Gravy

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A FOOD LETTER
FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

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ABOUT GRAVY

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A LATE ENCOUNTER *with* CRUCIFERS

Illustration: Courtesy Michele Humes

By Michele Humes

When a chance encounter with the *Oxford American* magazine introduced me to Eudora Welty, Donna Tartt, and the notion that a yam could be candied, I became Hong Kong's preeminent teenage Southernist.

Ten years and one French culinary diploma later, I was still fascinated by the food and literature of the South. So it was with a morbid delight that I came upon *The Lady & Sons Savannah Country Cookbook*, which unites Paula Deen's recipes with an enthusiastic and unlikely foreword by John Berendt, of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* fame.

"There are some things we do that would make a French chef sick," Deen tells Berendt. But let him taste it, "and he'll get over being sick real quick."

This spring, in my New York City kitchen and on my blog, *Georgia on My Thighs*, I began putting her boast to the test. One of the

first recipes I tackled was Steak and Greens, Deen's riff on collards. The recipe called to mind, for me, Flannery O'Connor's Ruby Hill, a character in the story "A Stroke of Good Fortune."

"'Collard greens!' she said, spitting the word from her mouth this time as if it were a poisonous seed."

Ruby Hill is having a bad day. Catching her reflection in the lobby mirror, she realizes she's walked all the way home from the grocery store with a collard leaf stuck to her cheek. She doesn't even like collard greens; she's only making them for her baby brother, fresh out of the army and already getting in her way.

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When she said she'd fix Rufus anything he liked, she meant it. But he "had not had the gumption to think of one civilized dish—he had said collard greens." Ruby had always suspected that her brother would never amount to anything, and now this tasteless request had confirmed it.

Collard greens, I understand, are supposed to reek as they simmer, which may explain Ruby Hill's annoyance at having to cook them. Do they, though? Unlike, say, tripe, which really does have an evil stench all its own, I find that collard greens smell rather like they taste. Since I enjoy eating them, I don't really mind breathing them.

Assuming you do object to the smell of collards, Paula Deen notes that placing an unshelled pecan in the pot will counteract the odor. I've also seen instructions that call for two unshelled pecans, a single shelled pecan, and even wadded-up newsprint, although I have no clue what one actually does with the newsprint.

Here's what Bill Smith, author of *Seasoned in the South*, has to say about such techniques: "Even people who love collards complain about the way they make the house smell while cooking. People have different cures for this: Place four pecans in the pot. Cover the top of the collards with slices of white bread. None of this works."

Smell or no smell, I loved Paula Deen's Steak and Greens, and I learned from it. I had my doubts about the eleven-ingredient spice rub, which seemed to have been assembled through a series of wild stabs at a spice rack.

And I did wonder why a book like Deen's, in which salads containing bacon outnumber salads that don't, would, in a traditionally porky dish like collards, call for beefsteak instead of fatback. Was beefsteak up to the job?

As for the gravy—five whole tablespoons of flour to thicken it? Really?

Really. And not just any flour, but flour toasted butterscotch brown in a dry skillet. I'd cooked flour with butter to varying shades of roux, the French binder that gives body to sauces and gravies—and, in its Louisiana incarnation, serves as the powerful, chocolate-colored backbone to gumbo—but I'd never browned just the flour.

Well, dry-toasting it turns it nutty and fine. It stirs straight into the broth without lumping, and rounds out the stewing liquid into something mellow and complex.

That stewing liquid, or "potlikker," is copious and wonderfully good. "This," notes Deen, "is a sopping dish," and you can sop up the earthy, briny juices with a crusty roll, a plump little corn muffin, or, as I did, a mound of boiled rice. Those who don't love the collards themselves should still find plenty to like in the beefy potlikker and chewy strips of top round.

As for me, I do like soggy, slimy, faintly metallic-tasting collards. I was raised, in Hong Kong, on soupy platefuls of the bitter Chinese green, *gai lan*, and, to my palate, this iconic Southern vegetable tastes distinctly Southern Chinese.

To read Paula Deen's original recipe, turn to The Lady & Sons Savannah Country Cookbook. *To read Michele Humes's adaptation, visit www.georgiaonmythighs.com.*

Tales of Swamp Cabbage & Coleslaw Wrestling

Swamp photos: Courtesy Hayley Downs and Julie Kahn

by Hayley Downs and Julie Kahn

I was born in Central Florida to a Florida Cracker dad and an Alabama Belle mom. Not the Disney World Florida or the Florida where the snowbirds move when they retire. Not the Florida you send postcards from. In my Florida, there was wild boar hunting, gun toting, hard drinking, and swamp cabbage.

When I tell folks I'm "half-Cracker" I almost always get the same look—a cross between bemused and offended. But to my people, the term "Cracker" is not some sort of shorthand for bigot.

We think of Crackers as Scots-Irish pioneers who made their way to Florida as early as the 18th century, seeking an alternative to whatever fenced them in: the long arm of the law, poverty, their spouses, you name it. They braved treacherous terrain, heat, panthers, snakes, gators, and cow-killing mosquitoes in exchange for independence in an exquisite, primordial landscape. There were places to hide and room to get weird.

By the time I came along in the '70s, everybody was still weird, but without all that room, thanks to air conditioning and no state income tax. My rural-raised parents were torn between chasing the American dream and realizing that nothing tasted quite as good in the suburbs. Our subdivision house was tricked out with a vegetable garden, a walk-in cooler for storing game, and a junkyard refrigerator repurposed into a smoker.

The ubiquitous neighborhood chain-link fences ended at our handmade, coquina wall. We trolled the St. Johns River in search of massive, largemouth bass for frying and drizzling with "Old Sour," a condiment made from distilled key limes, salt, and hot pepper. My father's friends hunted cabbage palms to make swamp cabbage, a stew made from the delicate heart of the sabal palm, Florida's state tree.

Around me sinkholes swallowed my neighbors' homes; infamous Florida serial killers haunted my dreams; the space shuttle Challenger exploded over my junior high school; and every spring brought the "Super Bowl of Bike Week," a tournament of topless women wrestling in a vat of coleslaw. On the day my neglected pet rabbits disappeared from their hutch, my parents served up "tiny chicken" for dinner.

Embarrassed by my strange community, I took off as soon as I finished high school to reinvent myself as an urbanite. I headed south to Miami, eloped with a Cuban painter, and, to my father's chagrin, moved north to New York City.

I was living large until 1999, when a series of personal tragedies began to unfold, causing me to re-think what I had tried for so long to escape. My father died after a mighty struggle with cancer, and my husband left me...for my best friend.

I spiraled downward for years until I met a sweet Brooklyn

cellist unlike anyone I had ever known. On the eve of our engagement, he was diagnosed with cancer. After chemotherapy, multiple surgeries and a lengthy recovery, he's doing fine, but we are changed forever.

To make sense of it all, I find myself turning back to the most unlikely place—the mysterious landscape of my childhood, Florida. I realize I was never so much a runaway as a missionary, preaching the beauty of Cracker Florida, carrying it inside me like an ache.

To make sense of it all, I find myself turning back to the most unlikely place—the mysterious landscape of my childhood, Florida.

So I've teamed up with another Florida filmmaker, Julie Kahn, to make a documentary about my story, and what we might learn from Florida. In honor of getting to the heart of things, we are calling it *Swamp Cabbage*.

Yes, it's true that sprawl and thoughtless subdivision development have devastated my state. Where sabal palms once grew like weeds, they are now, like Crackers, a disappearing species. But as anyone who has ever weeded a garden there knows, you can't contain Florida. You can try to pull it up and cart it away, but all the while it patiently waits, finding just the right moment to wrap its tendrils around you and draw you back home.

For their work on Swamp Cabbage: A Dark and Sweaty Documentary*, Hayley Downs and Julie Kahn were recently awarded the SFA's inaugural John Egerton Prize.*

IN THE KITCHEN *with Dinah*

By Timothy C. Davis

Back before signature sauces, back before anodized cookware, back when butter was too often margarine, there was a stately old dame by the name of Dinah Shore.

People will tell you that Dinah probably wasn't the greatest cook in the world. People, in this case, were no doubt right. Her vittles voice had much in common with her singing one. She was able to take the territorial and the traditional, synthesize (and sometimes sanitize) it, and deliver it to a much wider audience than any of her countrified contemporaries, Justin Wilson and Betty Feezor included.

Shore never hurt for an audience, thanks to her Hollywood bonafides. The Winchester, Tennessee, native talked up her native Southern cuisine whenever given the chance, most often to the cavalcade of stage-and-screen stars who shared the stage with her on one or more of the many talk shows she hosted towards the end of her career.

Her three cookbooks bend under the weight of celebrity anecdote—usually jibes about the weight she and her pals gained while writing them—and too often dipped into the trendy and tacky in a Junior League-like attempt to stay true to the times in which they were written: "Oriental" shrimp with ginger, scallions and peanut oil, dips with more canned ingredients than a country club potluck. They were excerpted, not in *Saveur* and *Gourmet*, but in tactless tabloids like *Star* and *National Inquirer*. She even put sugar in her cornbread, for crying out loud.

What she did have, however, was personality. She was wise enough to take as her unofficial theme song "Someone's in the Kitchen With Dinah," a song that has been variously thought to be a verse to "I've Been Working on the Railroad," a late 1800s work song, or, as some say, an utterly salacious ode to infidelity. (Some versions of the original even have the line "Someone's making love to Dinah").

She was a shameless flirt who still maintained credibility with women and men, young and old alike. She was as home in an apron as après-skiwear, and that versatility was her hook: you could be this too.

So yes, she likely wasn't any more at home at the range than any other moderately skilled Southerner of her era. At the same time, there's no denying her impact. My own parents bought curry powder for the first time due to Dinah, much as they did olive oil after a recommendation on *Emeril Live*!

Her gift was the ability to personify subtle gradations of what it meant to be a woman, a singer, a Southerner, a star, in ever-changing times. Keeping her own star ascendant until her death was a trickier task than it appeared. If "In the Kitchen With Dinah" had a message, it might have been this: Girls, you don't have to stay at that stove if you don't want.

At Queen's College in Charlotte, North Carolina, Tim Davis earned an M.F.A. He now lives in Nashville.

Pardis Stitt
READS UPTON SINCLAIR

Pardis Stitt: Courtesy Angie Mosier

By Ashley Hall

Much ink has been spilled on behalf of Frank Stitt, the toque behind three Birmingham restaurants, Highlands Bar & Grill, Bottega, and Chez Fon Fon. Not enough trees have been felled in the name of Pardis Stitt, his wife of nearly 14 years.

The dining room is Pardis's domain. When asked to speak of herself, Pardis turns girlishly shy. Maybe that's a natural response for a front-of-house savant, who reminds her colleagues that, when it comes to service, "It's not about you."

On a nightly basis she and her troupe (some of whom have worked at the restaurants for 20-plus years) curate an energy that is both professional and joyful, exciting and homey, confident and warm.

All of these labels could also be attached to the lady of the house. Born and raised in Alabama by Iranian immigrants, Pardis is a disarming and inviting hostess, whose style might be labeled as much Parisian as Persian.

She also happens to be a vegetarian, married, counterintuitively, to this region's crown prince of pork. Though she occasionally sops the glistening juices that collect beneath a roasted haunch of pork, and she relishes the aroma of a freshly grilled beefsteak, she has not eaten flesh since she was 14, when she read *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair's muckraking exposé of the meatpacking industry.

Pardis is not a hectoring vegetarian. In fact, she admits, "I'm kind of in the closet about it." What's more, she understands how her choices impact her husband. Of Frank, she says, "It's hard for him when we get the rare chance to cook at home together. I mean, paella for one is not a lot of fun."

Yet her passion for food remains, no matter such self-imposed restrictions, unbridled: "I blame this whole restaurant thing on my mother, who is incapable of cooking for fewer than 20 people. I learned to set the table early."

A onetime newspaperwoman, Ashley Hall of Atlanta sells juice for Kermit Lynch.

PUTTING THE "FAIR" IN

GOOD, CLEAN, AND FAIR

By Judith Winfrey

Throughout the South, we are witnessing a renewed interest in local food and small farms. Folks who are hungry for good eats and meaningful community are thronging weekly farmers markets. In response, such markets are popping up in parks, town squares, and church parking lots. Paradise, it seems, may not be paved over yet.

But has the revolution bypassed the underserved?

One of the tenants of this good food movement is that the harvest should not only be delicious and safe. It should also be fair.

The meaning of "fair" in this instance is two-fold: Farmers have a right to a sustainable return for their crops. And all eaters, regardless of purchasing power, have a right to good, clean food.

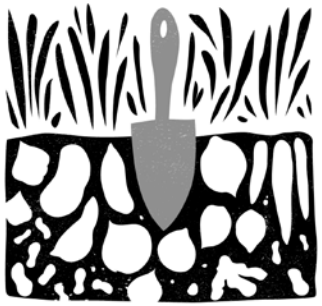
How can we pay farmers a fair price for good food and put that good food in the hands, and on the tables, of our friends and neighbors with the smallest food budgets?

The US Department of Agriculture has a program that may help. Most of us know this program, in existence since the 1930s, as Food Stamps. Here's the thing, though. Stamps are a thing of the past. Funds are now disbursed through debit cards, known in the jargon-heavy social services world as EBT cards, as in electronic benefit transfer.

Of late, savvy, social-justice-minded farmers markets have begun to accept EBT funds. Ditto other state-run nutrition enhancement programs like WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and Seniors coupons.

The program now distributes around $34 billion annually. In addition to funds from the USDA and state programs, organizations like Wholesome Wave—a non-profit based in Connecticut with a Southern beachhead in Georgia—are, in an effort to encourage healthy purchases, running programs that double the value of EBT dollars spent at farmers markets.

At the East Atlanta Village Farmers Market, Wholesome Wave Georgia has turned $300 EBT dollars into $600 market dollars in a few months—not bad considering the average market purchase is somewhere around $6.



EBT funds can be leveraged to help everyone gain access to good and clean food, while boosting the revenue stream at your local farmers market.

I hear you asking, "How do we do it at our local market? How does a farmers market go about accepting food stamps?"

Not surprisingly, it's somewhat complicated to access this government program. The best thing to do is start on-line with the USDA and complete the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Application for stores. Concurrently, reach out to your local USDA office and tell them what you want to do. Eventually, they will come and inspect your market.

Meanwhile, you'll need to start thinking about how to accept EBT cards. Merchant Source has a program offering free WiFi card swipes to anyone accepting EBT. This same system will also allow individual farmers to accept credit cards. The system may be free, but there will be processing fees of $60 per month, at a minimum.

Even with swipe technology, you need a way to convert the electronic funds to market-spendable currency. Here's the hitch: it's illegal to exchange EBT funds for US currency. Some markets have had success with a token system in which the shopper swipes the card at the main market booth and receives tokens to be spent only at market. The token system works well, but also requires funds to print, distribute, and manage the tokens.

Once you have everything in place, you'll need to have some way to get the word out to the EBT recipients. They need to know you're ready to accept their form of payment. Find out who administers EBT in your state (in Georgia, it's the Department of Human Resources) and ask them if they can help you by posting signs in offices near your market or including flyers in their monthly mailings.

It may take a little while to attract these new consumers. They may not come right away, but don't lose heart. This is a long-term project with a big vision. Even seemingly spontaneous revolutions take a bit of planning.

A full-time farmer in Atlanta, Georgia, Judith Winfrey is the leader of Slow Food Atlanta.

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