

Gravy

“Oysters are good. You can’t eat lunch in a more natural way than squatting on an oyster bar until you get through.” – Robb White, *How to Build a Tin Canoe*

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NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Florida’s Forgotten Coast: Stories of the Men and Women Who Work the Apalachicola Bay

Northwest Florida has witnessed many changes over the years, yet the appeal of its waters—the gulf, bays, rivers, and coastal dune lakes—is constant. Long before the narrative of this place was recorded in words, the land and water had stories to tell. The Florida’s Forgotten Coast Oral History Project pays homage to the men and women who have long worked the water, tonging for oysters, casting nets for shrimp and fish, and cultivating soft-shell crabs. Over the past four months, Amy Evans, SFA oral historian, has conducted three fieldwork-gathering trips to northwest Florida to document the seafood industry and life on the bay.

People have drawn their livelihoods from the Apalachicola Bay and surrounding waters for generations, but their way of life is changing. Oral history subjects tell stories of the days when schools of mullet were thick in the water and tupelo honey was a local find, not a Hollywood star. More than fish tales and folklore, these are the stories of the men and women who have depended on the Apalachicola Bay for generations.

Oysterman A. L. Quick says: “I started oystering when I was 17 years old. I’ve been doing it all my life just about. I quit school when I was 16 and started working the next day after I quit school. To me, it’s fun. I mean, I get pleasure out of it, you know. It’s hard work and all, but the one thing about oystering [is that] if you own your own rig, you’re your own boss.”

Oyster shucker Janice Richards reveals: “In 1959, when me and Johnny [Richards] married, I started out shucking oysters. And we’ve been married 46 years. That’s how long

I’ve been shucking oysters, 46 years. And I enjoy it. You got nobody over you; you can be your own boss. I’ll be shucking until I die. Because I just don’t see anything else I know to do.”

Soft-shell crabber Henry Tindell says: “I hard crabbled for years. [But] then I started soft shell crabbing. And I’ve been doing it probably 25 years. Hard-crabbing imports has killed seafood. The only reason you can survive with this [soft-shell crabbing] is because we ship these live. And I got sense enough to know that this is the only thing I can do to survive. Any young person that walks in here and asks my opinion, I say, ‘Get out of the bay, son. You ain’t going to make it.’ I did because I came along in a time when I could. But those times is gone.”

Amy has collected 23 oral history interviews, making this the SFA’s largest oral history project to date. By the time you receive this, the completed transcripts and audio clips will be online at www.southernfoodways.com.

Oral histories from Florida’s Forgotten Coast have been made possible by a grant from the St. Joe Company, a publicly held company in Jacksonville, which has a long history in Florida dating back to the 1920s. One of the state’s largest private landowners, St. Joe is engaged in building towns and resorts throughout Florida.

And while we’re talking oral histories, you should know that Amy’s oral history on Doe’s Eat Place in Greenville recently won the Elbert R. Hilliard Oral History Award from the Mississippi Historical Society for outstanding work in oral history.



SAVE THE DATE

Camp Nashville
with pilgrimage to Lynchburg, too!
August 11–12

Southern Foodways Symposium
with Delta Divertissement, too!
October 19–22

A Note from SFA President Elizabeth Sims

What an extraordinarily exciting time for our organization! On the heels of completing work on our five-year strategic plan this winter, your board and staff have been busy laying the groundwork for the future growth and well-being of our mission. Recently, the SFA received a stunning pledge of support from Jim 'N' Nick's Bar-B-Q, the Birmingham-based family of restaurants that have long championed the SFA. Their pledge will stabilize our financial outlook and fuel our growth. Look for more details in coming issues of Gravy.

—Elizabeth Sims

➔ GRAVY ⇐

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The Place Setting: Timeless Tastes of the Mountain South, from Bright Hope to Frog Level

by Fred Sauceman
Macon: Mercer University Press, 2006. \$25.00.



If you were lucky enough to be at the 2003 Southern Foodways Symposium and hear Fred Sauceman's Saturday afternoon presentation, "Bright Hope to Frog Level: A Mountain Diner's Diary," you will recall that his knowledge of Appalachian eats is both encyclopedic and wonderfully quirky. Now comes the book. One could not want for a better companion than Sauceman, a man who loves his neck of the woods and wants you to taste the best it has to offer.

—Henry Mencken

The Blue Grass Cook Book

by Minnie C. Fox
Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005. \$29.95.



In 1904, Kentucky socialite Minnie C. Fox published *The Blue Grass Cook Book*. In Fox's time, the work of black women in the South was often characterized by demoralizing portraits of servants toiling in "big house" kitchens. In contrast, *The Blue Grass Cook Book*, with A. L. Coburn's photographs of African American cooks at work and a passionate introduction by Fox's brother, novelist John Fox Jr., reveals the vital role of black cooks in the traditions of Southern hospitality. A new introduction by past SFA president Toni Tipton-Martin adds historical context to the reprint of this classic Kentucky cookbook and offers a nuanced portrait of a unique culinary culture.

—Henry Mencken

Letter from Shaun Chavis, Glory Foods Scholarship Winner

Two years ago, you awarded me a scholarship to attend the 2004 Southern Foodways Alliance symposium. At the time I was attending culinary school and concurrently working on a master's degree in gastronomy at Boston University. At the end of the conference, I left Oxford overwhelmed by the fabulous experience of discussing food, culture, and journalism with incredible people. SFA's board members have been kind enough to keep tabs on my work and career ever since.

I finished my degree this spring. And I'm writing to let you know I recently accepted a position with Health magazine as associate food editor. I wouldn't have had this opportunity without the help of Glory Foods, the SFA, and the relationships I built through the scholarship program. Thank you for the tremendous impact you've had on my life.

—Shaun Chavis



Wish You Were There – A Postcard from Camp Athens

by Angie Mosier

“Communication!” cried Dexter Weaver, “Communication!” as he tried to juggle orders from the crowd that snaked through his celebrated meat-and-three restaurant, Weaver D’s Delicious Fine Foods. The sign above his dining room door declares his slogan, “Automatic for the People” and, in order to keep that declaration true, Weaver believes there must be effective communication.

Across town, Angelish Wilson of Wilson’s Soul Food in downtown Athens dished out her brilliant fare—introducing a crowd of newcomers to the nourishing food that students and Athens natives migrate to when they need a taste of home.

Both restaurants were part of an Athens romp orchestrated by the Camp Athens host committee and spearheaded by camp director Judy Long. Our day started with bloody Marys, cheese straws, and jam bars from North Georgia neighbors Barrie Aycock of Glen Ella Springs and Michelle Weatherby of Manna to Go.

The gospel harmonies of the Inspirations opened a morning gathering that segued to author Terry Kay, who taught us how *not* to make biscuits from his novel *To Dance with the White Dog*. James Cobb, writer and history professor at the University of Georgia, shared an essay on the globalization of Southern culture and cookery. Cobb proved a worthy interpreter *of* and evangelist *for* our native fare. That afternoon, we disbursed and followed the paths plotted by our Athens hosts, working our ways through the city’s art galleries, studios, and historic homes—before heading out to a local farm, Woodland Gardens, for dinner.

Tucker Taylor manages this pristine organic garden that supplies Athens’s and Atlanta’s most celebrated restaurants with gorgeous fruits and vegetables. Two 72-foot-long tables were set under a hoop house and covered in white linen topped with bright oilcloth runners. Hothouse flowers were mixed with gathered garden blooms and arranged in tin cans and silver mint julep cups. The mix of haute and humble, down-home and uptown, illustrated the South’s love of the diversity. As folks toured the farm, they drank Terrapin beer, Athens’s own micro-brew. Mat Garretson donated his Peach State Cuvee, both red and white, which we enjoyed liberally. Dexter Weaver and the Wilson family were seated as our guests of honor, while Workhorses of the Entertainment/Recreational Industry laid down some tasty tunes.

Nothing could prepare us, however, for the freight train of food that hit us. In the “kitchen,” a brilliant outdoor set-up complete with running water and counter space, giant grills, burners, and bubbling pots, a line-up of Southern superstars stirred and steamed. Sonya Jones from Sweet Auburn Bread



Company in Atlanta provided yeast rolls and buttermilk cornbread muffins. Scott Peacock and Steven Satterfield of Watershed in Decatur served tomato soup with pimento cheese finger sandwiches, the latter individually wrapped in wax paper. For our knockout meat-and-three plate, Frank Stitt, from Highlands Bar and Grill in Birmingham, baked a white bean and collard green gratin. Ben Barker of Magnolia Grill in Durham dished luxe mac ‘n’ cheese. From our host restaurant, Five & Ten in Athens, Chuck Ramsey laid down pole beans with fatback, and our camp chef Hugh Acheson graced the plate with sweet-onion braised short ribs.

Just when we thought we couldn’t eat another bite, Karen Barker from Magnolia Grill presented buttermilk vanilla-bean cheesecake in a cornmeal crumb crust with strawberry-rhubarb compote.

Between courses, honors went to our special guests and Athens institutions, among them Wilson’s Soul Food and Weaver D’s Delicious Fine Foods. And each honoree was presented with a commemorative “Guardian of Tradition” plate made by Rebecca Wood of R. Wood Studio Ceramics in Athens.

Late night took us downtown, where our crowd gathered at Restaurant Farm 255 and the Manhattan Lounge for after-dinner drinks followed by a late-night munch from JB’s Hot Dogs. Thanks, Athens, for a great time.

Funds and services—generously provided by, among others, Rinne Allen, Bertis Downs, Byhalia Books, Lee Epting, Evergreen Construction, Betty Alice Fowler, Foodworks, Fire & Flavor Grilling, Peggy Galis, Terry Kay, Zaxby’s—benefited the SFA Oral History Initiative, which captures through audio recordings and documentary films the works of individuals who have made a significant impact on our food culture. Day Camps are the perfect way to introduce new folks to our group and our mission. Keep your eyes peeled for more camping opportunities.

North Carolina Livermush: Strangest of Meats or the World's Most Perfect Food?

by Timothy Davis

As the unofficial spokesman for livermush, Shelby, North Carolina, mayor Ted Alexander has seen the processed meat product—a mixture of pig liver (at least 30 percent, by law), head parts, and cornmeal—move from regional in-joke to feted culinary oddity in the 20 years since Shelby celebrated its first Livermush Expo. The festival still packs the streets once a year in celebration of this strangest of meats, or “the world’s most perfect food,” according to Alexander.

Thought to be a descendant of scrapple, livermush was most likely brought south through the Appalachian mountains by German settlers. It was thought to have thrived throughout the late 1800s, at a time when frugality mattered.

Yet, even as people in the region have seen their local economies grow dramatically, livermush remains a mealtime staple, still popular without benefit of the advertising and marketing tricks companies sometimes use to sell potentially icky foodstuffs. In fact, livermush has furthered itself mostly by doing nothing to betray what it is: a common food with

uncommon taste and value. (Famous ’mush fans include author Jan Karon, whose characters enjoy livermush almost as much as low-grade Mayberry melodrama, and bluegrass pioneer Earl Scruggs, also a Shelby native.)

Although the price has increased over the years—one could purchase a five-pound block of the stuff for around 10 cents a pound in the 1930s and 1940s—livermush will still set you back only about \$2 for a brick-sized loaf at almost any grocery store in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Sales are climbing, too, with regional producers such as McKee’s turning out about 4,000 pounds of livermush daily.

Whether fried as a breakfast meat, eaten cold in a sandwich, or tossed on top of a pizza, livermush can boast of being high in protein and low in fat—and versatile besides. And that’s a value no matter how you slice it. For more information on August’s 20th Annual Livermush Expo, contact the Uptown Shelby Association at 704-484-3100.

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