

Pleasure
AND
Prohibitions

Savannah's history of regulation,
revelry, and sweet treats

by IMANI PERRY

52



Caramel apples dry in the kitchen window at Savannah's Candy Kitchen. The city's well-established sweet tooth contrasts with its decidedly unsweet rates of poverty.

Jac Malloy



Cheryl Day is the owner, with her husband, Griffith Day, of Savannah's Back in the Day Bakery. She is at work on her second cookbook, which will tell stories of black women bakers, including her great-grandmother, who was born into slavery in 1838.



The two women I met,

who were casually proselytizing for Jehovah, warned me not to go down to the waterfront at night. “It’s too wild down there!” They sat, I stood, in one of Savannah’s twenty-two squares. ¶ Although I’ve been to Savannah more times than I remember, I noticed something this time that I hadn’t attended to before. Each square is a palimpsest of history. The Revolution, the Great War, the African, the Confederate, the French, the other Great War. In the thick of flora, the monuments pose cat a corner to one another, at once composed and cluttered. Founded in 1733, Savannah is an old city for the United States, with a politely vexed history.

I’d made my way to this square on the way back from an antique store that I visited on the very off chance that it might still have the earrings I’d coveted a decade ago (of course, no earrings). I said, “How y’all doing today?” That was all the greeting the two women needed to get going.

They were friends and retired. They told me they sat in that square often in the afternoon. Were it not for the sign and copies of *The Watchtower*, I wouldn’t know they intended to encourage me to join the ranks of the 144,000 who will make it home to Jehovah after death. Both were easy conversationalists. One looked like a Southern city woman, wearing green separates, tortoiseshell glasses, and a straightened, coppersy,

tapered haircut. The other was more country. Her arms and long fingers stretched out along the back of the bench. Her afro was salt and pepper, her skin a remarkably smooth blue-black. Her voice was deep, but raised in a singsong whenever she cooed over the tiny dogs that led their owners past us.

The problem, as they described it, is a problem of many tourist destinations in the South. Visitors, released from the shame and shreds of dignity they carry at home, came there to get wildly drunk. They didn’t know how to act, didn’t have any home training, and cut up badly.

Southerners are, generally speaking, both exacting in their judgment and good at alcohol. These people, however, from out of town couldn’t be trusted. I trusted

their judgment: “You a little bitty thing too, and look like you from around here,” and avoided the waterfront at night.

When Savannah was founded, three things were outlawed: slavery, lawyers, and rum. All three prohibitions failed stupendously in the face of prospective wealth. The elegant, even lavish, downtown area is a testament to the prosperity gained by the forbidden: the port, the cotton gin and exchange, and black people made Savannah rich. And so pleasure here, as nearly everywhere, has a gripping, anguished underside.

I must admit, I was a little bit surprised when the women started talking about a new health-food store that they enjoyed. It had good prices, they said, even though it was part of gentrification’s encroach. I wasn’t surprised that they liked the healthy goods, mind you. I’ve always rejected the tendency to talk about Southern food in terms of what’s “bad.” Eating greens, beans, corn, and even freshly slaughtered meat, the mainstays of our foodways, is one of the healthiest habits in the nation.

Our nutritional deprivation these days is more than anything a consequence of

fast food, mass production, and poverty. I think of the health-food industry as so often very white, moralizing, and as I said, gentrifying. But this place, they told me, was nice. The country woman said a young man who worked there gave her an effective cure for her constipation. While approving of the rates for green beans, the other cautioned that you have to be careful when it comes to vitamins, “cause you can’t be sure what all they’re putting in there.”

It’s true. Regulations are both necessary and tricky. They save lives, and sometimes they destroy them. I thought about that the next day, walking around Savannah, when I came across one of its many tourist destinations: the only museum devoted to the Prohibition period in U.S. history.

Among its features is an exhibition on one of the more colorful characters in a Technicolor Southern history: Carry Nation. Hailing from Kentucky, Nation claimed she received a message from God after her first husband died from alcoholism. She was a soldier for temperance. At first, she entered bars and threw rocks, but at the suggestion of her

*Southerners are,
generally speaking,
both exacting in their
judgment and good
at alcohol.*

Jennifer Chase

Queen of Tarts pastries at Back in the Day Bakery



second husband (she reportedly said this was the only smart thing he ever said), she began to wield a hatchet instead. She hacked away at tables, counters, and stools for the Lord. Her antics put me in the mind of one of Savannahian writer Flannery O'Connor's best quotes: "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one."

From the julep at the Kentucky Derby to the Sazerac of New Orleans, the South is known for mixing a good drink. Yet, the moral and religious argument against drink has also flourished in the region. Perhaps that makes sense. We know the price of the intoxication.

But I also think of it as one of the numerous contradictions that we carry: preaching doing right while all the while doing wrong, the habits of a people convinced of a forgiving yet judging God. And just maybe, it is an essential refuge in a cruel history. It quiets the haunting. I do not think the South is uglier than the rest of the nation, but I know that it has been required to witness inequity up close much more.

Sugar, like liquor, soothes. But unlike liquor, it isn't charged with sin, at least not in the South just yet. Though living off the land, fresh vegetables and fruits, and farms are within hands' reach, so are the sweetnesses of extra-processed cane, beets, and corn. I imagine that during Prohibition, and between bouts of religious temperance, sugar often filled the yearning for a respite until backsliding crept up. In fact, I don't just imagine it. I know it.

After the live oaks and the draping Spanish moss, the first thing I fell in love with about Savannah was the candy. It is a confectionary paradise that shreds all of my health-nut inclinations. All the old-fashioned candy can be found there—

sugar buttons, candy canes, sweet tarts—at longtime businesses such as River Sweets and Savannah's Candy Kitchen, which is the country's largest producer of pralines. Each day, it makes 4,000 pounds of the buttermilk, sugar and pecan or almond candy, that had its American provenance in New Orleans. There's a Candy Kitchen branch right by the museum, and I stopped and stocked up.

The two companies started as just River Street Sweets. But the couple that founded the family business had an acrimonious divorce. Each got two stores. The wife, Pam Strickland, kept the name; the husband, Stan Strickland, started Savannah's Candy Kitchen. After two decades in direct competition, they reunited in business. Walking by their sites in Savannah, Charleston, or Atlanta's Hartsfield Jackson airport, you can smell hot, browned sugar wafting through the air.

My favorite candy they make is the gopher. It's like what most people know as a turtle, but that name is trademarked. So everywhere else you find them, they have to go by a different name. But I think the gopher tastes better anyway, because the salted pecans are more finely ground and the chocolate just sits on top. You get the sweet taste at the top of your mouth and the salt on your tongue until you chew and the flavor bursts together.

When you eat candy, just like when you have a drink or swallow a Vicodin, opioids and dopamine are released into your brain. All of them soothe, but the sugar habit is the addiction that hits Americans youngest. And hits the South hard.

Now, I bristle at both the moralizing about Southern habits and the mockery of Southern moralizing. The thing that people have to understand is that it is one of the hardest-living regions. Yes, due to the history, but also due to the present. You'd be hard pressed to see, in



*Pleasure here, as
nearly everywhere,
has a gripping,
anguished underside.*



the centers of tourism, how much vulnerability there is in a pretty city like Savannah. The poverty rate in Savannah is twenty-four percent, twice the national rate and ten percentage points higher than the overall rate in Georgia. For children, the poverty rate in Savannah is forty-one percent; of that number, half are living in what is termed extreme poverty, in families with income that is less than fifty percent of the poverty level.

This too, along with the squares, the elegant homes, the museums, is the remnant of history. Savannah is exceptionally beautiful, but it does not exist in a state of exception relative to the region. Though not overrun by Walgreens and strip malls, it, too, bears the legacy of Jim Crow and economic inequality.

I stopped and talked to these women, and really any women elders I could find, because at a certain level I realized that I am not that much different than the drunken tourists on the waterfront in

the way I indulge in its beauty. I partook: the delicious fish sandwiches, the beautiful museums, the good shopping, the entertaining gaming nights, and the candy. It is revelry for me, though perhaps a relatively quiet one. I tried to redeem myself by listening and seeing.

Savannah is a majority African American city. When I asked the elders about living there, I heard that there wasn't enough quality affordable housing, that the local colleges were too expensive for their children and grandbabies, that they were tired of the Northerners who came down and behaved like gentry or the old Southern aristocracy.

There's something that makes your chest ache about it all. So much building and bricklaying and surviving for so little a piece of the pie. But they also told me that they were still here, a living libation, an enduring people. And that was, more than anything, the kind of sweetness I sought. 🍷

Imani Perry teaches African American studies at Princeton University and is author of six books, including Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant Life of Lorraine Hansberry and Breathe: A Letter to My Sons.