GRAVY

$7 • FALL 2015 • A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

TASTING LAOS IN THE NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAINS
PAGE 39

FEAR THE TICK
PAGE 33

GOODNIGHT, MRS. CALABASH
PAGE 26

CAROLINA CORNUCOPIA

ISSUE #57
FALL 2015

Tommy Yon's boiled peanuts Bryson City, North Carolina

Rush Jagoe

GRAVY

THE SFA SERVES YOU...

FEATURES

18
HAM TO HAM COMBAT
Emily Wallace

26
GOODNIGHT, MRS. CALABASH
Besha Rodell

33
FEAR THE TICK
Chris Fowler

39
TASTING LAOS IN THE NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAINS
Katy Clune

Cover photo by
RINNE ALLEN

2 FIRST HELPINGS

4 ELEGY
Sandra Beasley

6 POP
Sandra Beasley

8 NOT A DROP TO DRINK
Gustavo Arellano

12 GREASE BALLS OF SOUTHEAST TEXAS
Daniel Vaughn

15 POP CULTURE
Emily Hilliard

46 WHERE THERE'S SMOKE
Kevin Pang

50 CRESCENT CITY BRUNCH
Rien Fertel

56 CONJURING FLAVORS FROM MUSTY PAGES
Hanna Raskin

60 THANKS A MINT
Sheri Castle

62 THE ART OF FERMENTATION
Phil Blank and April McGreger

GRAVY #57 FALL 2015

First Helpings

TAR HEEL TERROIR

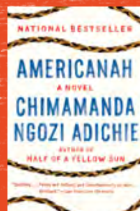
Here at the SFA, we try our best to cover the whole of the U.S. South. Our region begins on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay and ends about midway across the massive expanse of Texas. Despite our efforts at geographic distribution, some places just seem to throw a lot of stories our way. If you know us well, you probably know that I'm referring to Louisiana. And Atlanta. And, in this issue, North Carolina. By the middle of this year, I'd heard so many good ideas for North Carolina stories that I decided to publish them all at once. They make up about half of this issue of *Gravy*, and I think there's something in there for everyone, from the marshes (and fried seafood) of Calabash to the mountains of Boone—where a native daughter lets us in on a bit of local trivia.

Full disclosure: I grew up in the Tar Heel State, where most of my family still lives. And I received my master's in folklore from UNC-Chapel Hill, my father's favorite school to cheer *against*. (Sorry, Dad. Maybe one day the Wake Forest Deacs will return to the glory of the Tim Duncan era.) So it's especially fun for me to help tell these stories. But after this issue, I might have to put North Carolina on the back burner for a while so that *Gravy* can probe the far corners of our region. If you've got tips, please send them my way: **saracamp@southernfoodways.org.**—*Sara Camp Milam*

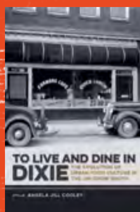
Tip Number 57 Subscribe to our Gravy podcast on iTunes.

GRAVY BOOK CLUB

SFA staffers love to read. In this space, we share our favorites with you. I'll go first—look for recs from the rest of our team in future issues.—SCM



Favorite novel I've read this year—recommended by four SFA members.



We were proud to publish the work of our first postdoctoral fellow, Angela Jill Cooley.

I draw my own line at pig-uterus tacos—how about you?

Earlier this year, *Gravy* decided to excise the term "Capital of the World" from our vocabulary. Our reasoning: It's kind of a silly term, virtually always self-appointed and devoid of meaning outside of tourism literature. And how do you legitimize such a claim? With a festival? A billboard on the outskirts of town? A commemorative refrigerator magnet?

Our bold editorial decision was entirely internal. We didn't put it to paper, or communicate it to contributors, or even really expect an opportunity to enforce it. We were wrong.

The Capital of the World reared its head twice in this issue: in Emily Wallace's tale of two ham-loving Smithfields, and in Besha Rodell's appreciation of Calabash, North Carolina, and its famous fried seafood. And in both cases, it turned out to matter—to those places and their people, and therefore to the story. So, after that big talk, we let it slide.

Maybe we'll start reviewing "Capital of the World" usage on a case-by-case basis. Until then, here are some of the region's most colorful capitals, crowd-sourced from the SFA's Twitter and Facebook followers. Do you agree with these designations?

1. **Vardaman, Mississippi:** *Sweet Potato Capital of the World*
2. **Athens, Texas:** *Black-Eyed Pea Capital of the World*
3. **Salley, South Carolina:** *Chitlin' Capital of the World*
4. **Ponchatoula, Louisiana:** *Strawberry Capital of the World*
5. **Cordele, Georgia:** *Watermelon Capital of the World*

NOTE: *We intentionally stayed out of the barbecue capital debate; we don't think it would be wise to choose sides there.*

Featured Contributor
GUSTAVO ARELLANO

MEET GUSTAVO ARELLANO, *Gravy*'s first columnist. You may recognize him from previous issues of *Gravy*, or perhaps from the 2012 SFA Symposium on barbecue, where he talked about barbacoa and cultural exchange between Mexico and the U.S. South. Gustavo is the editor of *OC Weekly* in Southern California, the author of *Taco USA*, and the titular Mexican of the syndicated column "¡Ask a Mexican!" His *Gravy* column, which begins in this issue, is "Good Ol' Chico." (If you don't speak Spanish, that's Gustavo's cheeky reimagining of the Good Ol' Boy trope.)

GRAVY: You've spent most of your life in Orange County, California. Why are you so interested in the South?

GUSTAVO ARELLANO: I'm fascinated by the South because it reminds me so much of my Mexican upbringing: not just the unique food, music, booze, and beautiful landscape and ladies, but how it lives up to Faulkner's adage about the past not even being past. In addition, both Southerners and Mexicans must bear the brunt of stereotypes and misunderstandings hurled at us by the rest of the country. We're brothers from another madre, and they're just jealous.

G: What's your favorite Southern food that you can't get in Orange County?

GA: Pimento cheese. OC's still too obsessed with Parmesan and goat cheese to get the real cheese religion!

ELEGY

FOR DEAN

by Sandra Beasley

The gift
was hasty—
my lover's name
erased, mine
written in,
that Southern
hospitality.

The gift
was fig jam,
preserved
from a local tree.

No. The gift
was the embrace,
the *you*
are kin of it.

We gathered at
your house—
casket in parlor,
Four Roses
on the table.
Half a country
away, the figs
wept their sugar.

Illustrations by Natalie K. Nelson

POP

by Sandra Beasley

We call an unpuffed kernel
the *old maid*

but really, she's just a lady
who read the fine print.

Sometimes it's enough—
pan, oil, flame.

Sometimes you must
hold the water within you.

Sandra Beasley's latest collection of poetry is Count the Waves*, published by W.W. Norton. Illustrations by Natalie K. Nelson.*

Illustrations by Natalie K. Nelson

NOT A DROP TO DRINK

THOUGHTS ON THE CALIFORNIA DROUGHT

by Gustavo Arellano

Education Images/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

EVERY TIME I DRIVE THROUGH THE SOUTH, behind the wheel of an obnoxiously large GMC Yukon, someone inevitably determines that I'm from California, and my home state becomes a point of discussion. A young man in Pall Mall, Tennessee, who proudly told my wife and me that he had never left the Tennessee foothills, wanted to know if we had ever visited Hollywood. A tour guide at Sun Studios in Memphis used to play in a rockabilly band in Fullerton, a city in my Orange County. A gas station clerk in Russellville, Arkansas, told me her plan was to move to San Francisco, where a cousin had married a tech millionaire, and find one for herself.

Back in 2008, a silver-haired and pasty-skinned Southern gentleman—responding to all my questions with a drawled "No, sir" and "Yes, sir"—drove me to Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport in South Carolina. When he discovered I was headed back home, he went on a homophobic rant because California had just declared gay marriage legal. All I could do as he growled that gays "knew their place" in his day was grit my teeth and grin, given it was 4:30 in the morning and he was driving me through some lonely-ass woods.

It's all good—California will always fascinate the rest of the country. But last year, a new topic was on the minds of Southerners: my state's epic drought. Friends jokingly asked if we were collecting bathwater (not yet at that point). A Mexican immigrant I interviewed for an SFA oral history project, who had moved to Louisville from Los Angeles, said he was glad his family didn't live there anymore. In Cave City, Kentucky, the clerk at a Comfort Inn asked whether our lack of rain was as apocalyptic as the media made it out to be. "Worse," I admitted, before telling her I loved the Bluegrass State for its ever-verdant landscape.

"Well," she responded, "we're in the fifth year of *our* drought."

Oh.

That was last year. In 2015, California's dry spell has become a near-daily topic in the national news. I write this piece from the Ozarks, on the way to the 127 Yard Sale that serves as an annual vacation for my wife and me. We're carrying the drought with us. Already, we've told befuddled waiters that we'll share one glass of water. At every hotel stop, we turn off the shower while we lather and scrub—it's now a habit. I'm texting my brother daily, reminding him to water my garden not with the hose but with collected bathwater. (Yes, we're there.) Meteorologists say a phenomenon known as El Niño will deliver epic storms at the end of this year that will save us all. They said that last year, too, and our winter was about as desiccated as burnt carne asada.

It's scary times for us out west. And I blame you, Southerners, for taking us to the edge of ruin.

AFTER ALL, James G. Boswell II, a native of Greensboro, Georgia, essentially created modern-day California agribusiness in the 1950s. His family's cotton-empire clout dammed rivers, dried up lakes, and set us on the parched path we're on today. And the first person to commercially grow oranges and grapes in Southern California was a Kentuckian: the awesomely named William Wolfskill. Back in the 1830s, this green thumb convinced other Americans to transform what was then mostly cattle-grazing pastureland into tens of thousands of acres of thirsty citrus and avocado groves. Thanks for nothing, Wolfy!

FORGIVE ME FOR STEREOTYPING SOUTHERNERS, BUT ONE OF THE MAIN ATTRIBUTES I'D ARGUE DEFINES *USTEDES* IS A KNACK FOR PREPARING FOR HARD TIMES.

In reality, I blame all U.S. food consumers—which is to say, all of us. Our insatiable desire for California's luscious, delicious produce has tapped the state. Eighty percent of California's water used by humans goes to agriculture. That massive number won't change until the rest of the country decides to start weaning itself off our perfect climate, endless pool of cheap labor, and fields that can grow virtually anything. Too bad Vanderbilt will win an SEC football title before *that* happens.

California leads the nation in producing more than seventy crops. Many are the ones you'd expect: olives, raisins, bell peppers. And the state is virtually the sole domestic producer of figs, pistachios, walnuts, and almonds.

This is where the South comes back in: "Like the South, California typically exports about half its crop each year," reports the The United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service. Between the two of us, we serve as an international salad bowl and fruit basket. While farming brings billions of dollars to our respective regions, it's not a business model that's sustainable. It's time we tell the rest of the country to feed itself, and save our precious water resources.

The demand for California produce has reached absurd proportions. A couple of years back, I noticed California peaches at a Nashville Kroger. Never mind that just days earlier, my wife and I had feasted on the fruit from a roadside farm in northern Alabama. When I asked the clerk why they sold peaches from the West Coast, she had a telling answer. "California fruit is just better," she said. "And cheaper, too."

We bought a half-dozen. Alabama's peaches were juicy, fragrant treasures. California's? Stale.

THE U.S. DROUGHT Monitor Map run by the National Drought Mitigation Center (NDMC) shows that, as of August 2015, abnormally dry conditions are afflicting almost all of South Carolina as well as swaths of North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida. The South can't yet claim the ominous crimson and red shades that color California on the NDMC map, but it's getting there.

In your coming troubles, I see hope for the Golden State. Because Californians must all become Southerners now in order to save us from ourselves.

Forgive me for stereotyping Southerners, but one of the main attributes I'd argue defines *ustedes* is a knack for preparing for hard times. I'd say the same for Mexicans, which is why I think I have such an affinity for y'all. In Southern California, the land of eternal sunshine, we've been spoiled for more than 150 years on the idea that anything is not only possible, but attainable—damn the future. Build a megalopolis in the desert? Sure: We stole water from the Colorado River and built a mighty aqueduct that sucked a lake dry hundreds of miles away. That assuredness is what left us so—pardon the pun—high and dry. And thirsty.

Though rivers crisscross the South and it rains abundantly, I spot rain-collecting barrels on the sides of homes. In your region, canning culture is gospel. In California, backyard fruit rots on the ground, after we tire of eating and giving away the bumper crop. The South saves and preserves while California spends and throws away.

Will we follow your example? Possibly. California officials announced in August that the state had saved more water in July than what they had projected. Homeowners are ripping out their lawns in record numbers and planting drought-tolerant vegetation instead. Hopefully, next time I'm in the South, people will ask me about something other than our desertification. Like breakfast burritos, the next Mexican-food trend coming to conquer the South. Mark my words…or better yet, read my next column!

Head to **southernfoodways.org** *to explore Gustavo's first oral history project for the SFA: Kentucky's Mexican restaurants.*

KENTUCKY'S MEXICAN RESTAURANTS

BLUEGRASS AND BURRITOS

In these oral histories, you'll meet chefs and restaurateurs such as Laura Patricia Ramírez of Taquería y Tortillería Ramírez in Lexington, pictured here. Ramírez's specialties include chicharrones (pork skins) and burritos.

Gustavo Arellano

Daniel Vaughn

GREASE BALLS OF SOUTHEAST TEXAS

THE NOT-SO-FAMOUS BEEF LINKS OF PATILLO'S BAR-B-Q

by Daniel Vaughn

PATILLO'S BAR-B-Q IN BEAUMONT, TEXAS, is the fourth-oldest barbecue joint in the state. You've probably never heard of it. Founder Jack Pat(t)illo is believed to be a direct descendant of one of the earliest Texas settlers, George Alexander Pattillo. The recipes they still use today came from a woman who traced her ancestry to the McFaddins, a powerful local family who amassed wealth from land and cattle. These family ties aren't simple, and the stories behind them don't figure into Patillo's marketing strategy.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Robert Patillo; A Patillo's beef link, or grease ball.*

Robert Patillo runs the restaurant now in a wooden structure his forebears built in 1950. He hand-stuffs the same spicy beef links that his great-grandfather Jack Pat(t)illo cooked when he opened the doors in 1912. Robert Patillo says that Jack married into the recipe by way of his second wife, Roxie, in 1907. (She made him drop one of the "t's" to become Patillo.) Five years later they opened a small restaurant together downtown, cooking with recipes from Roxie's mother. The thin, gravy-like barbecue sauce they still make was hers, says Robert. And "she developed the all-beef link, and that's the way it has always been made."

Texans revere their state's century-old barbecue joints. Visits to the central Texas stalwarts of Kreuz Market in Lockhart, Prause Meat Market in La Grange, or Southside Market in Elgin are prized check marks on a barbecue tourist list. So why don't you know about Patillo's?

The location in often-overlooked Beaumont doesn't help. If you told everyone in Austin that Beaumont was part of Louisiana, half of them would believe you. Beaumont's only claim to fame is Spindletop, an oil well that went dry in the 1930s.

Patillo's most famous menu item is an all-beef sausage link stuffed in beef casing and imbued with a heavy hit of garlic. Locals call them "grease balls," and the nickname likely repels some diners. I asked Robert Patillo, now sixty-seven, if being overlooked on barbecue best-of lists bothered him, given the long history of the place. "After I got to be a certain age, I don't want to have that stress on me," he said.

I could blame geography or beef fat for Patillo's relative anonymity, but I know it's neither. The Patillos were dismissed before they even started selling links. According to family lore, Jack Patillo was the son of George Alexander Pattillo and his black housekeeper. His name doesn't show up on the otherwise-heralded Pattillo family lineage. Roxie's mother, Martha McFaddin, was the half-black daughter of a housekeeper and a patriarch of the wealthy McFaddin clan. To distance herself from the family, she used the name Martha Mack.

Robert Patillo, with fair skin and wavy white hair, sat across a table from me. I was embarrassed to ask, but I wanted to know how he identified himself. "I'm black," he said. "Back in the time when I was born, there wasn't any mixed. You were black or white." As he talked, it hit me that Patillo's is the oldest African American–owned barbecue joint in the state. I realized the disservice I've done to Texas by not crowing enough about Patillo's history—or their beef links, which are unique to southeast Texas.

The sausages start with a beef casing instead of pork. It's tougher to chew, so most squeeze the contents out onto bread the way you might work a toothpaste tube or

Entries for Patillo's in the 1914 (l) and 1957 (r) Beaumont city directories

American National Ban
We Invite You to Visit Our Ba
BEAUMONT 1914
488 Patillo Jack (c), restr
cor Norvel-Wilder Hdw Co
Bowie intersects
(c), clothes

PATILLO'S BARBECUE STAND (Frank E Patillo) Barbecue for Parties, Table Service for White Folk, 720 Railroad av, Tel TErminal 2-2572

PATILLO'S JACK BARBECUE STAND (Jack F Patillo) Good Barbecued Meats, Chicken, Pork, Beef and Links, Catering to Parties and Picnics, Barbecue to Go and Dining Room Service, 2775 Washington blvd, Tel TErminal 3-3154

a link of boudin. Unlike the restrained salt-and-pepper seasonings of German- and Czech-style sausages in central Texas, these links hit you with garlic and leave you with the heat of black and red pepper and chili powder. And don't forget the fat. These aren't lean sausages. The bright red, molten "juice" that runs out when you crack one open gave grease balls their nickname.

There are easier ways to make it in the barbecue business than by hand-stuffing 500 links every other day. They grind the beef in-house. Robert oversees the quality control: "I even taste a spoonful of the raw meat after it's ground up and the seasoning is mixed in," he said. "I don't spit it out."

Patillo's Bar-B-Q has survived despite devastating hurricanes and moves all over town. By 1945, the business had expanded to a second location under Frank (Jack Jr.) Patillo, Robert's grandfather. His willing tutelage helped to spread the famous link to other establishments around Beaumont and eventually to Houston. It's likely that the Patillos created a tradition of sausage making that has survived for a century.

At *Texas Monthly*, we evaluate barbecue joints according to brisket. It's a common fallback position for writers and barbecue fans alike, a rating system anchored in the legendary, and mostly white-owned, joints of central Texas. If the brisket isn't any good, then the restaurant is only worthy of moderate praise. And if a barbecue joint doesn't have great brisket, it won't make our Top 50 lists.

But what if another menu item is a culinary treasure that goes back a hundred years? Until now, joints like Patillo's have not received the considerable attention that comes along with top rankings. I've come to realize that it's an outdated way of thinking. It's like judging a deli solely on its poor pastrami, even if it has the world's best corned beef sandwich, or requiring that Tom Brady also be good at basketball before we call him a great athlete.

Patillo's does not serve brisket. Chicken, ribs, and those all-beef links are the stars—and after that, if you still have room, the personal-sized pies are excellent. There's a chicken mounted to the roof, not a steer. Sliced beef, carved from shoulder clod, is a newer addition to the menu. The only brisket in the building ends up in the sausage.

Beaumont is a long way from central Texas, where sliced brisket is king. That shouldn't make Patillo's an afterthought. After all, they've been making spicy beef links a lot longer than brisket has been on anyone's menu in Texas. Those sausages—and their history—deserve our respect.

Daniel Vaughn is the barbecue editor for Texas Monthly *and the author of* The Prophets of Smoked Meat.

POP CULTURE

TRAVIS MILTON'S SOUTHERN SODA VINEGARS

by Emily Hilliard

Stephanie Breijo

Travis Milton's rainbow of fermentation

TRAVIS MILTON GREETS ME at the door of his Richmond, Virginia, house, bearded and burly in a plaid shirt, horn-rimmed glasses, and a "Virginia is for Lovers" ball cap. Peeking out from his rolled-up shirt sleeve is a tattoo of his great-grandfather's farm logo surrounded by vegetables. He offers me whiskey before I'm through the door, and I spy his collection of Star Wars and Ghostbusters action figures in the next room. As we cross the hall, he reverently points out his grandmother's last written recipe hanging in a small wooden frame among family photos and album covers—Rick James, Hank Williams, and Thin Lizzy.

In the living room, he's piled at least a dozen notebooks of varying sizes on the coffee table, their open pages revealing scrawled handwriting and sketches of kitchen layouts. I've heard about these notebooks before. When I first met Travis at Comfort, where he was executive chef, he told me that he keeps nineteen journals in various locations—restaurant kitchen, home kitchen, glove compartment, and nightstand. When ideas strike, he records them before they flit away.

SWEET ALCHEMY
Milton's classic soda arsenal

Nehi Orange
Columbus, GA

Dr. Pepper
Dublin, TX

Texas Sweet Peach
Dublin, TX

"Sunday is notebook-collating day," he explains, gesturing toward the stack.

On a long farm table in the kitchen—amid a bushel of peaches, bright heirloom tomatoes, and two giant cushaw squashes—sits a lineup of Ball jars filled with neon-hued liquids. The half-dozen jars look like something out of Willy Wonka's laboratory, had Willy Wonka gone country. The concoctions in these jars are the result of an idea Travis once scribbled in one of his notebooks: naturally fermented vinegars made from Southern sodas.

"I wanted to make pork barbecue with Cheerwine somehow, and I wanted it to be sour instead of sweet," Travis says. He thought that turning Cheerwine into vinegar would be the easiest way to achieve that flavor. "Growing up in Appalachia, I've always said there's two things you come out loving: black pepper and vinegar. It's just kind of in our palates. I love vinegar, I love pickled things."

He started experimenting with Cheerwine vinegar in other dishes, like vinegar pie, a classic Appalachian dessert. Initially he followed a simple fermentation process: flattening the soda and letting it naturally ferment with airborne yeast, first becoming alcohol, then vinegar.

He wondered if he might try the same process with other beverages. While the Cheerwine he sourced was made with all sugar, other classic sodas—Peach Nehi, Mountain Dew, RC Cola, and Dr. Enuf—now contained high fructose corn syrup. Breaking that down proved a challenge for a simple vinegar mother. "It's really tough for your average everyday yeast that's flying around right now to fully break down the corn syrup before they die. So it really took a while before I got to the point where I thought okay, maybe I need to think of something that's gonna be stronger," he says.

The solution? Kombucha SCOBY. An acronym for "symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast," SCOBY is the thick, slimy mother that is used to brew the trendy health tonic, kombucha tea. Travis says, "It acts like a mother in a true sense: It not only nurtures the vinegar but it also protects it. You get that nice thick layer so if mold forms on the top of that, you can just take a spoon and scrape it off. If you can get a really, really solid SCOBY to start it with, you're golden."

The irony of pairing kombucha—one of the most naturally occurring, localized, and healthful fermented foods—with highly processed, mass-produced sodas is not lost on Travis: "I'm taking this chemical test-tube thing and morphing it into something different using one of the most natural things in the world: yeast that's floating around us," he says. While the natural yeasts deconstruct the high-fructose corn syrup, the flavor of the sodas is preserved. That was crucial for Travis. "When I was growing up in southwest Virginia, I'd come off the farm with my great-grandaddy and we'd go get an RC Cola and a Moon Pie, or get a bottle from the little makeshift fridge he kept stocked with Peach Nehi. That, Sundrop, and RC Cola were staples of everyday life for me."

Travis Milton at home in Richmond, VA

Photographs by Stephanie Breijo

GROWING UP IN APPALACHIA, I'VE ALWAYS SAID THERE'S TWO THINGS YOU COME OUT LOVING: BLACK PEPPER AND VINEGAR. IT'S JUST IN OUR PALATES.

He plans to bring soda vinegars to his new restaurant, Shovel and Pick, when it opens in spring 2016. So far, he's used the vinegars in chicken liver terrine topped with a Cheerwine vinegar gel and peanuts, beef tartare with Coca-Cola vinegar, and marinated Chesapeake ray in a Sundrop brine. "One of my favorite things to do is a watermelon salad with house-made farmer's cheese and Mountain Dew vinaigrette. The Mountain Dew just kind of pops against the watermelon, and it's like sitting out on a porch in the summertime."

Before I leave, Travis pours me a generous shot of Smooth Ambler Rye from Maxwelton, West Virginia. We chase it with a sip of a new vinegar he's experimenting with, made from an electric-blue cream soda called Frostie. While the taste is tangier than I remember, it instantly takes me back. "Blue Moon ice cream!" I shout. "I haven't tasted that in years."

Travis nods. "That, now that's the powder off the outside of a Bazooka Joe." His hypothesis sounds as boyishly confident as a quip by the ball-capped Joe on the bubblegum's cartoon wrapper. I throw back another sip of the blue stuff, convinced.

Emily Hilliard is a folklorist and writer who works for Smithsonian Folkways and writes the pie blog Nothing in the House. *Flip to the end of this issue for an illustrated guide to fermentation.*

Mountain Dew
Knoxville, TN

NuGrape
Atlanta, GA

Frostie
Catonsville, MD

Nehi Peach
Columbus, GA

Cheerwine
Salisbury, NC

Illustrations by Emily Wallace

HAM TO HAM COMBAT

THE TALE OF TWO SMITHFIELDS

BY EMILY WALLACE

THIRTY YEARS AGO, MY HOMETOWN OF SMITHFIELD, NORTH CAROLINA,

launched what the Washington Post later called "A War In the Hamlets." On the line were rights to the title "Ham Capital of the World," which Smithfield, Virginia, long took as its own and painted on a welcome sign at the entrance to town. They took the Smithfield brand name, too, when in 1926, Virginia's General Assembly passed a law stating that any ham labeled "Genuine Smithfield" had to be "cut from the carcasses of peanut-fed hogs, raised in the peanut-belt of the State of Virginia or the State of North Carolina," and "cured, treated, smoked, and processed in the town of Smithfield, in the State of Virginia."

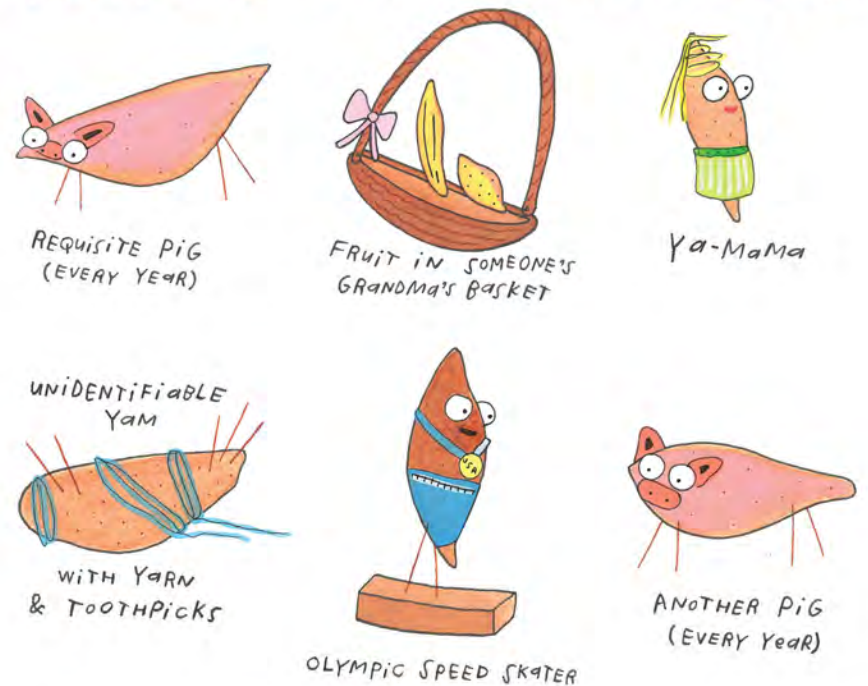
This all caused endless confusion for my similarly rural Smithfield, located just three hours south in eastern North Carolina, with its own strong curing tradition. In 1940 Carolina Packing Company on Brightleaf Boulevard began slaughtering hogs for their own line of products. Soon after, they began to supply hams to other local companies.

In 1985 Johnston County's so-called Big Five—Barefoot's Country Hams, Johnston County Hams, Medlin Hams, Sanders Country Hams, and Stevens Sausage Company—launched the Smithfield (North Carolina) Ham & Yam Festival. There was a hog calling contest, a "What's That Yam Thing?" competition (in which kids transformed sweet potatoes into animals and celebrities using toothpicks, paint, and glue) and a Pretty Pig Pageant, which reportedly garnered just one contestant, Mike Outlaw. He donned a plush, pink costume borrowed from the local Shriners club. But the main event was a series of head-to-head ham competitions for the best cure. The town bigwigs invited Smithfield, Virginia, down to settle the score.

Jim "The Sodfather" Graham, North Carolina's longtime agriculture commissioner, felt so sure his state would win that he put a set of tickets to the ACC basketball tournament on the line, a prize equivalent to winning the lottery in this part of the country. The night before the contest, a group gathered at Becky's Log Cabin steakhouse—where Johnston County's contestants reportedly plied the judges with bourbon—and exchanged verbal blows. John Smith of *The Smithfield* (VA) *Times* said, "When I think of North Carolina hams, I think of salt pork that hasn't been smoked and Tar Heel politicians that may or may not have been cured."

Leo Daughtry, a local lawyer who attended Wake Forest with one of the Smithfield, Virginia, ham boys and was just getting into politics, "set the record straight," explaining that North Carolina was the first to cure hams. After all, he proffered, when Englishmen arrived at Roanoke to find the Lost Colony, next to the famed tree inscribed with CRO, they also found a smokehouse hung with hams.

What's true is that in 1666, a promotional piece written for British immigrants declared Carolina hogs thriving, practically drunk on an abundance of acorns (this was before Johnston County became known for its moonshining). Sixty years later, William Byrd II of Westover, Virginia, went south to encounter a "porciverous" population whose "only business...[was] raising hogs." John Shelton Reed tells these stories in *Holy Smoke*, the Good Book of North Carolina barbecue, along with a black-and-white photo—conceivably a century old, at



[1]My prized entry to the 1994 competition was Dan Yamsen, a nod to Olympic speed skater Dan Jansen, who took gold at that year's winter games. Unfortunately, as nobody in temperate eastern North Carolina was as into speed skating as I was at the time, my potato lost to Duke University's better known Coach K, who stylishly rode in a Barbie Ferrari with the caption "Yam dunk."

AS SEEN ON THE HAM CAM

least—that depicts a group posing by thirteen hogs that hang from a lengthy post. The caption: "'Porciverous people' in Johnston County."

According to Rufus Brown, the second-generation curemaster at Johnston County Hams, this abundance of local pork allowed commercial country ham businesses to flourish in this pocket of eastern North Carolina in the second half of the twentieth century, when sliced and packaged meats became popular. The Big Five cured hams for an average of five to six months. Contrary to North Carolina's dominant style, Johnston County Hams, under the direction of Rufus's father, Jesse Brown, a native of North Tazwell, Virginia, also smoked their pork with hickory fumes for eight hours. That scared a few North Carolina folks off—they expected the heavy-handed cure of Smithfield, Virginia, where hams are smoked for an average of two weeks. But the results are pretty perfect, as far as I'm concerned.

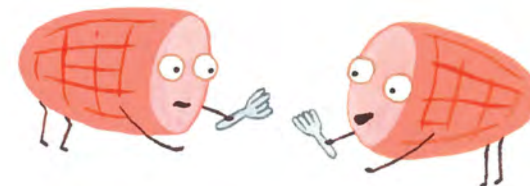
As for the judges, my people didn't quite crush Virginia at the first Ham & Yam Festival in 1985. Entries from our county's curers placed first and second in the uncooked ham category, and second in the cooked competition. The *Virginian-Pilot* reported that the judges—two food scientists and one ham-maker—"pondered their decisions prayerfully in the shade behind Smithfield's Primitive Baptist Church." Ranks were doled out according to fat-to-lean ratio, trim, taste, and

overall appearance, and Jim Graham was confident of a victory, determined to keep his basketball tickets safely in his clutch. "We took three of four," he said, "so I consider North Carolina won it."

Virginia wasn't so sure, claiming they didn't send down enough hams for all of the categories and promising more for next 1986 rally. "Last year we brought two hams and were met by about fifty from Johnston County," said John Edwards of Smithfield, Virginia. But North Carolina won again in 1986, nabbing five awards in four categories: cooked long-shank, cooked short-shank, uncooked long-shank, and uncooked short-shank (with two awards handed out in each category). As the *Smithfield* (NC) *Herald* boasted on its front page above a photo of two of my friends dressed as pats of butter and riding on a sweet potato float, "Johnston Hams Send Virginians Home to Lick Salt From Wounds."

That was the last time Smithfield, Virginia, officially came to town. They declined an invitation for a rematch in 1987, and the Ham & Yam Festival shifted to a competition among North Carolina curers. By the early 1990s, the festival had dwindled into a sort of craft fair, with less emphasis on pork and potatoes.

Rufus Brown believes that timeline follows the overall decline of cured pork. As he sees it, the industry peaked in the 1990s and fell out of widespread favor during a national shift toward fat-free foods and fad diets. Ham production in Johnston County fizzled out, too, with just two curers now remaining: Johnston County Hams and Stevens Sausage Company, which rounds out its product line with bright red hot dogs and cooked pork chitterlings, among other things. Smithfield, Virginia, on the other hand, has expanded to become the world's largest producer and processor of pork, well beyond cured hams—including a line of pre-scandal Paula Deen–approved meat products. In 2013 Shuanghui International, a China-based company, purchased Smithfield for $4.7 billion.



I WAS THREE YEARS OLD WHEN MY HOMETOWN INVITED the folks from Virginia down for the big rumble. Though we beat them whole hog then, some thirty years later the confusion remains, murkier than the waters of eastern North Carolina's hog lagoons. When I say I'm from Smithfield, more often than not, folks singsong back, "The hams!" They're right, but not for the right reasons.

At his family's factory on Stevens Sausage Road, I asked Mike Stevens

what the mix-up means for his company. The stakes are small, he told me. Sometimes they get mail addressed to Smithfield, Virginia (albeit with the right zip).

"When Smithfield, the big company, gets some bad publicity, then we do also because of our website—and our store, Smithfield Ham Shop," said Rufus Brown of Johnston County Hams. Even so, "It's been more advantageous to us as far as sales and stuff. We've sold probably thousands over the years because of it."

Sitting in Brown's metal warehouse, I felt a twinge of satisfaction that our rival Smithfield's name somehow helped local sales. But I also felt slightly betrayed that he let the mix-up roll over. "We explain it and move on," he told me in his slow, measured drawl.

I wasn't convinced. So, sporting a T-shirt emblazoned with the word HAM and Facebook's thumbs-up icon (a gift from my mother), I ventured across state lines on a fact-finding mission of my own. Highways meandered around peanut fields toward Main Street in Smithfield, Virginia, where Captain Mallory Todd made the town's first recorded ham transaction in 1779, and today, the Taste of Smithfield restaurant and gift shop welcomes lines of tourists. I stopped for thick-sliced ham and opted for a yam biscuit (holding onto state allegiances) then drove further down the road to the Isle of Wight County Museum, where the lord of aged hams resides in a glass case.

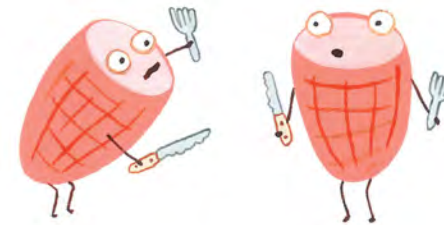
While most "Genuine Smithfield" hams cure for a year, this prized Virginia ham is 113, having begun its drying process in 1902. For almost twenty years it was forgotten among the rafters at P.D. Gwaltney Jr. and Company—which eventually became a subsidiary of Smithfield Foods. Beginning in 1924, the shriveled ham, reduced to 35 percent of its original weight, was insured for $1,000 and

I KEPT RETURNING TO THE 113-YEAR-OLD HAM, CONVINCED THAT IT MIGHT BREATHE OR MOVE.

stored in a safe that was opened each day to give the ham fresh air. Gwaltney took his beloved "pet," adorned with an engraved brass collar, to different fairs, where it was fastened by the collar for safety and displayed as a marvel of the curing process. By 1932 the ham had featured twice in Robert Ripley's *Believe It or Not* exhibition, and its value reportedly increased to $5,000.

I paid just $2 to enter the museum, where I glimpsed the World's Largest Cured Ham, the World's Largest Ham Biscuit (or, at least, the shovel used to assemble it), and the Oldest Peanut in the World, with 1890 scribbled in black ink across its dusty shell. As if all of that isn't enough, in a corner next to a cardboard cutout of Gwaltney sits his ham, the World's Oldest. If you happened upon the museum's website that fine day, you may have glimpsed me through the Ham Cam—a twenty-four-hour live feed that captures visitors' reactions to what looks like a black, petrified lung. I left the display several times: to flatten and emboss a penny with the outline of a ham; to watch grainy footage of Gwaltney showing off his pet and adjusting its collar; and to purchase an "I've Been to Smithfield, Virginia" magnet.

But I kept returning to the old ham, convinced that it might breathe or move. Back in Chapel Hill, my colleague took a screenshot that reveals me, mouth agape, hair crazed, timidly waving at the Ham Cam as I connected my Smithfield and this one.



TODAY, BROWN SAYS, THE MAJORITY OF LOCAL CUSTOMERS buy hams just once a year for their holiday tables. Folks call relentlessly. "I tell some of the people who work here, I say, 'Listen. Their whole house could burn down, they could lose all their presents, their Christmas tree, but if their refrigerator made it through the fire with that ham in it, that Christmas would be fine,'" says Brown. "They say, 'Nah, you're crazy!' But I say, 'Once you get through one Christmas, you'll see.'"

Johnston County Hams also appeals to a niche market. Under the Curemaster's Reserve label, they cure specialty hogs including the Mangalitsa—a curly-headed beast whose mop Brown likens to a poodle. (Those hams go for about $275.) He has also begun working with Sam Suchoff of The Pig, a Chapel Hill restaurant that butchers and barbecues whole, all-natural hogs. The result is Lady Edison, an "extra fancy country ham" that's named for a Raleigh-born inventor who worked around the turn of the twentieth century on patents including a hair curler and something called a Poodle Dog Doll. Sliced thin, prosciutto-style, it is some of the best ham I've ever tasted. For solidarity, not just flavor, I keep Lady's business card tucked in my wallet. She's another Johnston Countian who moved west to the city and is fighting the good fight in the name of Smithfield ham.

Emily Wallace, a writer and illustrator based in Durham, North Carolina, is deputy editor of Southern Cultures *at UNC-Chapel Hill.*

Goodnight, Mrs. Calabash

My people, my coastline, my seafood

by BESHA RODELL

Intracoastal Waterway, Brunswick County, NC. View from the Sunset Beach bridge, looking south to Calabash

Kate Medley

WHEN I WAS THREE YEARS OLD, MY MATERNAL grandmother was very sick with cancer of the everything. My mother and father and I were living in Boston, but her brother, my uncle, was in medical school at the University of North Carolina, and as a result my grandmother was transferred to the hospital in Chapel Hill for her last months of care. It was her final wish to be taken to the ocean, and, because of this, my earliest memories of the seaside are of the Atlantic coast of North Carolina. I remember playing in the sand with cousins a few years older than me, I remember the small beach shacks that lined that coast in the 1970s, and I remember my uncle carrying my grandmother out into the water in his arms because she didn't have the strength to walk.

I was born into a nomadic family of sorts, one that has split and fractured and

regrouped and moved, over and over again. By the time I was eighteen, I had lived in five cities, in sixteen houses, and on two opposite ends of the world. There were and are very few constants in my life, locational or otherwise, but the land between Wilmington, North Carolina, and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, is an exception. It is the coastline to which I belong.

When I'm far away from this part of the world, as I usually am, three things tug at my heart the hardest. There are the beaches themselves, their old fishing piers and warm water and periwinkle-strewn sand. There's the thrumming, intense greenness of the marshes, a kind of green that doesn't exist anywhere else, that hits you when you cross the intracoastal waterway to the beach islands, an almost mossy green that's different from the green of a forest or a field or a pasture, a green that is basically the color of my soul. And there are the hushpuppies and fried seafood of Calabash, North Carolina.

CALABASH IS A SMALL FISHING town on the border of North and South Carolina, just on the north side, on an offshoot of the Intracoastal Waterway called the Calabash River. In the early 1800s, Calabash was called Pea Landing, but when they got a post office another name was needed. Pea Landing was already taken. "Calabash" comes from the French and Spanish words for "gourd." The town likely got its name from the gourd-shaped river it sits upon.

The town comprises a few roads, most notably Highway 179, which runs the length of the town. A small waterfront overlooks marshy river. It's not close enough to the beach or to the bawdy wonder of Myrtle Beach to be a true tourist trap. For people who have been coming to this coastline year after year, as I have, Calabash is beloved for two things.

The first is a 35,000-square-foot gift shop called Callahan's. About two thirds of that labyrinthine sprawl is run-of-the-mill beach stuff: shells, T-shirts, large sculptures of mermaids; the stuff you would use to tastefully (or no so tastefully) decorate the beach condo you just bought and named "Dune Nothin'."

The back third of the store is Saint Nick Nack's, a year-round Christmas shop dazzling in its breadth of sparkle. There are rooms and rooms of lights and snowmen, dinnerware and Christmas-themed electronic miniature train sets, ornaments for hunters and bakers and bikers. My husband, who was born and raised in North Carolina and who vacationed at nearby Cherry Grove Beach his entire childhood, still has a visceral horror-faced reaction when I say "Saint Nick Nack's," remembering summer days wasted while his mother dragged the family around the store, cooing over Christmas decorations in July. Fate is cruel: I do the same thing to him now.

Then there's the fried seafood. On the town's website and logo and elsewhere, Calabash declares itself the Seafood Capital of the World, and has done so for many decades, since back when the population was in the low hundreds. *The New York Times* reported in 1983 that Calabash had 180 people and thirty-two restaurants.

"Calabash-style" is a term used to describe breaded and fried seafood, usually served with hushpuppies and coleslaw. The term is ubiquitous up and down the North and South Carolina coasts and especially along the gaudy stretch of Highway 17 that runs through Myrtle Beach, one of the South's most popular destinations for spring break and summer vacation debauchery. True Calabash seafood is lightly breaded and lightly fried, and if you ask anyone who knows they'll tell it's not really Calabash seafood unless you're eating it in Calabash. Even so, more people know the term than the town itself. You can find restaurants advertising Calabash-style seafood throughout the Carolinas, and into Virginia and land-locked West Virginia. In Battle Creek, Michigan, there's a restaurant called Captain Luey's Calabash Seafood.

The land between Wilmington, North Carolina, and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, is the coastline to which I belong.

Kate Medley

The offerings at Beck's seafood restaurant

The mythology of how Calabash came to be famous for its seafood goes like this: In the 1930s, people would wait at the docks in the early evening for fishermen to drop anchor with the day's catch. Families began to set up tubs of hot oil and fry the fish along the riverbank, and these fish camps became so popular that they eventually attracted locals, and then visitors. In the 1940s, two sisters decided to turn their family fish fries into brick-and-mortar restaurants. Ruth Beck and Lucy Coleman each opened a restaurant: Coleman's Original in 1940, and soon after, Beck's. In 1950 their brother, Lawrence High, and his wife, Ella, opened Ella's.

As with any large family in any small town, different folks tell different stories of who came first and who invented what. But it's accepted that these three siblings are the originators of Calabash seafood restaurants. Descendants of those siblings still own all three establishments. Lawrence High's daughter, Sheryl Ann Hardee, took over Ella's after her parents died. When the owners of Beck's decided to sell in 2004, Hardee bought that restaurant to keep it in the family. Hardee's children, Kurt Hardee and Shaun Bellamy, now own and operate both Ella's and Beck's.

While the addictive quality of the seafood

Kate Medley

Ed Ratliff holds freshly caught shrimp at the Calabash dock.

cemented the town's fame, it also got a boost from Jimmy Durante. Beginning in the 1950s, Durante began closing all his performances, which included television, radio, and live theater, with the words "Goodnight, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are." Contested theories posit how and why Durante came to use that sign-off. (Was Mrs. Calabash Lucy Coleman, who fried the fish? Or did Durante's first wife love Calabash-style seafood so much that "Mrs. Calabash" became his pet name for her?) There's no doubt that Durante ate in Calabash at some point, and that it made such an impression that the town earned a prominent place in showbiz history.

MY FIRST CONSUMER OBSESSION was not food but junk, and it was junk that first brought me to Calabash. When I was a teenager, my family often drove down from the Northeast for a week or two in the summer to share a North Carolina beachfront house with my uncle. The summer after I graduated from high school, my mother bought a house in Tarrytown, New York, and the closing got pushed back until a couple of weeks after the lease expired on our previous house. We decided to turn temporary homelessness into a vacation. My mom and my three siblings and I piled into our station wagon and headed south, to a beach house on Emerald Isle, North Carolina.

Within a few days, Hurricane Bertha had pushed us off of the island, and that hiccup began a summer odyssey. The closing on the new house was pushed back again and again, and the five of us ended up driving around the South crammed into that wagon, for what turned out to be months. We sat out the hurricane at a bed and breakfast in New Bern, my fourteen-year-old brother and I drinking the cheap complimentary Port on the front porch as we watched Bertha blow trees down the street. We drove to the mountains and then back to the beach, this time settling on Sunset Beach, our preferred beach, just to the north of Calabash.

Seeing as we had no time constraints and nothing to do, I insisted we stop at every thrift store, junk store, and flea market we passed. On the winding back roads around Sunset Beach, we found a junkyard owned by a craggy guy named Mr. Varnum and spent hours exploring the bombed-out cars and mysterious twisted metal on his swampy property. And I learned that Calabash, North Carolina, is one of the best towns in America for thrift stores. In the Calabash EMS thrift store, which was located in a falling-down house and run by a ninety-seven-year-old woman and was only open on Saturdays, I found a Miss Teen Pageant USA T-shirt that read: THE QUALITY PAGEANT FOR QUALITY GIRLS. It cost ten cents. I still think of this as one of the shopping highlights of my life.

From there we stumbled upon Saint Nick Nack's. And from there, across the street, we discovered Ella's of Calabash.

OF THE THREE EARLIEST CALABASH restaurants, only Ella's still operates in its original building. Ella's is built in the typical style of casual Southern coastal restaurants: There are wooden booths, brusk waitresses in pastel Ella's t-shirts, and a short salad bar (one trip: $3, all-u-can-eat: $5.99) with canned beets and cottage cheese and green olives and six kinds of dressing, all of them creamy. The walls are festooned with sixty-five years' worth of memorabilia, including a giant mounted fish that Ella herself is said to have caught.

The menu at Ella's is the same as the menus at almost every other restaurant in town: small or large plates of fried shrimp, oysters, flounder, scallops, or deviled crabs. Or combos with two or three of these items. You can get side orders of them, platters of them, sandwiches stuffed with them. Or, "for land lovers," there's a spaghetti dinner.

The original locations of Beck's and Coleman's burned down. In October of 2012, Beck's caught fire due to some old wiring in the roof. It reopened six months later, in April 2013. The new, nautical-themed interior feels antiseptic compared to its former worn and homey building, which stood for seventy-two years.

Losing the original Beck's was heartbreaking for Shaun Bellamy, the granddaughter of Ella and daughter of Sheryl Ann Hardee, who grew up working in both restaurants. "My mom was so passionate about keeping Beck's in the family," Bellamy says. "She passed away just a few years ago, and that was her project. To see that old building go was just so hard. I love the new building, but it's not the same." Bellamy's father, who served as Calabash's mayor for twenty years and helped build the new Beck's building, passed away this past January.

Lots of restaurants have burned in Calabash over the years. Last year, Coleman's Original went up in flames, for similar reasons, and it wasn't the first time: Coleman's had burned once before, in the 1970s. They are planning a comeback similar to Beck's—a new building to house all that old history. Captain John's, on the west side of Coleman's, burned in November 2010. Captain Nance's, next door to the east, burned down in July 1999.

Even before the fires, my family always gravitated toward Ella's. When I married into a North Carolina family, I was relieved that their loyalty lay with Ella's, too.

I don't know if there's much of a difference between Ella's and the other restaurants in Calabash. Bellamy says the recipes are all similar, but that doesn't stop people from arguing over whose is better, or greasier, or fresher. I do know that Ella's

serves the kind of hushpuppies that are long and squiggly and lighter than the more traditional cornmeal spheres served at Beck's and most other spots. And I know that the fried oysters at Ella's taste the crispest and creamiest, probably because I ate there as a kid and I ate there during that crazy homeless summer and I ate there the day before my wedding. We said our vows under Spanish moss looking out over the marshes of the Intracoastal Waterway at a house about a mile and a half north of Calabash.

IN THE THIRTY-TWO YEARS SINCE that *New York Times* article, the population of Calabash has grown to just over 2,000, which is a lot of people to fit into 3.7 square miles. The largest restaurant in town is a newer place called Boundary House that sits behind (and is owned by the same folks as) Callahan's gift shop. In a dining room that looks like it belongs to a fancy mall restaurant, they serve frozen drinks and "oriental chicken salad" and spinach-artichoke dip in addition to fried seafood.

But according to Bellamy, not much has changed, despite the town's massive population growth. "There aren't nearly as many restaurants as there used to be. It's mainly just the ones with a long history," she says. "Someone came in here and tried to open one of those Myrtle Beach–style buffets that call themselves Calabash, but they didn't last long."

The remaining restaurants still have long waits for dinner many nights, but the shrimp trade that built Calabash isn't what it used to be. In the last thirty years, a combination of golf-course gentrification, declining shrimp hauls, and the glut of imported frozen shrimp have killed much of the business that was left. The two main shrimping companies in town now make most of their money from the charter fishing business. In the early mornings, a group of shrimpers gathers every morning at the Calabash riverfront to drink coffee, tell stories, and reminisce. They're mainly retired.

Bellamy admits that because of the demand they face and the small supply, they often use frozen shrimp, though not when they can get fresh. On some things she stands firm. "At Ella's we have oyster roasts during the winter, and it's one of our most popular items." Those oysters, different from the variety she fries, come in huge metal tubs, still fused together. You have to wrestle them apart and open to get to the briny-hot goodness inside. "We want our food to represent this town, this part of the country," Bellamy says.

I've never eaten at Captain Luey's Calabash Seafood in Battle Creek, Michigan. I'm sure there's plenty about it to love, but I've come to the conclusion that some food isn't meant to transplant particularly well. It's okay if I can't get proper North Carolina or Texas barbecue in Los Angeles, where I live now, and it's okay if Calabash seafood is only truly possible in Calabash. If you want to try it, you'll just have to go there yourself.

To that end, I'm now teaching my son the exquisite torture of a trip to Saint Nick Nack's to buy Christmas ornaments in July, followed by a plate of fried seafood at Ella's. Despite the influx of residents, despite the fires, Bellamy is right that not much changes here, which is maybe why I'm so attached to this odd little town. The EMS thrift store has moved twice and is now open six days a week. I'd look stupid in a Miss Teen Pageant USA T-shirt these days. But the fried shrimp at Ella's still taste like history, and that mossy green marsh along the Calabash river is as close to a home as anywhere else I'll ever be.

Besha Rodell is the restaurant critic for LA Weekly.

FEAR THE TICK

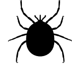
Alpha-gal is the **scariest allergy** you've never heard of

by

CHRIS FOWLER

Lyle Buss

An engorged female lone star tick



I WAS IN THE DIRT UNDERNEATH MY GIRLFRIEND'S CAR

in Durham, North Carolina, trying to pull a dead alternator off an engine that had been installed sideways. When it became too dark outside for me to continue cursing the engineer who signed off on this configuration, I retreated indoors for supper, took off my shoes, and discovered, to my horror, a single tick attached to the top of my foot. It hadn't been there long, perhaps a couple of hours. I easily picked it off. When I inspected the small female lone star tick with that telltale white dot on her back, in the nymph stage of her short life, paranoia kicked in. I was not afraid that I had contracted Lyme disease or Rocky Mountain spotted fever, two rather well-known tick-borne illnesses. I know what symptoms to look for with those, the bull's-eye rash or fever, fatigue, and joint pain that follow in the days after a bite. This lone star tick (*Amblyomma americanum*) could unleash a far worse fate: It could rob me of my ability to eat mammals.

A few friends of mine have developed an allergy to red meat: pork, beef, lamb, goat, venison, rabbit, bison, and the like—no more barbecue, no more cabbage smothered with neckbones. More specifically, the allergy is to a sugar inside that meat, the carbohydrate Galactose-*alpha*-1,3-galactose. It's called Alpha-gal colloquially and is found in non-primate mammals. The only mammals whose bodies do not contain Alpha-gal are primates like humans and old-world monkeys—but I don't plan to acquire a taste for those types of meat. The Alpha-gal allergy develops for certain people after pathogenic lone star tick bites, and researchers are unsure whether it's transmitted through tick blood, or saliva.

The time from infecting bite to an allergic reaction varies by patient. Some of the people I know with this allergy can remember the exact tick that did them in. Others say it's been years since they remember having been bitten. During the interval between tick bite and the development of histamines to Alpha-gal, life may go on as usual—until the day that a BLT sends them to the emergency room. The reactions often occur three to eight hours after ingesting red meat. At that point, many Alpha-gal sufferers feel an upset stomach. They might begin to itch, sometimes in conjunction with hives.

Chris Fowler

The author in his protective armor

Chris Fowler

Female lone star tick

Others go into full-blown anaphylaxis. For the uninitiated, anaphylaxis is a reaction that includes a number of alarming physical affects, from the unsettling (swelling of the lips and tongue) to the seriously dangerous (difficulty in breathing, low blood pressure, swelling of the throat). Death sometimes follows.

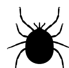
Researchers studying Alpha-gal at the University of Virginia observed severe gastrointestinal distress in some of their subjects, reporting that "it is not uncommon for a patient who has anaphylaxis to lose consciousness while moving their bowels."

Scared yet?

I am terrified.

Dr. Thomas Platts-Mills, an allergist at UVA, discovered the lone star tick connection to Alpha-gal back in 2006. He was trying to determine why certain cancer patients, most of whom lived in the South, suffered serious allergic reactions to the cancer drug Cetuximab—which happens to contain Alpha-gal. Eventually, Dr. Platts-Mills linked the lone star tick and the Alpha-gal allergy. The next summer, he went for a hike in the Blue Ridge Mountains. After he took off his hiking boots and socks, his ankles were covered with lone star tick larvae. A few months later, Dr. Platts-Mills awoke in the middle of the night, coated in hives. He'd eaten lamb for supper that evening. Now he is afflicted with the very same Alpha-gal allergy he researched and helped identify.

Because of Alpha-gal's delayed reaction, the allergy is often misdiagnosed or not diagnosed at all. Like Dr. Platts-Mills, people who suffer from the Alpha-gal allergy frequently experience reactions in the middle of the night after they eat red meat for supper. It can take multiple attacks to make the connection.



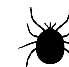
I PROBABLY EAT MORE red meat than is good for me. I grew up in rural, southeastern North Carolina, where livestock is big business and whole-hog barbecue reigns supreme. Dinnertime often meant barbecue sandwiches (more precisely: finely chopped, whole-hog flesh including the crispy skin, dressed in peppery-red vinegar sauce), and suppertime centered around things like gnaw-the-bone-good fried pork chops. After moving away for college and work, I discovered different ways to enjoy plated mammals. When I was working in London, lamb vindaloo became a dietary staple, and I developed a taste for pork bulgogi when I lived in Massachusetts. Red meat is the subtitle of my food autobiography.

A few years ago, I caught up with a friend over dinner in Hillsborough, North Carolina. When I asked why he was passing over a very fetching swine entrée for a Buffalo shrimp wrap, Adam Rosemond told me his story. For a barbecue lover, it sounded like the plot of a sci-fi horror film.

This is what more than a year of Adam's life looked like after receiving multiple lone star tick bites: When he ate a pork chop or a cheeseburger for supper, he would wake up in the middle of the night, perhaps six hours after his evening meal, covered in a layer of hives that resembled bubble wrap. Next came the debilitating stomachaches. The reactions eventually got worse, and Adam would struggle to catch his breath. For months he slept with a bottle of Benadryl on his nightstand, popping a couple whenever he would wake up, in a panicked effort to head off the reactions. He couldn't figure out what was wrong. These reactions were absolutely terrorizing him.

Finally, after stumping a series of doctors, Adam identified the pattern on his own. When he stopped eating red meat, he stopped having reactions. Almost a year and a half after his symptoms appeared, he received a formal diagnosis at Duke University's Asthma, Allergy, and Airway Center.

As I tucked into the mammalian smorgasbord before me, I contemplated how different life would be if I were similarly afflicted. Since learning about Adam's experiences, I've met others who suffer from the Alpha-gal allergy, and I've developed a macabre obsession. In my nightmares, I live a life without sausage biscuits, mark joyless birthdays without pig pickings, and sit down to Sunday lunches with no roast beef. My cardiac health might be better, but I'd be heartbroken. Many of the afflicted I know are hunters, farmers, or work in the food industry. Adam works in the grocery department at Weaver Street Market, a cooperative grocery store in Hillsborough. The implications of this allergy go beyond an altered diet. They demand lifestyle changes.



I MET MARY BETH Miller last spring when I was taking photos for an article about Coon Rock Farm, where she works. Coon Rock is a sustainable organic farm in Hillsborough, North Carolina, that grows vegetables and raises cattle, sheep, and heritage-breed hogs. Mary Beth and her husband, Brock Phillips, met when they were both serving as interns there after college. Mary Beth plants, weeds, harvests vegetables, and takes care of the animals. Growing up in nearby Wake and Chatham counties, she says, "I am not a stranger to a tick. We would pull them off of us all the time, pull them off the dogs—I have no idea when I was bitten. It might've been when I was seven years old, or it might've been when I was twenty."

Things took a turn for the worse one night after a meat-centric supper on the farm. "My first reaction, I had no idea what was going on," says Mary Beth. "I'd had hives before, just not that intense. I kept having these reactions for about a year and a half." Her primary care doctor misdiagnosed Mary Beth's symptoms.

ALPHA-GAL SOUNDED LIKE THE PLOT OF A SCI-FI HORROR FILM.

Mary Beth Miller with the cows she raises but cannot eat

Eventually, like Adam, she went to the Duke Asthma, Allergy, and Airway Center, where a doctor confirmed her Alpha-gal allergy with a simple test.

"It's been interesting, still being a part of raising the meat animals that I can't partake in eating," says Mary Beth. "We take care of the animals so well and make sure that they have a good life. We watch them being born on the farm, and then we raise them, and we take them to the processor. Then we get to enjoy the meal that we've worked so hard for—except, now that part has been taken away from me. I don't see the animals as a dinner in the future. I think I look at them more in the moment as these very sentient beings that are here, and it's my job to take care of them."

Even though her work with livestock no longer manifests as a meal, she is still deeply connected to these foods. "I miss a good steak. It's funny, because since my diagnosis I've been to a butchering class, and I've been to the Women in Meat Conference—I learned how to break down a pig, and break down a cow. It's still part of my job. I have no problem touching it. It still interests me a lot. I still go to the farmers market every Saturday and sell meat—I just can't eat it. It's all right. I think the universe works in very funny ways."

Like Adam and Mary Beth, the other Alpha-gal sufferers I know have been able to adjust to life without red meat. Adam has substituted ground turkey for ground beef—turkey burgers feature regularly at his house. Even so, I catch myself checking the clock and counting the hours since my last torta de carnitas from my favorite Mexican spot, Fiesta Grill. I keep Benadryl in my truck now. My paranoia is palpable.

Chris Fowler is an omnivore who no longer leaves the house without his pants tucked into his socks. He lives (in fear of ticks) in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

Chris Fowler

TASTING LAOS IN THE NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAINS

A gentle diplomacy of flavor

BY KATY CLUNE

A market display in Luang Prabang, Laos

Map Illustration by Katy Clune; PREVIOUS PAGE: Katy Clune

IN THE QUIET OF THE EARLY MORNING IN VIENTIANE, steam rises from sticky rice. Women sit on low bamboo stools waiting for *tak baht*, the morning ritual of serving monks their daily meal. Wrapped in dark orange robes, young men cradling alms bowls walk single file. As they pass each group of morning worshippers, the men stop, turn to face away from the street, and chant in thanks.

While the warmth of the sun is still gentle, fishermen and -women wade into the Mekong, their longboats rigged with intricate homemade bamboo nets. Across the city, vendors sell fresh river fish: skewered, salted, and grilled; wrapped in banana leaves and steamed; or cooked at waterside tables in hot pots. Kitchens are typically outdoors, centered around a low wood- or coal-fired concrete brazier. As the day heats up, women move their vegetables and cutting blocks from inside to the breezy shade, transforming residential streets into ad-hoc prep areas. Their syncopated chatter and the beat of mortar and pestle mingle with the sounds of passing motorcycles. Trays of chilies and patties of day-old rice dry in the late-afternoon sun. The evening meal begins with a Beerlao poured over ice.

WHEN I ARRIVED IN VIENTIANE, THE Lao capital, the outdoor markets drew me in. I was overwhelmed by the abundance of fresh vegetables, fruits, and meats—a colorful reflection of the country's agrarian economy. Under the tarp canopies was a sea of green, with flashes of silver (fish), red (chilies), purple (eggplant), and the orange of marigold-studded temple offerings. Shoppers coveted seasonal delicacies. In early summer in Luang Prabang—the old royal seat in the north—there were round, earthy, dumpling-like mushrooms; dark jumping frogs; and a precious foraged ant nest resting on a banana leaf. There was an art to these market displays. Vendors arranged quilts of colorful vegetables and fruits, braided and bundled herbs, and hung jerky and fried rice snacks overhead. Wandering the stalls, I sampled leaves fragrant and foreign. I learned that these bitter leaves, which had no English name, helped balance the heat of chilies. And without chilies, Lao food isn't Lao.

A year before my first visit to Laos, the Phapphaybonn family of Morganton, North Carolina, schooled me on the importance of the chili via papaya salad, a national staple. There are at least seven different names for chili peppers in Lao. My friend Toon, the family's second oldest daughter, explained to me, "Without spice, it is not papaya salad; it is just tossed vegetables. It's good, but it's not *Lao*." I love heat, but I was out of my league when I ate with the Phapphaybouns. While I sat in a state of joyful distress, Toon reached for another raw green chili to chew between bites of papaya salad and laab—a cold, herbed, minced-meat dish.

The two Phapphayboun homes in Morganton are equipped with kitchens fit for feasts. Toon's grandmother taught her mother, Noubath, how to make pickled fish and sour pork. Both women were known as the very best cooks in their Vientiane neighborhood. Noubath passed this knowledge of traditional Lao methods to her daughters. As I grew to know Toon and her family, I spent hours at their tables eating sticky rice

TOP: ***Tak baht in Vientiane***
BOTTOM: ***Market chilies in Hickory, NC***

Katy Clune; Didem Lenz

(khao neow) with spicy dips (jaeow), soups (gheng), grilled fish, and fermented pork sausages (som muu). I also worked my way through the menu at Asian Fusion Kitchen restaurant, where Daraphone "Dara" Phrakousonh, Toon's younger sister, serves Lao specialties both fiery and mild.

The meals I ate in Morganton repeated themselves half a world away in Vientiane, which I visited in summer 2014 in pursuit

of greater context for this family's journey. As I walked those early-morning streets and markets, I grasped more fully all that the Phapphaybouns had left behind—and I understood how cooking, eating, and sharing Lao food in North Carolina is the most natural way to bring their country to life in the mountain South.

TOP: ***Champasak Province, Laos***
BOTTOM: ***Morganton, NC***

This family's daily togetherness is a triumph over history and circumstance. It is the taste of Laos that enables the Phapphaybouns to nurture their connectedness to each other and to home. At the same time, they use its spicy, tangy, salty, and sweet flavors to share their story in Morganton and build bridges of understanding.

TOON WAS THE FIRST IN HER FAMILY to escape Vientiane for America. She left in 1980, when she was just fourteen years old. In 1975, despite covert U.S. operations that had lasted from the Eisenhower Administration through to the Johnson years, the communist Pathet Lao party overthrew the last vestiges of the old royal government. Our country's involvement in Laos is a tragic, little-known chapter of the Vietnam War. In an effort to stanch the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, the United States secretly enlisted approximately 30,000 Hmong—an ethnic minority in Laos—to fight against their countrymen. We also dropped more than two million tons of bombs on the country. An average of one bomber left base every eight minutes for nine years. Countless explosives still rest, sinister and silent, just below rice paddies and forest floors.

This history deeply affected Toon's family. In 1974 her father, La Phapphayboun, was assassinated. The following year, the man who would become her stepfather, Khamsi Bounkhong Siluangkhot, was imprisoned in a reeducation camp. Toon escaped the new government's strict regime under the cover of night. She risked her life on a leaky canoe and made it safely across the Mekong River into Thailand. "We started in the early morning," Toon recalled. "We were so thirsty, when we crossed a sugarcane field we broke it and chewed it to get some juice and water in our body. We walked on mud along the rice paddies. All that horror stuff you read in books, I went through that."

After eight months in refugee camps, Toon arrived in Los Angeles. She helped each member of her family make the journey to America. Twenty-three years later, the Phapphaybouns are reunited in Morganton, where the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains now evoke the mountains of Laos.

Katy Clune

SEVENTEEN THOUSAND PEOPLE live in Morganton, sixty miles northeast of Asheville. As you exit I-40, fast-food restaurants line the road. Zaxby's, McDonald's, and a drive-through sushi joint in a refurbished Burger King give way to a small downtown. Commissioned as the county seat in 1784, Morganton first prospered as a railroad stop before lumber operations, furniture factories, and textile mills moved in. These industries required immigrant labor earlier than other parts of the South. French-speaking Waldesians came from Italy in the early twentieth century. The region's most recent wave of immigrants—indigenous Maya from Guatemala—began arriving in the 1980s. Between these two movements, Hmong refugees from Laos, displaced by the Vietnam War, began to settle in Morganton in the mid-1970s.

North Carolina's Asian American population is growing quickly. Like other parts of the South, the state is a second migration site for immigrants who initially settled elsewhere. For Southeast Asians especially, the climate, landscape, and even the quiet of the countryside recall distant homes. Hmong greatly outnumber the Buddhist Lao in this part of the state. The Phappaybouns are one of approximately forty families in their community.

Dara and her husband, Danil, were the first in the Phapphayboun family to move to the South. The young couple eloped, rented an apartment, and began work in a textile factory in neighboring Valdese in 1994. Dara dreamed of opening her own business, hoping to bring the family together. In 2010 she opened Lao Lanxang Grocery (named for Laos's ancient monarchy), and she soon began selling out of her Thursday night pho and the sweet and salty snacks made by her mother, Noubath. On Valentine's Day 2013, Dara opened a sit-down restaurant and a second iteration of her grocery store at a new location. She still works twelve hours a day, six days week at Asian Fusion Kitchen.

Lao textiles and carvings decorate Asian Fusion Kitchen's yellow walls, and framed photos of monuments in Vientiane hang just below the ceiling. Dara says she wanted "to show everybody where I come from, who I am, and why I do what I do, because I wanted to introduce everyone to Laos. Because everybody says, 'Hey, you Chinese.' Laos never exists! That's why I said, 'I'm going to open a restaurant or grocery store one day and I'm going to tell them I'm not Chinese, *I am Lao*.'"

This love of country suffuses the Phapphaybouns' palate. When I talked with Toon during our visit to Laos, she was bubbling with affection for the foods of her youth. It had been over twenty years since she was last in Vientiane. "I noticed a difference between the aroma of the lemongrass in America and the aroma of the lemongrass in Laos," she said. "I could eat it plain, it's so tasty here. There's that aroma, there's that crunch, that little hint of sweetness, lemon, and a kind of herby smell." Grown and eaten at home, even an undressed herb is sublime. Sitting in her late father's Vientiane home in the cool, dark air, Toon said, "I missed Laos the day I landed in Laos." She acknowledged the impossibility of staying, and the ever-present, bittersweet connection to her country—present in its flavors, however paled, in North Carolina.

ASIAN FUSION KITCHEN IS MORE than a place for the Lao community to gather around familiar foods. It is also the key way locals can learn from and engage with their new neighbors. While the essentials are in place—sticky rice served in *thip khao* (lidded bamboo baskets), papaya salad, and chilies—compromise and accommodation are at the heart of Dara's restaurant. She chose the name Asian Fusion Kitchen because it didn't sound too spicy, and because some of her dishes "throw America and Asia together a little bit." Lao and Hmong know to order laab or khao poon noodles off-menu. Through a gentle diplomacy of flavor, Dara is slowly introducing Morganton to her native cuisine. The restaurant is a success: She has expanded tables into her grocery store. Sticky rice is one of the most popular dishes. Dara loves it when her customers call it by its Lao name, khao neow.

Pam Roths, a native of Morganton, believes Dara and her family's hospitality has a lot to do with her success in this small town. Pam likes to say that, on her first visit to Asian Fusion Kitchen, she "came looking for pho and found family."

The rest of Morganton is catching on. Local craft brewery Fonta Flora created a special brew inspired by the Beerlao that Dara stocks. Brewed with turmeric, Charleston Gold rice, and miso, they call it Year of the Wood Goat.

Dara and her family bring Laos to the American South by balancing traditional foods with the palates of their customers. This spirit of accommodation makes Asian Fusion Kitchen an essentially Lao restaurant. "The Lao way is to be humble," says Toon. "We do not force anything down anyone's throat, and yet we accomplish what we want done. There are two ways: You can force the horse to water, but it won't drink. The Lao way is to show you how to get to the river, and if you want to drink the water, that is fine—but you have found your own way there." For North Carolinians, the taste of Laos may not be as exotic as they think. Noubath ferments her Lao-style fish sauce, padaek, with fish from the nearby Catawba River and Lake James, and Dara occasionally uses it in her dishes at Asian Fusion Kitchen.

As communities like Morganton evolve, cultural exchange becomes an everyday occurrence. Families like the Phapphaybouns are paving the way. In April 2015, I joined in the celebration of Pii Mai, Lao New Year, at Wat Lao Sayaphoum. Toon's parents helped establish this Buddhist temple in a double-wide trailer and carport thirteen miles outside of Morganton. As in Laos, on this festival day blue tarps were stretched above homemade snacks, mortars and pestles, and steaming bowls of noodles. As I ate pho with the Phapphaybouns, I noticed two older white men gamely asking their Lao friends what foods were for sale, and joking at their inability to use chopsticks. I introduced myself to them and learned both men were Vietnam veterans, here on the invitation of new neighbors and coworkers. On a foggy mountain morning in North Carolina, some forty years after the conflict that displaced Toon's family and so many others, food offered all a common ground.

Katy Clune works as a digital editor for the SFA and a cultural communications consultant. She completed her MA in Folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill in 2015 with the thesis "Home in a New Place: Making Laos in North Carolina."

GREEN PAPAYA SALAD

Recipe by Dara Phrakousonh and Katy Clune

In Lao, green papaya salad is *tahm maak houng. Tahm,* which sounds like the beat of mortar and pestle, means to pound. *Maak houng* is papaya, but you can "*tahm*" anything with this combination of flavors: green mangoes, noodles, or seafood.

Green papaya salad is beloved in Laos and Northern Thailand and is a common street and festival food. The quantities listed below are loose guidelines; you order your papaya salad according to your tastes—extra chili or no fish sauce. At some stands, vendors let you balance and pound your own ingredients. While the Lao style uses paedek, a strong, fermented fish sauce, this taste can be attained with a pinch of crab and shrimp paste.

Makes 4 servings; prep time approximately 15 minutes.

INGREDIENTS

- **1 medium-sized green papaya, grated (roughly 5 cups)**
  If you do not have access to an Asian grocery where you can purchase an unripe papaya, substitute chopped English cucumbers or equal parts grated carrot and cabbage.
- **1–2 limes**
- **2 Tbsp. sugar***
- **3 Tbsp. fish sauce* (available in many supermarkets)**
- **3 diced Roma tomatoes, or roughly 1 pint halved cherry tomatoes**
- **5 long beans, cut into 1 inch pieces on the diagonal (roughly 1 cup)**
  Long beans—which can be up to a yard in length!—can be replaced with regular green beans
- **1 large (or 2 small) cloves of garlic, minced**
- **2–3 bird's eye chilies*, minced (red chilies are often hotter than green)**
- **Roasted salted peanuts, crushed**

*These ingredients depend on your palate—start with these quantities, then increase as needed once you mix the salad.

PREPARATION

1. Peel the green papaya, cut it in half, and remove the seeds. Working in pieces, grate the papaya using a food processor attachment, if possible. You can purchase a tool made for this purpose in Asian food stores, but the food processor makes this step blissfully easy.

2. While a large mortar and pestle is ideal, a big bowl and two sturdy spoons will work just as well. Add grated papaya to bowl, taking note that the quantities listed are for roughly 5 cups. Add all remaining ingredients. Stir with a spoon, and once ingredients are integrated, "pound" the salad roughly twenty times with the two spoons, stirring occasionally.

3. Taste and adjust seasonings accordingly. Serve topped with a generous handful of peanuts and a slice of lime.

Katy Clune

Denny Culbert

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

ON FIGHTING—AND TAMING—FIRE

By Kevin Pang

Pitmaster Samuel Jones

SAMUEL JONES, fire chief in the town of Ayden, North Carolina, can describe in lucid detail his first encounter with a structure fire.

He was twelve. On Fridays he would spend the night at his grandparents' house. One evening Grandpa Pete had just finished supper when a neighbor hollered into their home: "Mr. Jones, your stable is on fire!" Inside the stable were Pete Jones's sixteen racehorses. Young Samuel and his cousin J.D. bolted for the stable, hoping to bring out the horses before it was too late.

As he ran, Samuel saw neighbors pull up in pickup trucks and change out of their work clothes and into fire suits. They were volunteer firefighters, and, like Samuel and J.D., they ran toward the fire and saved all but two of the horses.

By the time Jones reached high-school age, he didn't work at a video store or a dairy bar. In 1997 he joined the fire department. Today, as chief, he oversees forty-four volunteer firefighters in his hometown. He sleeps with his fire department pager on. For the first month after his daughter was born in 2012, Jones slept in the guest bedroom for fear of waking the baby. Sometimes in the middle of the night, he has to get out of bed and run toward the fire.

OUTSIDE AYDEN—population 5,000 and change—Samuel Jones is not known for firefighting. He is the face of Skylight Inn, the eastern North Carolina joint beloved for whole-hog barbecue. Six days a week, the dome-topped restaurant echoes with the machine-gun staccato of cleavers chopping through peppered-and-vinegared pork. They top each serving with coleslaw and a slab of cornbread, much in the same way it's been served here for nearly seventy years. Locals refer to Skylight by a more endearing and familiar name: Pete Jones BBQ. Samuel Jones is the seventh generation in a family of whole-hog pitmasters.

"You need to look, listen, and feel," says Jones, speaking of both vocations. "When you arrive at a structure fire, if there's no fire visible and there's something burning inside, you can tell what's happening by the behavior of smoke coming out. I can also pull up to the parking lot at Skylight and just from the smoke coming out of the smoke house, I can tell you what's going on."

Chart the professions of firefighters and barbecue pitmasters and the Venn diagram overlaps more than you'd think. Pitmasters such as Jackie Hite, Woodrow Washington, Ricky Scott—all have moonlighted as firefighters.

"Seeing those fire trucks and lights going down the street, man, I wanted to be one of those," says Scott, a firefighter for twenty-seven years and proprietor of the Thursdays-only Ricky's BBQ in Kingstree, South Carolina. "The brave, the finest, helping save lives—something I always wanted to be."

You would think firefighters hate fire, something they spend their professional lives trying to smother and extinguish. This is a fallacy. Firefighters *love* fire. They savor the challenge of taming a force of nature before it runs wild.

Thumb to the wind, a good 85 percent of fire stations have someone on staff proficient with a smoker or grill. Samuel Jones says many rural fire departments, especially ones with tight budgets, stage barbecues to raise funds.

Understanding the science of combustion contributes to the barbecue pitmaster's fortunes. On the first day of firefighting academy, trainees learn about the fire tetrahedron. For fire to exist, three components must be present: fuel plus oxygen plus heat.

Jones's fire helmet

Daniel Vaughn

For Craig Kimmel, a firefighter-paramedic of twenty-three years with the Seminole County Fire Department in Florida, one of the most important lessons he's carried over to the barbecue world is the ability to read smoke.

"Different colors of smoke tell you certain things," says Kimmel, who also runs the FireHouse BBQ food truck in Orlando. "Black smoke indicates it's not burning clean. You wipe a wet finger on your meat and it comes away black. It's all soot and carcinogens."

Kimmel says not allowing proper ventilation in the pit causes stale smoke, which turns meat bitter.

What pitmasters want, Samuel Jones says, is a sheer white smoke. Jones explains that smoke is just unburned gases, which means it's also flammable. The darker smoke gets, the closer it gets to its ignition point. "Once it gets pitch black, the firefighter can't be far into the room," he says. "I'm talking three or four feet into the room. When that happens, he won't be able to get out."

The best pitmasters rely on a host of other fire-science principles. The delicate balance of the fire tetrahedron is required to maintain a consistent burn. If the fuel, oxygen, or heat goes out, the fire will die. Water is another important consideration: Some pitmasters, especially those on the South Side of Chicago, will regulate temperature and moisture by spraying water into their pits with a garden hose. A droplet of water expands 1,600 times in volume when it vaporizes into steam. More moisture equals more smoke.

"It's a brotherhood in the fire department," says Kimmel, who spends more than half of the work week on his barbecue catering business and the rest on firefighting. "The guys seem to always do something together off duty. We eat together. A lot of times you know these people a lot more than your own family."

"It's the fact that you're in control of something that's way more powerful than anything you can deal with," says Robby Royal, EMS and fire chief in Turner County, Georgia, and captain of the competitive barbecue team Rescue Smokers. "You're holding the power to how hot it's going to get. It's a domination factor. You have control over your pit."

On August 28, 2008, Samuel Jones's two worlds converged. He had just returned from helping battle a blaze two fire districts over. Back at the Skylight Inn, fire conditions were prime: A hot summer evening, humidity low, with winds blowing from the southeast between thirty and forty miles per hour. Jones asked his pitmaster whether he left anything burning in chimney. He said no. Still, the smokehouse was a constant 180 to 200 degrees. All it would take was the right amount of wind, residual heat, and some rendered pork fat for fuel.

Three and a half minutes after Jones locked up the smokehouse, brown smoke started billowing

Denny Culbert

The pits at Skylight Inn

from the chimney. Soon, flames leapt out of the vents.

"You take your apron off and put your fire suit on," Jones says, "and you went from manager to firefighter in charge."

It took four hours for Jones to call the "all clear" that night. It was so hot inside the smokehouse that the hosed-down pits became troughs of boiling water.

"Normally, we put the fire out, I sit and talk to the homeowner, and then we all go back to our normal lives," Jones says. "Only difference with this was I took my fire helmet off and put my apron back on, and went, 'dang.' Almost like you're being robbed to some extent. Because that was our livelihood." Rebuilding the Skylight Inn smokehouse took six months.

The economics of small-town firefighting are brutal. The position of Ayden fire chief pays Samuel Jones a stipend of $2,400 a year. His department pays volunteers $9 an emergency call that covers maintenance and gas. A check is doled out twice a year as gratuity.

Calling firefighting a second career is a wrong choice of words. Jones considers it a civic duty. It just happens barbecue guys like himself know a thing or two about how to tame fires. "If we had to do away with gratuity because of budget constraints, one or two might bellyache," Jones says, "but the rest of them would have no problem with it. The way I look at it, a lot of things have to be done in our community for free that I don't possess the skills to do. But I possess the skill to be chief of the fire department. I don't ever see myself not being a firefighter. I never intend on getting out."

Kevin Pang is a staff writer at the Chicago Tribune.

CRESCENT CITY BRUNCH

ARE YOU A BRUNCH HATER? BLAME IT ON THE BEGUÉS.

By Rien Fertel

The Historic New Orleans Collection, acc. no. 1981.261.29

Begué's dining room

BRUNCH: WE LOVE IT. We hate it. We adore brunch for the promise of breakfast, lunch, and booze before noon. And we blame brunch for a host of ills: shoddy service, gummy eggs, and afternoons wrecked by bottomless mimosas. There's a thin line between love and hate, as the song goes, and often a very, very long line to wait for brunch. In New Orleans, where I call home, a recent art installation blamed brunch for raising rents in one particularly hipsterized neighborhood. A satirical takeoff of old carnival cutouts or amusement park stand-ins, the piece asked, "Who needs neighbors when we've got brunch?" as if Eggs Benedict might be the scourge of gentrification. But brunch is as much a part of New Orleans as Dixieland jazz, Carnival season, and Sunday second lines.

The Historic New Orleans Collection, MSS 527

LEFT: *Madame Begué;* **RIGHT:** *Monsieur Begué*

Its origin story dates to the mid-nineteenth century, in the French Quarter. An enterprising young woman who would come to adopt the grand title Madame Begué not only popularized brunch here but had a hand in creating a global demand for that decadent mid-morning meal. From the kitchen of her restaurant at the corner of Decatur and Madison, Madame Begué served a single meal each day, promptly at 11 A.M. A maximum of thirty diners sat communally at two long tables. She did not use the word brunch, but rather "second breakfast," which she defined as a morning feast, stretching three to four hours into the afternoon and consisting of eight to ten courses, chicory coffee, and pour after pour of French wine and Champagne.

Omelets were at the center of Begué's second breakfasts, hearty and stuffed with robust ingredients: Gulf oysters, slices of fried veal, sweetbreads, fried potatoes. Her specialty, Liver à la Begué, was a Saturday standard: lobes of of beef liver skillet-fried in lard.

Born in Bavaria in 1831, Elizabeth Kettenring, the future Madame Begué, came to New Orleans at the age of twenty-two to join her brother Philip, a butcher in the stalls of the French Market, which ran along the river opposite the Lower French Quarter. There, Elizabeth met and married another butcher, Louis Dutrey, and in 1863 they opened Dutrey's Coffee House at 207 Old Levee Street. He served coffee and tended bar downstairs. She cooked and served late breakfast, or early lunch, upstairs for butchers who shuttered their stalls at 11 A.M. to avoid the heat of the midday sun.

After Louis died in 1877, she married a butcher-turned-bartender, Hippolyte Begué. He joined her business, which they renamed Begué's Exchange. For the next several years, the Begués continued at this pace, serving late, hearty breakfasts, coffee, and wine to French- and German-born butchers.

Their fortunes dramatically shifted in the winter of 1884,

BY 1890, TOURISTS HAD SUPPLANTED THE BUTCHERS AT BEGUE'S TABLES, AND RESERVATIONS WERE REQUIRED WEEKS IN ADVANCE.

when scores of New York and Boston newspapermen and -women descended on New Orleans to report on the World's Fair, held in what is now Audubon Park. Many remained to document a city in the midst of a social and cultural renaissance. At the time, New Orleans boasted the nation's most vibrant theatre scene, an influential circle of literati and other public intellectuals, and storied restaurants like the St. Charles Saloon and the Jewel.

But it was Begué's shabby surroundings, juxtaposed with the extravagance of the meal, that captured the hearts and pens of those writers. "No sign marks the entrance," wrote one, "and up one must go by the darkest, narrowest, most tortuous of stairways. This lands one in a plain room with sanded floor, just large enough to hold a table."

Begué's was the semi-secret speakeasy of its day: elaborately designed to feel authentic, romantic, and a bit crusty. "The table is unadorned," the account continued, "the linen coarse...the china common, but all this one forgets with the first course... shrimp salad served with a pepper sauce.... Then came boiled fish with potatoes. Finally Monsieur Begué entered with an immense omelet, which he carried around the table, so all could view its size and lightness.... By this time our stock of adjectives was so diminished we could say little, but merely wondered what next."

Dozens of articles detailed Begué's second breakfast. As much as they praised the food, they reveled in the ritualistic lavishness of the experience: the dirty stairwell; portly Monsieur Begué, seated at the table's head, commencing the feast by dipping a cap of French bread into a glass of red wine; the midday hours disappearing under the weight of massive omelets and too much Champagne; a peek into the Madame's simple kitchen; finally, coffee served with brûléed sugar soaked in Cognac. Shared tables, conviviality, drunkenness: This was Begué's.

Around this time, in 1895, Guy Beringer coined the portmanteau "brunch" in the short-lived British magazine *Hunter's Weekly*: "Instead of England's early Sunday dinner, a post-church ordeal of heavy meats and savory pies, why not a new meal, served around noon, that starts with tea or coffee, marmalade and other breakfast fixtures...before moving along to the heavier fare?" He continued, "By eliminating the need to get up early on Sunday, brunch would make life brighter for Saturday night carousers." Almost immediately, brunch became a symbol of overindulgence and wealth, its origins as a butchers' repast fading from view.

Meanwhile, a broader New Orleans restaurant culture took shape. By 1890, tourists had supplanted the butchers at Begué's tables, reservations were now required weeks in advance, and cookbooks circulated. Madame Begué's second breakfast had made her the nation's first female celebrity chef. "Madame Begue [sic] is dead," wrote one Boston magazine upon her death in 1906. "No more Epicurean breakfasts in the Quartier Latin for the *bon-vivants* of the nation."

Rather than close the restaurant and miss out on an opportunity to cash in, Hippolyte Begué married the Madame's kitchen apprentice, Françoise Laporte, who was crowned the second Madame Begué. Like Marie Laveau or Louis Armstrong, Begué's name was mythologized, and she became part of the fabric of New Orleans lore. This second partnership continued for a decade, until January 1916, when Hippolyte sold the business to his neighboring rivals. Today, in the former Begué's, Tujague's Restaurant still serves a Madame-esque brisket with Creole horseradish. (If you visit, head upstairs to examine a cabinet of Begué memorabilia.)

As the Begué era drew to a close, brunch faced an uncertain future in the United States. Prohibition all but eliminated the possibility of

An early-twentieth century etching by Louis Oscar Griffith depicts Begué's building

The Historic New Orleans Collection, partial gift of Dr. James W. Nelson, acc. no. 2008.0216.59

The Historic New Orleans Collection, acc. no. 1981.261.29

Begué's kitchen

brunchiest of brunches: brandy milk punch, turtle soup drizzled with aged sherry, and rum-flambéed Bananas Foster.

Over the ensuing decades, live music, for better or worse, has become synonymous with brunch. In 1974 five members of the Brennan family—Ella, Adelaide, Dottie, Dick, and John—decamped from their family's flagship to revive an old Garden District restaurant, Commander's Palace. Even before bringing on Chef Paul Prudhomme the following year, they rolled out Saturday and Sunday jazz brunch. They tapped Alvin Alcorn, a journeyman trumpeter with over a half-century of experience, to lead a four-piece band that serenaded diners from the Garden Room. In 1976 he released an album called *Soft and Over Easy at Commander's Palace* (give it a spin on Spotify).

a boozy breakfast in public, while shifting social and economic norms domesticated the meal. Newspaper columns encouraged ladies to serve the meal at home. A sober home brunch could save time and money for the modern middle-class household. "Make Sunday a two-meal day," one columnist in Ohio suggested, and "we're just as well fed and lots happier. Much of the brunch can be prepared on Saturday...and Sunday in our house is now a day when each one of us has a chance to rest."

Brunch would soon return to the public sphere. By midcentury a new generation of brunch-centric restaurants rose to fill the void left by Begué's. Brennan's, opened in 1946, kept the term "breakfast" while serving New Orleans'

The Brennans were brilliant marketers. Soon advertisements sold the Commander's Palace Jazz Brunch as "Pure New Orleans, part of the heart and soul of this city we all love." The marriage of jazz and eggs proved so popular that brunch spots throughout city, and eventually the world, copied the idea. Today, the jazz brunch is a staple in New York and Paris and even Dubai, where the super-luxury Jumeirah Hotel hosts a New Orleans-themed jazz brunch on Saturdays, complete with jambalaya and Creole baked chicken.

New Orleans cannot claim invention of jazz brunch's first cousin, the gospel brunch. That trend likely originated in New York City circa 1985, at the Southern soul food restaurant Lola's, in Chelsea. The Crescent City can probably claim responsibility for jazz brunch's rowdier sibling, the Drag Brunch. A twice-monthly affair since 2010, the Drag Brunch at the Country Club in the Bywater neighborhood is one of the toughest reservations in town. It features live entertainment—lip-syncing, catwalking—by the famous Mimosa Girls, who pour bottomless pitchers of their namesake cocktail.

L. Kasimu Harris

Breakfast at Brennan's, summer 2015

A century after the closing of Begué's, the history of brunch has come full circle: a mid-morning meal, invented in New Orleans, and grounded in sociability. But, to return to the question posed by the incendiary art installation: In today's New Orleans, can historic neighborhoods coexist alongside the newest brunch spots? We might do well to remember that, since the days of the first Madame, brunch has served as an introductory meal, a welcome mat of sorts, to visitors and new acquaintances across the expanse of the common table. Butchers and drag queens, journalists and jazz trumpeters, and several Begués have all hosted and toasted brunch with mimosas in hand. If we make room for all of our neighbors among the Benedicts and booze, there might be hope for brunch yet.

Rien Fertel writes, teaches, and calls New Orleans home. He spoke about Begué's and brunch at the 2015 SFA Summer Symposium.

Courtesy David Shields

CONJURING FLAVORS FROM MUSTY PAGES

HOW ONE POLYMATH IS HELPING TO REWRITE SOUTHERN CUISINE

by Hanna Raskin

David Shields in a field of flowering benne

When I made plans to meet David Shields in downtown Charleston, he warned me that he'd have to leave by 6 P.M. He had a prior engagement at a bowling alley.

My intention was to save the tough questions for our meeting. But I had to ask: What business did he have in a bowling alley 115 miles from home?

"Would it surprise you to learn that I am a high-stakes bowling sharp that snookers young vain ten-pin amateurs for $$$?" the University of South Carolina professor e-mailed back. No, it wouldn't. Not at all.

Actually, he was an expected guest at his wife Luci's office party. Shields is an excellent party guest who can converse in polished paragraphs on almost any topic: He's an authority on Russian piano music, a black belt in karate, and a renowned scholar of silent movie still photography. Like his bow ties and brick of a cell phone, Shields's mishmash interests seem to come from an earlier time, when men of means spent their days memorizing poetry and doing calisthenics.

There's nothing dilettantish about Shields's pursuits. A decade ago, he teamed up with Glenn Roberts of Anson Mills to parlay a longstanding interest in early American food culture into the restoration of a Southern crop system that developed around the commodification of rice: They envisioned bringing back the Sea Island white flint corn, Charleston Wakefield cabbages, and red sieva beans that nourished coastal rice fields and the people who farmed them. The Carolina Gold Rice Foundation now resembles a kind of Justice League of the Countryside, with Roberts as pitchman, Stephen Kresovich of Clemson University as scientist, Brian Ward of the Clemson Coastal Research and Education Center as grower, and Shields as historian—albeit one who happily wanders into freshly plowed fields.

The Southern food universe is expanding because of Shields's meticulous scholarship. "David declared he would produce world-class historic documentation to guide the revival of Carolina rice cuisine," Roberts recalls. "No one anticipated the scope of his grand vision. His commitment to historic integrity has given birth to paradigm shifts in prevailing interpretations of Southern culinary history."

Shields started his work by reading nineteenth-century agricultural journals. Over three years, he read them all, producing a master list of South Carolina's provision crops, companion crops, and cash crops in the era before industrial agriculture. Shields charged through the dense texts swiftly, tapping into an inherited aptitude for lexical speed: His father, an editor and sometime-CIA operative who spoke in puns, typed three times faster than most professional secretaries.

"When I have a project, I work unceasingly until it's done," Shields says. "I don't have rituals; I don't have to have a sharpened pencil. I just bang it out." (To the background sounds of Soviet symphonies if he's facing a deadline; punk-pop Nobunny or electropop MØ if he's transcribing new ideas.) "I have a really good attention span. I think getting married helped."

Shields married Lucinda Emley in 1980. They were classmates at the College of William & Mary, but didn't start dating until after their five-year class reunion. "We all went dancing," Shields says. "She didn't realize I could dance. And I mean I could really dance." Emley was then studying piano performance at the Eastman School of Music; she later became the first female

stockbroker in Charleston.

At home, Shields is the designated cook. His curiosity about food dates back at least to his undergraduate days, when he pressed the Colonial Williamsburg gardeners to explain cardoons, a spiny, celery-like plant that he didn't recognize. Since then, he's gone through phases: An intense period of Thai cooking in the 1990s followed a "wok moment" in the 1980s. "I guess my fantasy was if I could cook in a wok, I could be a professional," he says.

He never achieved that dream, exactly. Yet his work is on nightly display in restaurants from New Orleans to New York City. At Saison in Richmond, Adam Hall wedges pickled oyster mushrooms and spicy gochujang sauce into a bowl of Carolina Gold rice, produced according to methods Shields pried from musty books. At Old Village Post House in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, Forrest Parker decorates triggerfish crudo with African runner peanuts, tracked down by Shields sixty years after seed searchers wrote off the crop as forever lost.

And at Husk in Charleston, diners mark the last hot weeks of summer with compressed and salted wedges of Bradford watermelon, a fugitive heirloom that nearly drove Shields to hopelessness. With Shields's support, the melon's heretofore unknown guardian, Nat Bradford, collected all of the seeds segregated out during the brandy-making process at High Wire Distilling,

Kate Medley

SHIELDS'S WORK IS ON NIGHTLY DISPLAY IN RESTAURANTS FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NEW YORK CITY.

hinting at the economic potential of Shields's findings for South Carolina producers.

"They're like books," Shields says of the chestnuts and sorghums and beans he's helped usher back into existence. "They embrace entire cultures. They've got to be preserved at all costs."

The wish list of crops that Shields and Roberts compiled isn't merely an index of every forgotten cultivar Shields encountered in his research. They very deliberately focused only on fruits, vegetables, and grains that reportedly tasted good, succeeded in the nineteenth-century marketplace, and differ substantially from what's now available.

As his recent book *Southern Provisions: The Creation & Revival of a Cuisine* makes clear, Shields brooks no sentimentality when it comes to bygone varietals. A mention on an 1859 menu doesn't automatically qualify a field pea for a callback. But if delegates to a farmers' congress that year delivered lengthy testaments to the pea's superior flavor, Shields would e-mail Kresovich about the logistics of restoration.

"The interesting thing about aesthetics is if something had the capacity to provoke human pleasure at any point in any time, it should be able to do so at a later point in time," Shields says. "We can listen with great satisfaction to Vivaldi's Four Seasons. It's not the classical music that's being written now. It's not the popular music that's being written now. But its capacity to charm the ear is great."

In ten years, Shields predicts, the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation will have brought back every crop in the sphere of flavor built around rice. The latest project is purple straw wheat, which Shields had to free from a web of misapplied names. He's also chasing the Hick's mulberry and Duke cherry, both of which will be chronicled on The Old Southern Orchard, a comprehensive website he's building.

"After I got tenure, I decided that I would develop an expertise for each one of my senses," Shields says. "I have to save one for when I retire, and that will be smell: Eventually, I'm going to do a history of the perfume trade. But right at the moment, it's taste. This is a critical moment in the history of food."

Hanna Raskin is the food editor and chief critic of The Post and Courier *in Charleston, South Carolina.*

THANKS A MINT

MY HOMETOWN SECRET

by Sheri Castle

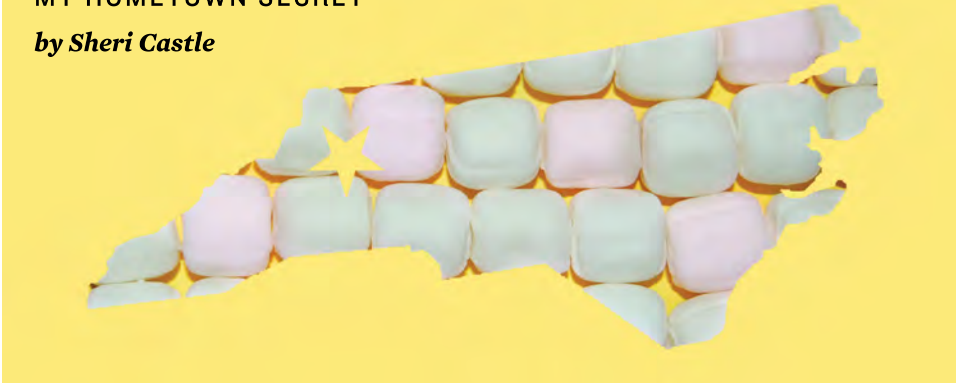


Photo illustration by Brooke Hatfield

YOU KNOW THOSE little individually wrapped butter mints that come with the check at a certain type of restaurant, perhaps the chain steakhouse where your aunts and uncles take you when you go to visit, a place that pegs the doneness of the meat with colored plastic picks? The mints that wait politely in a cut-glass bowl next to the register at the meat-and-three, where the implied offer is all you can carry but you restrain yourself to a decorous two? Yes, those mints. You pop the first one in your mouth as you walk to the car and eat the second when you find it in the bottom of your cup holder a day or three later. The candy has a slight crisp crust on the outside, quickly melting on the tongue to a wonderfully smooth and creamy interior, like a tasty glob of buttercream frosting left out overnight.

Hospitality Mint Company in my hometown of Boone, high in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina, makes a prodigious number of these mints. In a community curiously called Bamboo, across from the tiny private airstrip that the locals wryly call Bamboo International, the factory building on Candy Lane is nondescript. Around it, the air swirls with the scents of sugar and chocolate and mint.

Inside, 155 employees, almost all locals who have worked there for years, crank out as many as 10 million mints a day. Most of these are the soft, white, peppermint puffs. That's more than 1 billion a year. Even in the days of mechanization, making mints is tedious. Each 2500-pound batch takes nuanced adjustment and handwork

THE AIR AROUND THE HOSPITALITY MINT FACTORY SWIRLS WITH THE SCENTS OF SUGAR AND CHOCOLATE AND MINT.

while it cooks. Perfect mints demand merging and managing sugar, butter, time, and heat. Even on a winter day when employees have to climb on the roof to shovel off the weighty snow, the candy kitchen can soar to 120 degrees.

Hospitality Mints began as a family business in 1976. Founder Mitchell Minges started with a few copper kettles and a marble slab in the corner of the sauerkraut factory his family ran near downtown Boone. In 1988 they moved to the current location so they could increase capacity and refine their packaging. Each mint is individually wrapped in its own cocoon. Multiple patents protect the printing system that stamps custom logos and images onto every wrapper.

Four cordial women answer the customer service calls at the factory. Rarely a day goes by when someone doesn't ring up only to say thanks and chat a bit. One caller recently ordered her own case of mints to keep at home, lest she be "banned for life from the Sizzler" for filling her purse each time she left after Sunday lunch.

Hospitality Mints sells to all fifty states and the better part of Canada. It never fails to charm and center me when I'm traveling and flip up the flap on my mint wrapper to see the words BOONE, NORTH CAROLINA. I've turned that bit of trivia into a bar trick. Each time I get a chance, I hover my hand over the unopened mints and tell my tablemates that I can intuit where those mints came from. Sometimes I go so far as to make a friendly wager. I've never made a meal of those mints, but I've eaten lunch off them more than once. How hospitable.

Sheri Castle, a lover of mountains, farmers' markets, and bourbon, writes about food and teaches cooking in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

GRAVY

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THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

We set a common table where black and white, rich and poor—all who gather—may consider our history and our future in a spirit of reconciliation.

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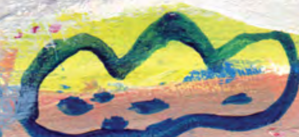
WHAT IS VINEGAR? ACTUALLY?

SPECTRUM OF FERMENTATION

BY PHIL BLANK & APRIL McGREGOR

1 WE START WITH RAW FRUIT OR GRAINS. THIS BEGINNING IS THE END OF AN EQUALLY MIRACULOUS PROCESS OF PLANT GROWTH THAT CREATES SUGARS OUT OF SUNLIGHT AND DIRT. HOWEVER THIS SUGAR WILL CAUSE THE FRUIT TO ROT IF LEFT ALONE.

2 IF YOU MAKE A FRUIT JUICE AND CAREFULLY CONTROL ITS EXPOSURE TO OXYGEN YOU WILL MAKE WINE. THE ALCOHOL IS A WASTEPRODUCT OF THE BACTERIA THAT ARE EATING THE SUGARS. WHEN THE BALANCE BETWEEN FLAVOR AND ALCOHOL PEAKS, CORK THE WINE TO STOP OXIDATION.



3 IF YOU CONTINUE TO EXPOSE THE WINE TO AIR, YOU WILL GET VINEGAR. IN THIS WAY, VINEGARS ARE CONSIDERED A "DOUBLE FERMENT." BECAUSE THE ORIGINAL INGREDIENTS HAVE BEEN RADICALLY TRANSFORMED BY NOW, CONTROLLING FLAVOR IS DIFFICULT.

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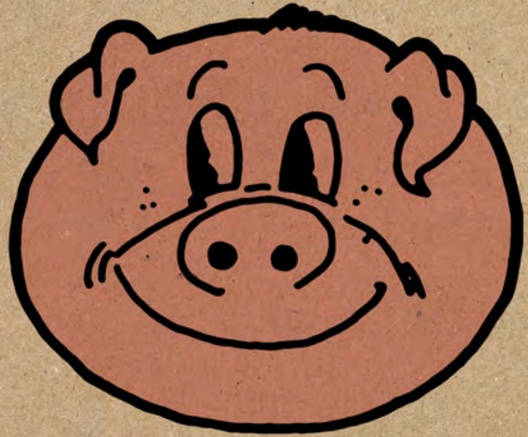

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