of altering our gaze, we also confront the menace in our landscape alongside the beauty.

The past and the present exist within the frame of a photograph as well as in the photographer's vision. As we move away from focusing on sharp decisive moments toward images that we cannot easily explain, we can begin to focus on complexities that were once obscured. What we see can transform the idea of Southern place and imagine a new future for the South. That is the only way we can begin to see the truth.

Seasonal workers prepare to plant sweet potato slips in Vardaman, MS, in this 2017 photograph by Rory Doyle.

Rory Doyle

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*W. Ralph Eubanks is the author of three books, including* A Place Like Mississippi: A Journey Through a Real and Imagined Literary Landscape, *forthcoming from Workman in 2021. He is a visiting professor of English and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi.*

# PLENTY WITH LITTLE AND MOST WITHOUT A LOT

## Lessons from Georgia Gilmore

BY SAFIYA CHARLES

ON MARCH 8, 1990, DOCTORS admitted Georgia Gilmore to Jackson Hospital in Montgomery, Alabama. A rupture in her intestines had caused fluid to leak and inflame her abdomen. She had no idea she was sick. The seventy-year-old civil rights activist was ready to "cook heavy" for guests, soon to arrive from across the country. She died on March 9.

When those guests gathered in Montgomery to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march, they joined mourners of Gilmore's life. Together they ate the food she prepared before she fell ill: her tender chicken and baked macaroni and cheese.

For decades, Gilmore had served a "full dinner" in her dining room where guests, who often entered her home without knocking, crowded around the table twelve or more at a time. Others spilled into the living room, edging in for a seat on the couch if they could manage to find one, or eating where they stood.

Each day she prepared two slow-cooked meats, baked or fried chicken, and spareribs. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. loved her stuffed pork chops. She cooked turnip greens, potato salad, and turkey dressing, with corn muffins and pound cake or a slice of pie.

One week after her death, St. Jude Catholic Church hosted her funeral service.

"You would have thought she was a world figure," her son Mark Gilmore Jr. recalled in a 2004 interview with journalist Jamie York of NPR. "The church was packed to capacity. And you know what's amazing?" he said, thinking about his mother's long fight against racism and injustice. "She had the police as pallbearers. Can you believe that?"

It must have been a sight to behold. Only twenty or thirty years prior, Montgomery police officers would have been more likely to resign in protest than carry a "Negro" woman's casket.

Following the service, mourners filled Gilmore's home on Dericote Street, where she had served dignitaries, locals, and politicians alike. They gathered around the dining room table and wherever else they could find a seat. Those police officers came, too.

Gilmore demanded respect from Black and white. A widow, she raised six children working within a grinding system of segregation and exploitation, while fighting to overturn that same system. Her cooking and entrepreneurship, encouraged by King and supported by the Black community, allowed her to finance her children's education. She was most proud of that.

Mark served on the Montgomery City Council for twenty-two years. In Gilmore's funeral bulletin, her daughter Martha Baker was identified as an evangelist in Kingston, Jamaica. Another daughter, Oscar Mae, graduated from Alabama State University. What different lives they must have led in comparison to her own. Like many who joined the movement, this was one of her goals.

When I imagine Gilmore, who worked as a cook most of her life, hunched over the stove and likely humming a tune, I think of my grandmother who grew up on the island of Tobago. She cared for fourteen children and reared grand- and great-grandchildren until she died. She, too, passed after an unobserved illness took residence inside her. My grandmother grew up a long way from Alabama. But her story connects.

In her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston writes, "Black women are the mules of the world." They show up. They do the work. They carry the load—and suffer the consequences of its burden. We are so much more than that. And we have

Montgomery Advertiser

Georgia Gilmore in Montgomery, 1978

made our country the better for it, at times paying dearly for our efforts.

Three decades after Gilmore's death, and more than eighty years after Hurston wrote those words, we see this in the massive burden Black women bear in the current health crisis. Twenty-eight percent of Black women in the United States work in the service industry. They're nursing assistants, cashiers, waitresses, and home health aides. Right now, they are disproportionately filling our hospital beds and dying of COVID-19. For their labor, they earn an average of 63 cents for every dollar earned by a white man. That figure drops to 58 cents in Alabama and 56 cents in Mississippi.

Women like Gilmore and my grandmother were of humble stock. They did plenty with little and most without a lot. They refused to succumb to despair or defeat. They labored from the time their dark hair shone in youthful plaits until their coils faded to gray.

> They show up. They do the work. They carry the load—and suffer the consequences of its burden. We are so much more than that.

Gilmore once told a reporter that she began cooking at age eight. *The Southern Courier* may have included that detail to elicit surprise and admiration from white readers. But to learn that skill so early seemed natural to me, and likely to many Black readers.

Gilmore's family was poor. Her mother, Alice, also known as a gifted cook, worked in domestic service for white families. When she taught Gilmore to cook, she armed her daughter with one of the few marketable skills that could earn Black women a wage at the time.

Has much changed? The vital work of care is really an expansion of domestic work. Childcare, early childhood education, disability care, elder care—that work is still done by Black women. As the Institution for Women's Policy research reports, "thirty percent of the workforce that cares for us are Black American women."

Like her mother before her, Gilmore also "caught babies" for Black women across the city. Barred access to white hospitals, the women either could not afford fees at clinics that served Black patients or preferred to give birth in their own homes. The service earned her between five and ten dollars for each birth, if she got paid.

"If I had the dollars I tried to walk and collect…I'd be a rich man," Mark once said of his efforts to fetch payments. "She delivered just that many children."

Much of what people know about Gilmore as a civil rights figure surrounds her fundraising for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In 1955, she founded the Club from Nowhere, a clandestine organization of women who cooked and sold food to raise money for the ongoing protest. As weeks became a year, Gilmore turned in more and more money to fund the volunteer taxis and carpools that ferried Black passengers across town.

We know too little about her continued activism, which, in the years after the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended, permanently altered the landscape of the city of Montgomery.

Many of the unsung heroes of the movement were women. Active as they were in the struggle, it was, as they say, a different time. Male leadership was considered both standard and superior. Yet Gilmore and other Black women were the foundation of the movement. Their efforts remain lesser known now, because so few enjoyed visible prominence back then. I ask again, has much changed?

The former home of Georgia Gilmore in Montgomery, photographed in November 2015

John T. Edge

From here in 2020, three things strike me. Two offer perspective: She used food as a weapon and a salve. She gained empowerment through her participation in the bus boycott. The third begs me to take a hard look at the misogynoir and relative disinterest employed by Montgomery's newspapers to tell her story.

PEOPLE WHO KNEW Gilmore called her "Georgie," "Tiny," "Big Mama," or "Madear." She called most of them "Baby."

Everyone from visiting presidents to students at the historically Black college Alabama State to politicians from the state capitol tasted Gilmore's cooking. John F. Kennedy requested her food be brought to his plane as it waited on the tarmac. But her enterprise was born of necessity.

About three months into the Montgomery bus boycott, Gilmore made her allegiance clear. In March 1956, she swore in court that Rev. King had not attempted to incite anyone to stay off the buses, as he was being accused by the state. For this, she was fired from her job as a cook at a downtown restaurant. Gilmore couldn't even get homeowner's insurance to cover her house, Mark told a reporter, because her involvement in the movement was known among whites.

Gilmore's dining room table served several purposes. It was a secure meeting place for talk that had to be kept quiet.

LEFT: Georgia Gilmore, 1978;
OPPOSITE: A clip from the December 31, 1958 edition of the *Montgomery Advertiser* announcing the closure of city parks

Left and Right: Montgomery Advertiser

King and the Montgomery Improvement Association leaders could move and speak freely; hold private meetings with public officials even, as was the case when King once brought President Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy to Gilmore's home.

The unsanctioned restaurant fed and nourished. In the physical sense and in the cultural and political sense. If you wished to make a pleasant escape from a dismal circumstance, you could take a seat at her table and Georgia Gilmore would fill you up until you were a balloon ready to burst.

If you wanted the latest news about the progress and challenges of various boycotts and protests, what was happening in the courts locally or nationally, and what was being discussed among white folks about the goings on of colored folks—hers was the place.

THE CURRENT MASS movement of protests and disruptions following the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor also incorporates food as a means of sustenance and empowerment.

When I visited Richmond, Virginia, in July, protesters had taken up residence in Monument Park, alongside the colorfully reimagined memorial to Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Spray-painted graffiti covered almost every inch of exposed stone: UPLIFT BLACK VOICES, THIS TIME IT'S DIFFERENT, and WE'RE NOT LEAVING. Activists had installed a compost station and a small community garden patch. They had planted seeds of intention.

Across the street from the monument, I found a group of men sitting in fold-out chairs grilling meat and vegetables under a canopy covered with BLACK LIVES MATTER signs. These men gathered, just as people once did at Gilmore's home, to nourish minds, bodies, and spirits and facilitate community.

Sikhs in Queens, New York, mobilized to feed protesters in June. The religion encourages *langar*, a practice of preparing and serving free meals to the community, as a form of *seva*, or selfless service. In Sunnyside, about a dozen volunteers distributed 500 meals of matar paneer, rice, and rajma, a red bean and tomato stew. A faithful Catholic, I imagine Gilmore was motivated by similar principles when she began to prepare that final meal for those marchers in 1990.

Calls now ring out for Black reclamation of Southern lands stolen from African American citizens. Crowdfunding campaigns raise money for urban gardens, grocery cooperatives, and farming collectives.

"Food has always been a powerful tool in the hands of oppressors. Food was a major component in colonization and enslavement. To control people, you control what they eat," Lindsey Lunsford, a specialist in sustainable food systems at Tuskegee University, told me when I went looking for ways to connect this moment with Jim Crow–era Montgomery. "Racial equity in the food system and community sovereignty is really people having control over and a say over what they eat … and making sure that food reflects them and their vision for their future and their families."

Food production and consumption as fuel, as politic, as a means of power, is a long-standing concept. As the bus boycott showed, the work of Black women could propel a movement. But the production of food is often stigmatized. The ongoing devaluation of Black women's work points to why many people like Gilmore, who powered the boycott and greater civil disruptions, remain relatively unknown.

**COMMISSION TEXT CLOSING CITY PARKS**

Following is the complete text of the City Commission resolution closing city parks:

WHEREAS, eight Negroes, namely Georgia Theresa Gilmore, Gussie Carlton, Sylvia Johnson, J. C. Smith, Mattie Cargill, Fred Harris, George Stephens, and Elizabeth Brown, have attempted to compel the integration of Oak Park and other public parks in the City of Montgomery hereinafter designated, by suit filed in the Federal District Court; and

WHEREAS, this attempt poses grave problems involving the welfare and public safety of all of the citizens of the City of Montgomery; and

WHEREAS, the members of the Commission are of the opinion that it is to the best interests of the citizens of Montgomery that said parks be closed:

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Board that the following public parks in the City of Montgomery, of Commissioners of the City of Montgomery, Alabama, to-wit,

| PARK | LOCATION |
|---|---|
| Bear Park | East of Coliseum Boulevard |
| Bruce Field | North of Highland Avenue at end of Anderson Street |
| Civic Park | Bounded by Yancey Avenue on the South, Madison Terrace on the West, Upper Wetumpka Road on North; California Street on East. |
| Day Street | North of Day Street, directly in front of Day St. Baptist Church |
| Diffley Park West | Bounded by Crenshaw on West, Aaron Street on North |
| Hamner Hall | Bounded by Mildred, Clayton and Holt Streets |
| Kings Hill | Claremont Street, 1 block north of Lower Wetumpka Road |
| Kiwanis | Small Downtown Park, north of Columbus Street |
| Mobile Heights | Mobile Heights |
| Oak Park | Bounded by Lake Street on North, Hall Street on West, Stevenson Street on South, Forest Avenue on East |
| Perry Street | Bounded by Jeff Davis Avenue on South, Lawrence Street on East, Perry Street on West. |
| Ridgecrest | April and Ridgecrest Streets |
| Trenholm Court | North of Columbus Street in project area |
| Washington Park | At west end of Dorothy Street, West of Jordan Street, South Mobile Road |

be closed beginning January 1, 1959, to all persons, regardless of color, until further action of the Parks and Recreation Board and the Mayor and Commissioners of the City of Montgomery.

(Signed by the Commission Members and dated Dec. 30, 1958.)

"HUGE NEGRO WOMAN draws Cursing Fine," read the headline in the *Alabama Journal* on November 3, 1961. The reporter likely recognized the name of the woman in question, for Georgia Gilmore had appeared in the paper before. But the reporter identified the business owner and activist only by her size, race, and sex.

The adjective "huge" does the most work in this headline. It speaks to a perceived unruliness, and to the stereotype of a large, disorderly Black female figure in need of censure. Or maybe it's just there for comic relief.

When Gene Kovarick of my paper, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, wrote in November of 1961: "A hefty Negro woman who weighed in excess of 230 pounds was fined $25 today in city court on charges of cursing a diminutive white garbage truck driver," he worked a twist on the sassy Black mammy archetype. And he rendered the white male truck driver her victim.

*The Advertiser* dropped the word "huge" in a follow-up headline the next day: "Big Negro Woman Fined $25 for Cursing Garbage Man." But the first line of the story employs it: "A huge Negro woman was convicted in Recorder's Court Friday for cursing the white driver of a City Sanitation Department truck."

By that point, Gilmore had been quoted or mentioned by name in the *Advertiser* at least four times. The discourtesies of 1961 follow a period in which Gilmore had made the paper as an activist for civil and voting rights and agitator for equitable city services. In 1956, the newspaper quoted her testimony from King's trial. In December 1958, she challenged a city racial ordinance. On New Year's Eve, 1958, she was named as plaintiff in a federal suit, *Georgia Theresa Gilmore v. City of Montgomery*. Last, in September of 1959, she was mentioned in a story about the invalidation of a racial ordinance.

At the height of a race-mixing panic in a city boastful of its reputation as the "Cradle of the Confederacy," it would have been unrealistic to expect fairness from a white Southern newspaper. I understand that. But I believe that coverage is worthy of attention now, as many newsrooms across the country begin the very late-term work of assessing and dismantling the historical biases and erasures that have alienated and marginalized Black communities.

My own presence at the *Advertiser*, as the race and ethnicity reporter, is meant to demonstrate a commitment to this effort. The reality is our newspaper now faces down decades of rightfully earned mistrust from African Americans. Only time, persistence, and engagement with the communities harmed can yield good faith.

For what it's worth, the *Advertiser*'s posture on Gilmore seems to have relaxed by 1964. In a story on the wedding of her daughter Oscar Mae, the reporter is generous, describing the bride with elegant language and telling readers that "the bride's mother wore a baby blue satin brocaded dress with black accessories."

Positive acknowledgment of Georgia Gilmore's activism, however, does not come until November 1980.

> Gilmore and so many Black women before and after her have demonstrated the courage, will, and sense necessary to effect great change.

THINKING OF 1955 and 1956 and Gilmore's involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, I'm fascinated by how her acts of civil disobedience shaped her life, as she embraced the power and responsibility she earned.

Before 1955, Gilmore, like most working-class Black women, had sometimes endured the mistreatment of drivers on the city's buses, because when you're Black, and poor, and a woman, you do what you must to survive. For Gilmore to resist and to triumph must have felt thrilling.

"It was just the idea that you could make the white man suffer. And let the white man realize that you could get along in the world without him," Gilmore said in a 1979 interview about her participation in the boycott.

Black women have long maintained the highest rate of labor participation among all women in the United States. But when the bus boycott began, Montgomery's working Black women were unaware of the power they possessed *en masse*. They were treated as members of the permanent underclass. They washed for whites, cooked, cleaned their houses, and cared for their children. They kept the municipality and its economy churning. Today, we would call these Black women essential workers.

"They was the one that really and truly kept the bus running. And after the maids and the cooks stopped riding the bus, well the bus didn't have any need to run," Gilmore said.

In a 1986 interview for *Eyes on the Prize*, a documentary series that chronicled the civil rights movement, Gilmore said that before the boycott she had grown dependent on the system. By walking or carpooling, she realized that she could do just fine without the bus. Working for herself, she proved she could do without a white employer, too. White Montgomery, on the other hand, couldn't survive without her.

"Before the bus boycott, I couldn't drive. But after the bus boycott began, I was able to drive. And then I was able to save enough money to get a car. And then I was really a big shot. Because I felt like that I had come up in the world being able to drive and say, 'Well, I own the car,'" Gilmore said.

The movement had granted her agency. The movement had empowered her.

In 1958, two years after the boycott ended, Gilmore was back in court. After her son Mark was beaten and arrested by two white police officers for crossing a segregated park, she challenged the law that gave them license. In 1959, Montgomery's ordinance barring Black residents from public recreational facilities was ruled unconstitutional.

IT'S HARD TO think of a contemporary who matches Gilmore's force and character, but many Black women continue to fight for and champion their communities. Women like Lunsford, the Tuskegee-based scholar who advocates for racial equity in food systems; farmer and food sovereignty activist Leah Penniman, chef and writer Adrian Lipscombe, land justice advocate and organizer Dara Cooper, and food historian Zella Palmer, to name just a few.

We must commit to listening to, amplifying, and supporting Black female leadership. Gilmore and so many Black women before and after her have demonstrated the courage, will, and sense necessary to effect great change.

Georgia Gilmore was an activist and a domestic worker. A mother, protector, a midwife, and widow. She was a cook, a witness, a restaurateur, a hustler, a joker, a fed-up citizen. A singer, an appellant, a wisecracker, a democratic purist, a civil rights hero, and a regular person.

She was a hardworking Black woman worthy of respect.

She was not a mule.

Know her. Celebrate her. Embody her legacy.

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*Safiya Charles is a race and ethnicity reporter in Montgomery, Alabama. This piece is published in collaboration with the* Montgomery Advertiser.

Mickey Welsh/Montgomery Advertiser

# HOW SUR-MEX TOOK ROOT

## Notes from a road trip in 2040

BY JOSÉ R. RALAT

Scott Balmer/Adobe Stock

MY SON, DIEGO, WANTS CURRY-DUSTED CHURROS. HE'S VISITING HIS mama and me from Japan, where he spent nearly the last decade building and test-driving concept cars. The lifelong gearhead had a self-driving car delivered to his old man, an epileptic since childhood, so that I could finally experience a facsimile of life behind the wheel. He's allowed me in the seat for an excursion for empanadas filled with Mexican chorizo and Madras lentils, those churros, and a couple of Indo-Mex tacos. The latter are for me. Filled with paneer or stewed cauliflower, the style was exported from Houston to Dallas, where *la esposa* (the missus) and I live in the Mexican-American neighborhood we've called home for thirty years. After traveling across Mexico and North America, writing about Mexican food with a focus on tacos, I plan to die here, I tell my son. "Not so fast," says the kid, now thirty-two. "You've got driving to do first."

I have trouble turning down writing assignments, partially because I am filled with wonder at the development of Sur-Mex. This style of Mexican food indigenous to the Southern United States incrementally took hold in the early 2000s and has remade Southern cuisine, at first through the interplay of ingredients from the world's great corn cultures: Mexico and the American South. During the 2010s and 2020s, Sur-Mex incorporated elements from other Southern populations, some of them immigrants from Asia, some African American, others Cajun. Sur-Mex is as varied as barbecue in the South. Don't worry, grits are still available. These days, you're more likely to find them in a burrito than on a country breakfast platter.

Combo plates, which my family dug into regularly in neighborhood Mexican restaurants, are a fading memory in 2040. Ordered by number or named after a restaurant family member, they often included an orange cheese–draped, ground beef–stuffed enchilada, a crispy ground-beef taco, and a red pork tamal in a rectangular masa parcel. Maybe there was a tostada with a preshredded Mexican-ish cheese blend blast-melted onto its curled edge, capped with an ice-cream scoop of guacamole. These combinations dominated the Mexican restaurant menu for decades.

At the turn of the century, restaurant names evoked American perceptions of Mexicanness: Mi Casita, Jalisco del Sol, and anything referring to "Mexico City." Those ideas were reinforced by Mexican American or Mexican immigrant owners, who broke their backs to feed their own families. Many of the immigrants to the Southern United States came from the town of San José de la Paz in the Mexican state of Jalisco. In the twenty-first century that began to change, as Mexican American gastronomy adapted the landscape and population of the American South to create what we now know as Sur-Mex.

By the 2020s, cooks filled blue, red, white, yellow, purple, and green corn tortillas with the homestyle stews and braises that characterize Southern and Mexican cooking, including meatballs in chipotle salsa. The array of colors presaged the ethnic diversification of Sur-Mex. Today, in 2040, Sur-Mex entrepreneurs have taken over Tex-Mex-leaning restaurants and rolled out flashy food trucks with LED signage aplenty. Diego and I pass at least three on the way to our destination. They serve smoked oxtail tacos with potlikker salsas, and those addictive curry powder–dusted churros.

In 2040 Sur-Mex blooms. But how did we get here? Where and how was

Sur-Mex brought to seed? Where did it root and who nurtured it? And how did it spread and branch? Like most changes in the South, Sur-Mex took a long, messy path, a knotted braid of time travel—to finding a welcoming home. It took nearly fifty years to find its place.

Diego, back in the car after grabbing our food, raises his white paper bag, grease spots blooming, removes one of the fried churros, sparkling with what Americans have generically termed "curry powder" and mixed with sugar. He produces a cup of creamy jalapeño salsa that he snuck out of the fridge. D plunges a churro into the shallow cup and grins the smile of unfettered joy. "It's good to be home, Papi," he says. Powder and crumbs tumble from his chin onto his shirt, then his lap, and finally the passenger seat of the self-driving car. I grumble and smile. I tell my son I love him and then drop my voice. "You're cleaning that up when we get home."

Sur-Mex entered the public square with the founding of Taqueria del Sol. The tradition was sustained by El Mero Taco in Memphis, and EaDeaux's Cajun Cocina and the Twisted Turban, both in Houston in the 2010s and 2020s. They began an earnest effort of codification. The trajectory wasn't linear. It wasn't just tacos of fried chicken or albondigas en chipotle with braised collard greens, made by Mexican immigrants, Chicanos, and their white business partners. Sur-Mex's leap to fully realized category began when it split into a regional family tree reflective of the South's diverse ethnic and racial populations.

Sur-Mex's leap to fully realized category began when it split into a regional family tree reflective of the South's diverse ethnic and racial populations.

An Atlanta-based chain with outposts in Georgia and Nashville, Taqueria del Sol opened its first restaurant in 2000 with executive chef and co-owner Eddie Hernandez in the kitchen. With partner Mike Klank, Eddie laid the framework for Sur-Mex. I outlined that development in my book, *American Tacos: A History and Guide*, the first national survey of regional tacos in the United States. Shortly after the book was published in 2020, Diego's best friend asked me a lot of questions about the book. We talked about structure and point of view, and we talked about our favorite tacos. My son has yet to read the book. If he has, he won't admit to it. As I much as I think about tacos, he ponders cars.

Jacob Dries, a native of Memphis, and his wife Clarissa Dries, a native of Oaxaca, founded El Mero Taco in Memphis in 2016. They began serving buttermilk-marinated fried chicken tacos with a blanket of queso blanco on locally produced corn tortillas. For the first six to eight months, while refurbishing a taco truck, El Mero Taco operated as a pop-up. In 2019, it moved into a brick-and-mortar space in the Memphis suburb of Cordova. After a brief stint as a take-out operation during the pandemic years of the early 2020s, El Mero grew into a small chain. The Dries flirted with franchising, but instead developed a handful of outposts in Nashville, Hot Springs, and Atlanta. Delivery evolved from third-party apps to self-driving pods the size of scooters. Customers could access menus and place orders via the earpieces that replaced smartphones in the 2030s. Now Jacob and Clarissa operate a small street stand with a short menu of Sur-Mex tacos made from locally sourced ingredients. Customers sitting at one of the five stools or standing on the sidewalk can order a single taco or sample the whole menu in the style of a chef's tasting.

A charred carrot taco on a blue corn tortilla

Jason Morris, courtesy Crujiente Tacos

In Houston, where taco trucks have long been the primary method by which residents got tacos, Cajun Tex-Mex is commonly fetched from food trucks that advertise TACEAUXS. The first was likely EaDeaux's Cajun Cocina taco truck, which co-owner Jason Harry, a native of Acadiana Parish, Louisiana, established as a link between the two neighborhoods to which his mobile food rig sells: the predominately African American Third Ward and the predominately Mexican American Second Ward. Houston is home to the Original Ninfa's on Navigation, the restaurant that popularized fajitas in the 1970s. "But there's also a great tradition of Cajun food." Harry says. "Why not blend the two," he told me back in 2018.

Today, public-school lunch menus list crawfish tacos during the spring crawfish season, crammed with corn kernels and potatoes in commodity tortillas. Boudin tacos, nachos, burritos, quesadillas, and enchiladas are everywhere.

Twisted Turban, focused on Indo-Mex—the integration of Subcontinental Indian and Mexican foods—began in Houston in 2020. "Whether you're Chinese, Indian, from Pakistan, or wherever, when you live in a place with such a strong Mexican or Tex-Mex presence, you're going to gravitate toward that," said Umair Alem, the owner of Twisted Turban. Alem, born to Indian parents in

The fried chicken taco at El Mero Taco in Cordova, TN

Jonatan Chi, courtesy Clarissa and Jacob Dries, El Mero Taco

about how Latino people changed everything here for the better.

The Hispanic population of the United States has only continued to increase. So have Asian and West Indian populations, creating an abundance of tacos that speak to the provenance of the cooks and the places they are made. Sur-Mex has become a grand tree under which many people bask.

Pakistan, moved to Texas from New Jersey. Foods folded into tortillas and other flatbreads have been wildly popular in the South since the 1990s. Twisted Turban and other Indo-Mex joints use buttery, flaky paratha. Small chainlets, many with drive-throughs and snaking late-night lines, now dot the South. A Mexican spin on Viet-Cajun serves crawfish cocktails and shrimp garnished with crumbled chorizo. All celebrate Taceaux Tuesday. Population proximity alongside the interplay of ingredients created this original American taco, Sur-Mex.

I'm running this history through my head as the car breaks at a red light. "The car actually stopped at the red light," I chuckle in wonder. D mumbles, his mouth still full. I wrap my right arm around his neck and gently kiss the top of his head. Dyed an effervescent blue, his hair looks just like it did when he first dyed it at age eleven. *How has this kid not changed?* I think. And I think, too,

"You started getting people doing Southern mixed with Indian or jerk," said Oscar Diaz, executive chef of José and Sons in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the 2020s, when asked to look to the future of Sur-Mex. "They're doing it with smoke the way we smoke here in the South."

Jacob Dries of El Mero talks about cooking as a form of cultural exchange He mentions a Cajun catfish taco with a smoked habanero aioli. Then he muses at the possibilities. "Maybe you're from Thailand and you can do duck in a red Thai curry or—even better—a smoked duck with yellow mole and then put that in a tortilla," says Jacob Dries. "You're going to see some funky blends come in with different cultures crossing into the taco."

This is us now. This is Diego now. Even as we arrive home and both of us forget about the mess of food he's left in the seat. This is you and you and us. So much us. As Diaz tells me, "We were just getting started back then."

*José R. Ralat is the taco editor of* Texas Monthly *and the author of* American Tacos: A History and Guide *(University of Texas Press). He's written* for Dallas Observer*,* Imbibe*,* Vice Munchies*,* D Magazine*,* Eater*, and other media outlets. His article about the disappearing Kansas City–style taco appeared in* The Best American Food Writing 2020.



# A LETTER TO MY UNBORN SON

## Passing down bread, butter, and stories

BY CALEB JOHNSON

DEAR SON,

I've never been a picky eater, but, like many kids, I didn't care for the food served in the cafeteria at my elementary school. When I was six years old, your grandmother began packing a lunch for me every day. She has always indulged my appetites. Even now she will drop everything to fix a special meal on request.

That year, first grade at Farmstead Elementary, my teacher Ms. Miller sat with us during lunch. This made an impression on me. Many of my classmates got free lunch, and Ms. Miller often shared her food with them. She always asked us lunch-bringers what we had to eat. No one had ever expected me to consider the food I put in my body. Your grandfather was a coal miner. He and your grandmother, who quit an hourly job at a downtown bank to raise me, concerned themselves with how to feed their family; less so with what we ate. Shopping for groceries involved calculations, compromises, clipping coupons. There's power in an adult showing interest in a child's thoughts. I likely wouldn't be writing this letter to you—writing anything at all—without Ms. Miller's early encouragement, nor would my interest in food be quite the same if I hadn't sat across the lunch table and observed the unmistakable pleasure she took in buttering a hunk of bread.

Before that day, it never crossed my young mind what other people ate. Something about the way Ms. Miller buttered her bread struck me as sophisticated and foreign. My deli meat, crackers, and cheese seemed boring in comparison. I felt an urge to understand why, to try something new. That afternoon I described Ms. Miller's lunch to your grandmother and asked if I could have the same. Credit your grandmother for

recognizing my curiosity and encouraging it. One fall day, she picked up a huge French-style loaf from the only bakery within forty miles of Jasper, Alabama. It was inside the Walmart Supercenter. The next day, she packed me a hunk along with a Tupperware containing a generous helping of Country Crock. For years, I thought this vegetable-oil-based spread was actual butter made from cow's milk because that's what we called it at home—butter. There was also a Ziploc filled with green grapes.

I'd never been so excited, so proud to get to the cafeteria and open my lunch box. Your mother now laughs at this image of me—a chubby, shy boy in rural Alabama—tearing apart that bread and smearing on margarine. Between bites I popped a green grape into my mouth and smiled at Ms. Miller as though we shared a miraculous secret. And we did. Eating, I began to understand for myself, can be a joyous act.

You will also eat for joy. Your mother and I believe doing so is essential to living well. We show our love through cooking for and with each other. As soon as you can stand on a chair, you will help in the kitchen. Eventually, you will wash mushrooms, peel potatoes, slice onions, season lamb. You will spoon dumplings, grate beets, stem greens. For dessert, we will bake blackberry cobblers and your mother's pavlova. We will plant a garden, knowing our small actions ripple far beyond our home. In warm weather we will feast on a porch with our old dog, Hugo, panting until we share off our plates.

For generations your family has gathered at tables inside Soviet apartments and suburban Philadelphia homes and single-wide trailers across north Alabama. Over creamed corn and shashlik and casseroles and pelmeni, they have told stories and jokes, prayed and cried, celebrated holidays and births and deaths and marriages. In a few months, you will take your seat with us. One grandmother, I suspect, will feed you salty orange caviar on buttered white bread. Your other grandmother will feed you buttermilk biscuits drowned in chocolate gravy. Your grandfathers, who don't cook unless given no choice, will hold you in their arms. They are funny men who speak with strong accents. From them you will learn to tell a satisfying story.

Your family doesn't own expensive heirlooms, but we possess stories and understand how to pass them down. Lately I've been thinking the stories I'll tell you. Fathers especially want sons to know where they come from. I have embraced and resisted my origin in the rural South. I imagine you will do the same. This is important work, especially for someone like myself who writes about the region and the people and animals living here. The Swedish writer Patrik Svensson puts it this way: "…a person who doesn't know his origin will always be a little bit lost. If you don't know where you came from, you can't know where you're going. The journey away from home and back to it follow the same given route."

Your mother now laughs at this image of me—a chubby, shy boy in rural Alabama—tearing apart that bread and smearing on margarine.

My route home snakes past now-closed Farmstead Elementary, its cafeteria, the memory of Walmart bread smeared with Country Crock. Your route will be knottier.

Illustrations by Marisa Seguin

You will be one of a small number on my side of the family born outside Alabama in more than 200 years. For at least a time, you will live in western North Carolina, a remote corner of the Appalachian South. You will walk mountains and swim cold, swift rivers. You will know the tastes of wild ramps and brook trout and sour apples and foraged mushrooms. You will hear turkeys talk to each other in morning fog, coyotes howl in pitch-black night. On your mother's side, you will join a first generation of American-born, Jewish cousins whose parents left an oppressive communist regime that no longer exists. City folks. They will take you to Uzbek restaurants and Russian grocery stores. You will speak two languages and experience many cuisines from a much younger age than either of your parents did.

You are born into a time of great uncertainty and change. Protests, disease, wildfires, floods. Humans have spent decades mistreating the planet and each other. Now, we are seeing the results of this behavior in our daily lives. Some days are terrifying. The way you eat will change along with everything else. I hope there will be grapes, butter, flour for fresh-baked bread. But I worry you will not know the taste of a raw, wild Gulf oyster. I worry coffee will be scarce by the time you reach an age where you start anticipating the next morning's cup when your head hits the pillow at night. I worry the delicate peaches of Chilton County, Alabama, will appear only in stories I tell you of summers past.

WHEN I WAS IN FIRST GRADE, WE rented a blue cinderblock house in Manchester, an unincorporated community halfway between both sets of my grandparents. Next to us lived three spinster sisters who fed me popsicles and ice cream, and helped your grandmother raise me while your grandfather worked long hours in a mine.

The coal industry no doubt escalated a climate crisis that will drastically impact your life, as well as the lives of those who come after you and I are gone. It may be hard to believe by the time you read this, but your grandfather wasn't thinking about what burning coal does to the planet. I've asked him. He told me he thought of his family each time he descended a thousand feet underground. Mining coal was how he kept us housed and fed. It was a well-paying job that provided health insurance for doctor's appointments in Birmingham, where sometimes we treated ourselves to shrimp cocktail at Red Lobster or fettucine alfredo at Olive Garden, which served all-you-can-eat breadsticks. An incredible luxury back then. At the end of a meal, your grandmother always asked for another basket. Then she discreetly wrapped the warm bread in napkins and hid it deep inside her purse to take home.

Because of your grandparents, and others, you will be privileged with a wide range of experiences and a broad base of knowledge, which means you will have choices. There are decisions we, as a family, must make and stick to going forward, especially when it comes to our relationship with food. Where an ingredient comes from, who grew it, who picked it, how it traveled to our plates, what it is, how its production adds greenhouse gases to a warming atmosphere. Your mother is more principled than I am. When she brings up the idea of no longer eating meat, a moral imperative to her, I wince. I want you to taste pulled pork, fried chicken, ribeye steak. This is a selfish desire, but so much about bringing a child into the world strikes me as selfish. However, to create anything—stories, meals, life—offers the kind of radical hope we need at the moment. So each morning I work on a novel about the existential distress caused by environmental change. In the afternoon your mother and I tend a small garden and, come evening, we eat homegrown tomatoes and cucumbers sprinkled with coarse salt. At night we place our hands on her stomach and wait for you to move. Each one of these acts feels miraculous and ephemerally sad.

Back in first grade, after I finished my work for the day, I often sat alone at a table and wrote stories for Ms. Miller. Sometimes she asked me to read one aloud for the class. I don't remember what any were about. Probably dogs and family. It's strange to stop and consider this letter, all the writing I do, as an extension of those first stories. Your mother and I now tell stories for a living. It gives us far more joy than wealth. That's alright for us. Sometimes we tell stories together. Some are rooted in truth, others stray from it. On certain days I wonder what my classmates thought of me at that table, and what you'll think about your father spending hours alone in a room, imagining people and places and problems in his head.

What I do know is folks have been smearing butter on bread for a long time. You will understand why when you're old enough to eat solid food. Your mother likes to sprinkle nutritional yeast on hers; I prefer a big dollop of blackberry jam. You will develop tastes of your own. As we wait for you to arrive, we imagine all you will enjoy, and look forward to the ways you will surprise us. We can't know for sure how that will look. The future remains unpredictable. This is the first of many things you will undoubtedly affirm for us. We can't wait to live, learn, and eat with you, alongside family and friends. Sharing bread and butter and the simple pleasures we discover and cherish together.

Love,
Your Papa

You will walk mountains and swim cold, swift rivers. You will know the tastes of wild ramps and brook trout and sour apples and foraged mushrooms.

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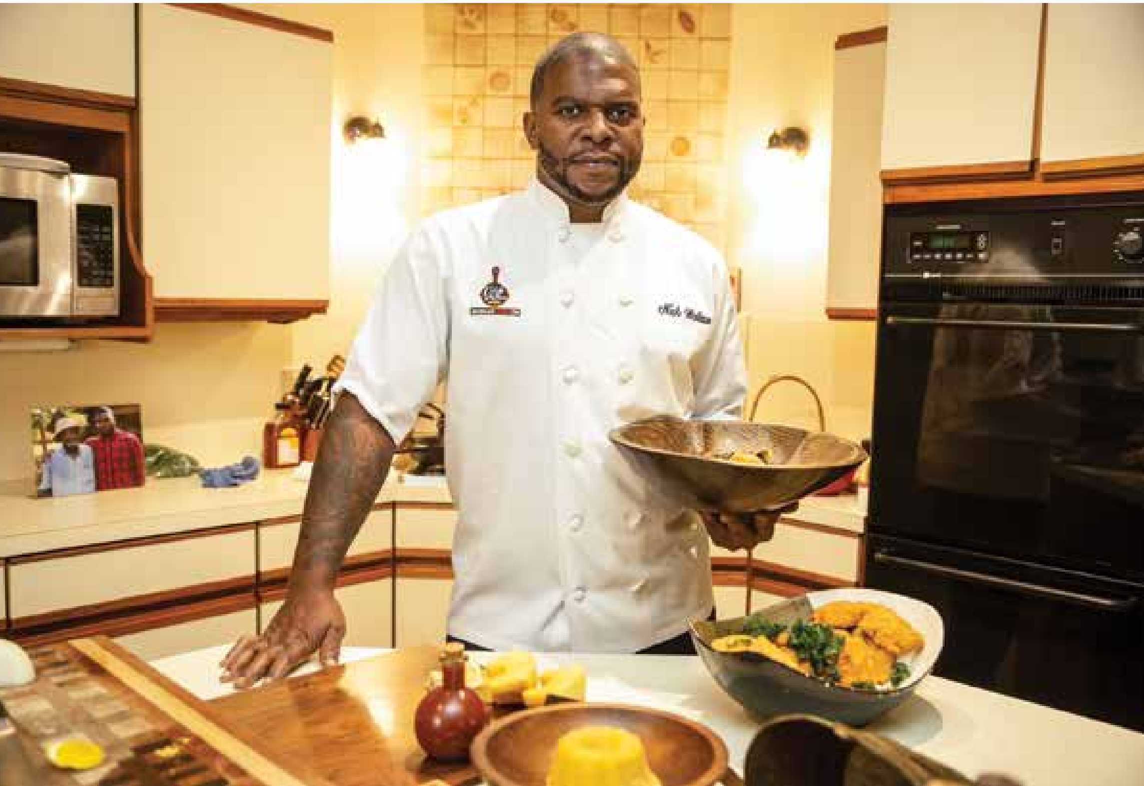
*Caleb Johnson is the author of the novel* Treeborne. *He teaches writing at Appalachian State University.*



WHEN WE GATHERED IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI, FOR OUR 2014 SUMMER Symposium, we asked chef Nick Wallace to cook a breakfast of catfish and grits. We envisioned a dish that was simple but not simplistic; a dish that showcased stone-ground grits and Mississippi farm-raised catfish. Wallace was game. And his breakfast, featuring Simmons Farm Raised Catfish, was a hit. In the years since, a number of SFA chefs have returned to that theme, including Bill Briand of Orange Beach, Alabama, in 2019. In the process, catfish and grits has become a signature SFA dish and a testament to the goodness to be coaxed forth by a thoughtful chef working with the best ingredients.

Make the onion preserves a day in advance and soak the grits overnight. The next day, cook the grits first—the risotto-style process will take about an hour—then fry the catfish. Serve, as Wallace does, with greens and cornbread.

Photos by Eric J. Shelton

# Nick Wallace's Fried Catfish and Grits with Summer Onion Preserves

*Serves 6*

**For the catfish:**

## INGREDIENTS

- **¾ cup yellow cornmeal**
- **½ cup all-purpose flour**
- **1 teaspoon garlic powder**
- **1 teaspoon black pepper**
- **1 teaspoon dried thyme**
- **1 teaspoon paprika**
- **1 teaspoon onion powder**
- **½ teaspoon cayenne pepper**
- **¼ teaspoon celery seed**
- **2 teaspoons kosher salt**
- **Peanut oil for frying (substitute canola oil if you prefer)**
- **6 Simmons Farm Raised Catfish Delacata filets (4 to 6 ounces each)**
- **1 cup whole milk**

## DIRECTIONS

**1.** Preheat oven to 200°F.

**2.** Combine cornmeal, flour, garlic powder, black pepper, thyme, paprika, onion powder, cayenne, celery seed, and salt in a large, shallow bowl or dish.

**3.** Pour enough peanut oil into a large, heavy frying pan (a cast-iron pan works best) to come ½ inch up the sides. Heat over medium-high heat until oil reaches 350°F. (A good test is to flick a little of the dry breading into the oil. If it sizzles at once, you're good to go.)

**4.** While oil is heating, place the catfish filets in a shallow pan or bowl. Pour in milk and let fish soak for 5 minutes. Set a wire rack inside a large rimmed baking sheet and place close to where you're frying.

**5.** Once the oil is hot, remove catfish filets from milk and dredge in flour mixture, shaking off excess. Working in 2 batches, carefully place filets in hot oil and fry until golden brown and cooked through, about 3 to 4 minutes per side.

**6.** Transfer cooked catfish to wire rack on baking sheet. Keep warm in oven until ready to serve.

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**For the creamy Pencil Cob grits:**

## INGREDIENTS

- **6 ounces (1 cup) coarse grits, such as Anson Mills colonial coarse Pencil Cob grits**
- **4 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- **Black pepper, to taste (approximately 1 teaspoon)**
- **Kosher salt, to taste**

## DIRECTIONS

**1.** Place the grits in a medium saucepan and cover them with 2 cups of water. (This will be the same saucepan and water you'll use for cooking.) Stir once. Allow the grits to settle for a full minute, tilt the pan, and use a slotted spoon to skim off and discard any hulls that have floated to the top. Cover and let the grits soak overnight at room temperature, just like you would if you were soaking beans. Alternatively, you can soak the grits first thing in the morning and they will be ready to cook for dinner that evening.

**2.** Set the saucepan over medium heat and bring the mixture to a simmer, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the

first starch starts to unfold, about 7 minutes. Turn the heat down to low. Heat 2 ½ cups of water in a small saucepan over low to medium heat and keep warm, but not boiling. Keep an eye on the grits throughout the cooking process. As the grits continue to cook and thicken, add warm water as needed, ½ cup at a time, stirring to incorporate. Cook until creamy and delicious-looking—yes, I said delicious-looking. Toward the end of cooking, add the butter 1 tablespoon at a time, stirring to incorporate. Taste and add pepper and salt to your liking.

**For the summer onion preserves:**

*Makes 6 half-pints (or 3 pints)*

INGREDIENTS

- **2 pounds sweet onions, such as Vidalia**
- **1 cup apple juice**
- **1 cup apple cider vinegar**
- **2 teaspoons fresh minced garlic**
- **1 teaspoon salt**
- **1 teaspoon black pepper**
- **¼ teaspoon ground mustard**
- **1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes**
- **3 tablespoons pectin (look for one with no added sugar)**
- **½ teaspoon melted butter**
- **1 cup honey**
- **⅓ cup brown sugar**

DIRECTIONS

*These instructions are intended for canning the preserves. If you don't have a water bath canner or don't want to complete the canning process, you can store the cooked and cooled preserves in any sealed containers in the refrigerator. They will keep for about a week. This recipe will make more than you need, so you might want to share with friends. Try the leftovers in a BLT, a grilled cheese, or with pork tenderloin.*

**1.** Prepare water bath canner and 6 half-pint jars and lids, keeping warm until needed.

**2.** Cut ends off onions and peel; slice in half and cut each in half again lengthwise. Turn halves and cut one more time. You should have 6 cups of onion slices.

**3.** Add onions, apple juice, vinegar, garlic, salt, pepper, mustard, and red pepper flakes to an 8-quart pot. Gradually stir in pectin, then add butter. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly.

**4.** Add honey and sugar; return to a full boil and let boil for 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove from heat.

**5.** Ladle hot preserves into prepared half-pint jars one at a time, leaving ¼ inch of space from the top. Wipe rims, attach lids, and place in canner.

**6.** Place lid on canner and bring to a gentle, steady boil—it will take 10 minutes. Turn off heat and let jars cool for 10 minutes. Using tongs, carefully remove them from the canner. Now, find the jars a happy place and let them sit at room temperature for one entire day. The next day, check to make sure no lids are open or looking weird. If they are all intact, you will enjoy some of the best preserves ever.

To serve, spoon grits onto each plate. Top with a dollop of onion preserves and place a fried catfish filet on the side.

ANSON MILLS

Bita Honarvar

VIRGINIA WILLIS, THE GEORGIA-born and French-educated chef and author, was one of the superstars of our 2013 Fall Symposium, focused on "Women at Work." She earned that status with these ridiculously delicious muffins, inspired by the casserole cooking of working class Southerners and the (then) new availability of better grinds of grits.

SFA and Anson Mills, the company that brought those better grinds to market, grew up together. At Fall Symposium tables. And in the kitchens of collaborating chefs like Willis. As we focus on the future, SFA looks back, proud of what we've accomplished together and forever hungry for more.

## Virginia Willis' Grits Casserole "Muffins"

*Makes 8 muffins*

INGREDIENTS

- **2 cups water**
- **2 cups whole milk**
- **1 cup Anson Mills coarse white or yellow grits**
- **Salt and black pepper, to taste**
- **16 ounces country-style breakfast sausage**
- **2 slices white bread or challah, cubed**
- **1½ cups grated sharp cheddar cheese (about 6 ounces)**
- **2 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- **4 large eggs, lightly beaten**
- **¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste**
- **1 jalapeño, seeded and finely chopped**
- **2 green onions, white and green parts, chopped**

DIRECTIONS

Combine water and milk in a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Stir in grits and return to a boil. Season with salt and pepper. Decrease heat to low and simmer until creamy and thick, 45 to 60 minutes. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a jumbo muffin tin with cups. Set aside.

While the grits cook, brown the sausage in a skillet until cooked through, about 8 to 10 minutes, breaking up the meat with the edge of your spoon.

Remove the grits from the heat. Add the cheese and 2 tablespoons butter. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper and stir to combine. Add the eggs, cayenne, jalapeño, and green onions and stir until well incorporated.

Scoop a heaping ½ cup of the mixture into each prepared cup. Top each cup with 2 tablespoons of sausage and 2 tablespoons of bread cubes. Cover with foil and bake until bubbly and golden brown, about 25 minutes, removing the foil the last 10 minutes of baking. Remove to a rack to cool slightly before serving.

LAST COURSE

# The Way We Were

SFA LOVES A CONTAINER LUNCH. Bentos, brown bags, shoeboxes, and tiffins: Over the last two decades, we've used all to get Symposia meals onto tables efficiently and gracefully. Last year, Maneet Chauhan served her Fall Symposium lunch in tiffins. In this to-go moment, she looks prescient.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
*Brandall Laughlin*

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*Gravy* is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

The SFA documents, studies, and explores the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. Our work sets a welcome table where all may consider our history and our future in a spirit of respect and reconciliation.

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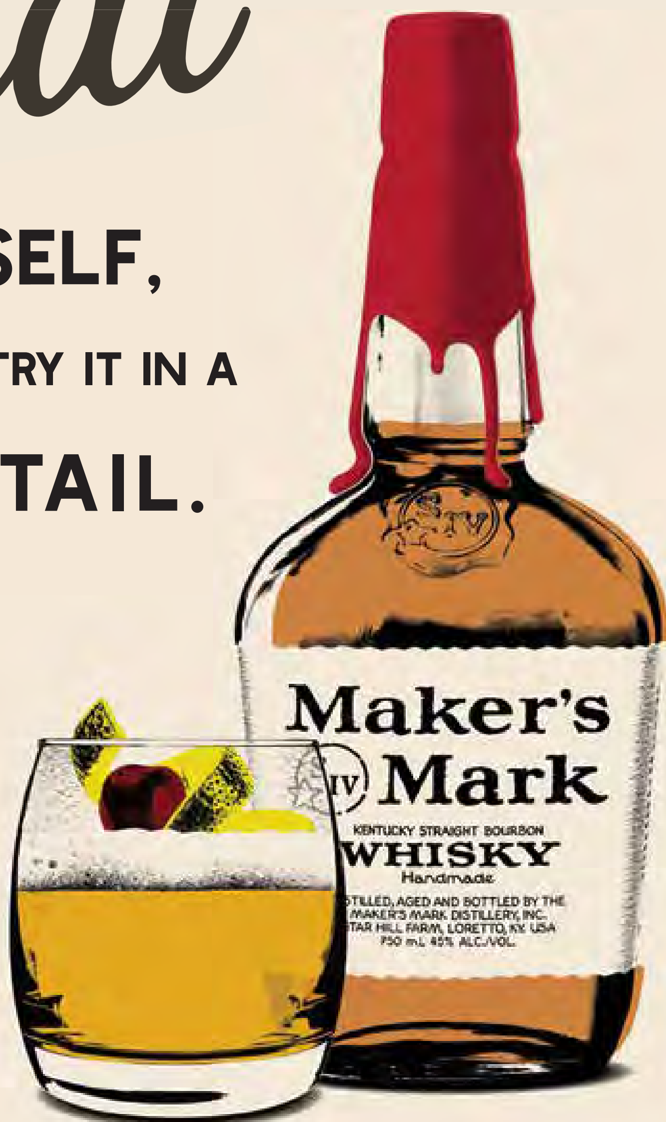
IF YOU THINK IT'S

# *Neat*

BY ITSELF,

YOU SHOULD TRY IT IN A

COCKTAIL.




WE MAKE OUR BOURBON CAREFULLY. PLEASE ENJOY IT THAT WAY.

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