#44

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Gravy

A FOOD LETTER

FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

PUBLICATION OF GRAVY IS UNDERWRITTEN BY **MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER**

Gravy

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ABOUT GRAVY

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Building a Barbecue Sandwich

THIS SUMMER, we serve you a *Gravy*-style barbecue sandwich. Instead of choosing one sandwich from a favorite spot, we've custom-built our own, employing three totemic ingredients: pork, vinegar, and white bread. We invite you to savor that sandwich while reading a reflection on barbecue, integration, and communion. And we encourage you to wash it down with an oral history about a beer joint-turned-barbecue shrine. You'll have to chop and stir the coleslaw.

—Sara Camp Arnold

PHOTO, PREVIOUS PAGE: Helen's Barbecue, Brownsville, Tennessee, 2011. Photograph by Landon Nordeman. PHOTO ABOVE by Denny Culbert.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

A barbecue communion

by Jake Adam York

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, a graduate-school classmate and I intersected in Birmingham. We'd become friends over the poetry of Keats and Yeats in upstate New York. Once a semester, we would trek to Syracuse's Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, where I'd load a rack of ribs into my toothpick-thin body, to the amazement of the Harley-riding regulars. So on his first trip to Birmingham, I decided to take Paul to Dreamland.

I mean the one near UAB. Paul wasn't ready for the Tuscaloosa cathedral. I had to ease him into it. And the Birmingham Dreamland was also part of my grad school experience: I went there with my parents just after it opened, when I made my first trip home from New York for Thanksgiving. Birmingham's Dreamland was one of the few places I could exceed my Dinosaur draw, polishing off a rack before moving on to the second. This was the obvious venue for an Alabama reunion with Paul.

What barbecue you eat provides an image of your tongue, of your taste, and thereby of your general discernment—even your tolerance. *Where* you eat says a lot about you, too. My tongue has always preferred the tangy, the hot, and the salty to the sweet, and I like a little char on my meat. This was Dreamland at its best.

BY THE TIME Paul and I slide into a booth, I've begun to write poems that explore the legacies of the Civil Rights Movement. I've spent a lot of time in Birmingham revisiting the 16th Street Baptist Church, Kelly Ingram Park, and the Gaston Motel, tracing the paths of Dynamite Bob Chambliss and Bobby Frank Cherry. The city is a palimpsest: Tilt your head and you see the past beneath the present. Everywhere I go, I know where I am in relation to the city's historical landmarks. I sit, Kelly Ingram over my right shoulder, thirty blocks away, Vulcan high over my left.

As we talk, I spot again one of the more intriguing pieces of Alabama ephemera that cover the walls, a sign that says STAND UP FOR ALABAMA—a relic from one of George Wallace's gubernatorial campaigns.

It wasn't easy being from Alabama—being white and from Alabama—in graduate school in upstate New York. I was always being asked to explain some Southern psychopathy, to parse the motives of the 16th Street Church bombers, as if being from the same place and

of the same race as the killers meant that I had some special insight, maybe even that I was in league with them. I wanted, so many times, to hold a simple point of pride in my home. I wanted to feel something other than shame. Maybe that's what George Wallace wanted, too.

But I can't read that slogan and not think of Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door, the very image of segregation. That history—the bombs and fire hoses and dogs, the resistance or the indifference to integration—casts its shadow over everything. So much separation. Belligerence, not pride. A fear, a separateness that hangs like smoke in the air.

A WAITER CATCHES MY EYE, and as he approaches, I think that if that fight against integration is a persistent part of our history, so, too, is the fight *for* integration. So, too, is the resistance to the old order, the desire to come together, which you can see here, where faces of almost every color congregate each day.

Until now, it was impossible to impart this scene to Paul, even as we PhD-seekers mingled with the motorcycle leather beneath the I-90 overpass in Syracuse. One of the core academic assumptions of the mid-'90s was that Birmingham's history would always keep us, white and black, apart.

The waiter greets me with a smile. I return the word. He turns to look Paul over, then asks him, "You ready to eat some ribs, little man?"

Paul's thin. And, as we say, he's not from around here. Somehow the waiter sees that. Maybe it's in our body language: I'm already relaxed by the scent of the smoke. Paul's still looking for the menu, something to hold in his hands, while I imagine everyone else can recite the sign over the bar: RIBS, RIB SANDWICH, WHITE BREAD, SWEET TEA—NO POTATO SALAD, NO COLESLAW, DON'T ASK.

Maybe the waiter can hear it—Birmingham, barbecue—in my voice.

As academics, Paul and I are brothers in arms. But the waiter and I, in this moment he offers me, are barbecue brothers. We speak the same language. Whatever our history tells us, however much it may remind of us our separations, our language—our tongues—bring us together.

Maybe it's only for a moment, a meal. But a meal is a promise, as it is a blessing. This is where we gather. This is where we all go to church.

Jake Adam York is the author, most recently, of the poetry collection Persons Unknown.

PHOTO, PAGE 3 by Amy Evans Streeter.

PHOTO, PAGE 5 by Denny Culbert.

Barbecue: An Exploration of Pitmasters, Places, Smoke, and Sauce

15th annual Southern Foodways Symposium

OCTOBER 18-21

NO SMALL WONDER

DOES WHITE BREAD HAVE A DARK SIDE?

as told to Gravy *by Aaron Bobrow-Strain*

IN MOST BARBECUE RESTAURANTS, white bread serves as a neutral sopper or a foil for sauce-drenched meat. But a new book by Aaron Bobrow-Strain explains that the fluffy stuff is anything but innocuous. *Gravy* asked Bobrow-Strain some questions about *White Bread: A Social History of the Store Bought Loaf* (Beacon, 2012).

What makes bread—specifically mass-produced loaves of white bread—such an appropriate case study for a discussion of food history and politics in the United States?

When I started this project, I had no idea what an important role bread played in the modern American diet. The country got, on average, 30% of its daily caloric intake from some form of bread—mostly white—from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1960s.

Because it was so essential to so many people, bread became one the country's most fought-over foods. Nearly every social reformer, diet guru, health expert, domestic advisor, military war planner, public health official, and social movement of the past century wanted to change America's bread or its bread habits in some way. So white bread is a great way to explore our nation's long, turbulent love affair with trying to "save the world" by getting people to eat differently.

What was the most surprising fact you discovered while researching White Bread?

After WWII, many U.S. officials in occupied Japan believed that, if they could just teach their former enemies to give up rice and adopt white bread as their dietary staple, the Japanese would be more democratic, peaceful, and able to stand up against the threat of Communism. This is an example of something that appears over and over again in the history of white bread: One group's confident idea of what counts as "good food" gets laden with all kinds of political and moral weight—and craziness ensues.

In the debate between white and whole-grain breads, where, if at all, does the iconic Southern cornbread fit in?

During the early twentieth century, most "experts," and lots of ordinary consumers—even in the South—believed that cornbread was an inferior food. Progressive Era food reformers fanned out all over the South to teach the gospel of modern, "scientific" eating habits to the poor. Preferring cornbread to white-wheat was seen as a sign of backwardness, and many Southerners bought into that logic.

There's one interesting exception to this story. During WWI, in an effort to conserve wheat for soldiers and allies, the U.S. government launched a massive campaign promoting cornbread consumption. The government put Southern cooks on tour to teach northerners about the joys of cornbread, sponsored seminars on the nutritional virtues of corn, and ran patriotic ads extolling corn as America's "original food." For just a moment, cornbread wasn't portrayed as a threat to the nation's health, but as essential to it.

As you mention in the book, 2009 was the first year in which sales of wheat bread eclipsed sales of white bread in U.S. grocery stores. Where will white bread be in ten years?

Wonder Bread's parent company is in bankruptcy proceedings right now—a judge is going to have to decide whether America's most iconic industrial bread is "Too Fluffy to Fail." There's a lot going on in that case, but part of it has to do with a big cultural shift away from industrial white bread. I suspect that people will always want industrial white bread for certain uses (including soaking up barbecue sauce!), but it will continue to fade away over the next ten years. At the same time, thanks to massive and growing inequality in the United States, the larger social divides epitomized by industrial white bread's lowly status today will continue unless we do something about it. We have a polarized food system that produces healthy, high-quality food mostly for the wealthy and garbage for the rest. The history of battles over white bread suggests that changing this mess will require more than just "voting with our forks" or "helping" the poor make better choices.

Aaron Bobrow-Strain teaches food politics at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington.

VINEGAR AND BARBECUE

Tales of live cultures and red herrings

by Hugh Acheson

IN THE WORLD OF BARBECUE, vinegar is a seasoning, a spritz, a wash—an agile épée to porcine succulence. Vinegar is a necessity when it comes to giving barbecue its glory. Good barbecue has a char, a pit-borne crust, and a rich, tender interior that yearns for that jolt of peppery vinegar.

I will not speak to the Mendoza Line of barbecue sauce, where vinegar yields to sweetness. I will not debate the merits of mustard or tomato, for the sauce I will share with you has both, but neither is dominant. I will not regale you with arguments about how whole is better than finely chopped. Or how ribs pale in comparison to brisket. Or how I think baby back ribs are a red herring, a cut sucked into vacuum bags in the deep recesses of a factory in China to be sold many moons later at a chain restaurant in the suburbs of Hoboken. I will tell you of the sauce I love.

Let's make a simple mopping sauce. Not just a mop, not just a sauce, but something in between. Thin enough to sink into the meat, but with a little body to it. I am not much for ketchup, but I

understand your love. I am here for you. Believe me when I say that saccharine sauces do not complement meat cooked for hours, tended with care and precision over wood coals stoked with love and strength. That's like roasting a perfect chicken and serving it with a melted jelly bean sauce. And don't get me started about liquid smoke. If you go there, we can never be friends.

I just want to make the sauce using ingredients that appear in nature, without a label. Except for that little dash of Worcestershire—and the vinegar itself, but then again, you can make that, too. It's easy. I take hard cider and mix it with Bragg's raw apple cider vinegar, a live culture vinegar, which you can find at stores that sell a lot of quinoa. Place it all in the biggest mason jar you have and cover with a paper towel. Store it in a cool cupboard. In about three weeks, you have apple cider vinegar.

Back to the sauce. Don't be scared of the allspice. It's a spice component in America's favorite vegetable, ketchup.

Turn the page for the recipe.

PLEASANTLY LUMPY BARBECUE SAUCE

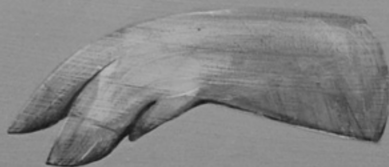
1 tablespoon bacon fat (You're reading *Gravy*, so naturally you have this at the ready)
¼ minced sweet onion
2 cloves garlic, peeled and thinly sliced
¾ cup cored, seeded and finely diced tomato
½ teaspoon kosher salt
¼ teaspoon freshly ground allspice (about 6 berries)
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
1 teaspoon crushed red chile flake
½ teaspoon dried mustard
½ tablespoon sorghum molasses or honey
½ cup Bragg's raw apple cider vinegar
¼ cup water

In a heavy sauce-pot, like enameled cast iron, heat the bacon fat over medium heat. Add the onion and cook for 5 minutes, stirring every one in a while. Then add the garlic and cook for 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes, cooking for 5 minutes to a pap consistency. Season with the salt and then add the allspice, Worcestershire, chile flakes, and honey. Cook down for 5 minutes until the tomatoes look like tomato sauce. Add the vinegar and water and cook for 30 minutes. Cool and pulse in the blender.

This is a sauce to have in a mason jar, and not in a squeeze bottle. It's lumpy. That's good. Spoon it out onto your pulled 'cue. Taste the goodness and be happy with the rowdy friend we have in vinegar.

Hugh Acheson is the chef of 5&10 in Athens, Georgia, and the author of A New Turn in the South.
PHOTO, PAGE 11 by Denny Culbert.

FROM BEER JOINT TO BARBECUE TEMPLE



Leo & Susie's
Famous Green Top Bar-B-Q
Dora, Alabama

as told to Amy Evans Streeter by Susie Headrick, September 26, 2006

In 1951, Green Top Bar-B-Que opened its doors alongside Highway 78 in Dora, Alabama. Offering cold beer and a jukebox packed with dance tunes, the Green Top was an oasis in a desert of dry counties.

Twenty-two years later, coalminer Leo Headrick bought the Green Top from its original owners. He wanted to get out of the mines and start a second career working with his wife. Susie let the roadhouse clientele have their fun, but she focused on the food. Eventually the Green Top became known for its barbecue, cooked in pits out back. Leo passed away in 1997. Their son has taken over the business, but Susie still stops by the Green Top every day.

MY NAME IS SUSIE HEADRICK, and I was born in 1922 in Sipsey, Alabama. Leo and I met in high school. He was a football player and I was a cheerleader, but I didn't date Leo then. We got married in 1942. My husband made two good decisions in his life, and the first one was marrying me and then the next one was buying the Green Top.

But when we first bought it, well, it was kind of rough. My husband, he worked on the day shift, and our son, Richard, and I worked at night. Sometimes I'd have to straighten people out. On Thursday nights we'd have a big crowd from Jasper, and they'd sing and dance. My husband, he always sang a lot, especially when he had him several drinks. We had a jukebox and after we'd close the grill up, there'd be some people in there that would still be drinking, and a lot of times we'd dance. Sometimes I'd sing with him, but most of the time I was too busy trying to keep everything going.

When we first came down here, people were bad to break in. There's a little building behind the Green Top, so we put us a bed in that and we would night-watch—sleep out there and go home in morning. But then we decided that that was too much trouble, and we bought a trailer and put it behind the restaurant. I liked living here because I could always go out there and check on things. If they needed anything, I could take care of that. And I like it now. I usually go by when I'm going to the bank. I get me a Sprite and come home and eat lunch. And I usually cook for me and Richard or anybody else that drops around. And then about seven o'clock at night, I go back out there and sit and talk.

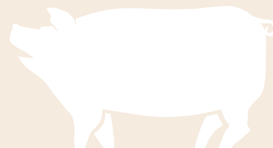
Through the years I've had a lot of good friends out there. It's been hard work, but it's like I told them: If I hadn't gone into the restaurant business, I'd have to be on welfare now. I never have gotten rich, but I do have a good living. And it's fun at my age. There are people that came out there when they were young, and their mouths will fly open—they're so excited to see me at my age. And they hug me and give me a peck on the cheek, and it's just a joy to know that you've had that many friends in your lifetime.

Amy Evans Streeter is the SFA's oral historian.
IMAGE, PAGE 13: Zelda Got Home Much Later Than She Expected to. *Acrylic on wood panel by Amy Evans Streeter, 2011.*

ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE ▸

Picture a Piggly Wiggly without the wiggly. An all-hog supermarket. The soft glow of neon illuminates lowboy cases filled with every conceivable cut, chop, and chitlin. Across the highway, five days' worth of live pigs fatten themselves for the slaughter. Deep in eastern North Carolina, where swine outnumber people, the Nahunta Pork Center sells everything but the hog's hair. In 1975, after decades of farming, founder Mack Pierce stepped down from his tractor to open a retail storefront, focused on all things porcine. Today, his son, Larry Pierce, serves as the general manager. "They see that pig head sitting there in the meat case," Larry says. And they think, "This is real."

—Rien Fertel



Nahunta Pork Center, Nahunta, North Carolina, 2011.
Photograph by Denny Culbert.

IF YOU'RE READING THIS IN A RESTAURANT OR STORE,
it's yours for the taking.

IF YOU'RE READING THIS AT HOME,
and you're not yet an SFA member, please join at www.southernfoodways.org.

IF YOU ARE AN SFA MEMBER,
well, thank you.

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

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