



Gravy

"The canned dream of the South is something I've resisted my entire career. . . ."

—Barry Hannah, as quoted in the November 2008 issue of *Garden & Gun*

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NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Outlaw Sunday: Celebrating Literary and Culinary Outlaws

by Timothy C. Davis

The concept of the trickster is endemic in Southern artistry. Known in native folklore as coyote, the trickster has lived for years in the William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. He is present in the kaleidoscopic Lowcountry legend-making of Padgett Powell. He hunts snakes and snipe, biceps and bicuspid bared, with Florida's Harry Crews. He sits at the breakfast nook with poet and songwriter Vic Chesnutt, and slams Cadillac doors with the Atlanta hip-hop group Outkast.

Two true tricksters are the author Barry Hannah and moonshiner-cum-NASCAR icon and culinary entrepreneur Junior Johnson, both of whom appeared at this year's Southern Foodways Symposium, which focused upon regional drink.

Hannah, born in Meridian, Mississippi, matriculated at Mississippi College before earning an MA and MFA from the University of Arkansas. At the age of 30, he turned the literature world on its ear with his debut novel *Geronimo Rex*, which won the William Faulkner Prize and earned a National Book Award nomination. Nurtured by Gordon Lish, Hannah's work became known for its unflinching glimpses of Southern life, at turns fecund and fantastical. His sentences, the critics wrote, "crackled with energy" and were "charged with gunpowder." Hannah is among the best we have, on either side of the Mason-Dixon line. Now an Oxford resident, Hannah is the director of the MFA program at the University of Mississippi.

Junior Johnson, born in rural Wilkes County, North Carolina, first made his bones behind the wheel, running moonshine for a local bootleg operation. After a stint learning the curves on area dirt tracks, Johnson joined a fledgling stock-car-racing conglomerate known as NASCAR. Following some initial success, he was tossed in jail for a year. (John Law caught him working at his father's still.) Upon getting sprung, he won six races the next year. Johnson went on to 50 NASCAR victories in

his career, thanks to tenacious driving and the groundbreaking discovery of the effects of "drafting" behind another car. He retired from racing in 1966. In the 1970s and 1980s he became a NASCAR racing team owner. These days, he is an entrepreneur come full circle, selling a line of foods true to his youth—pork skins, country ham, and, perhaps most notably, his own brand of moonshine.

That same outlaw spirit also exists in Southern food—arguably the most storied cuisine in America—if we open our eyes wide enough to see it. There are science-obsessed acolytes of Ferran Adria, like Sean Brock of McCrady's in Charleston, South Carolina. There are big-for-their-britches upstarts like Richard Blais of Atlanta, boiling (and freeze-drying, and sous vide-steaming) the blood of their regional cuisine with flair. All are expanding our horizons beyond the so-called new Southern cuisine that has remained static for months of Sundays. They know also that if a thing does not continue to grow, as Dolly Parton once put it, it is "just like last night's cornbread—stale and dry."



⇒ GRAVY ◀

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Taste of the South at Blackberry Farm: January 8-11, 2009

Join us for Taste of the South, the annual SFA fundraiser, hosted by Blackberry Farm in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. Each year we honor the Fellowship of Southern Farmers, Artisans, and Chefs, a peer-elected cadre of our region's most accomplished food professionals. Fellows inducted to date include:

Karen and Ben Barker, Magnolia Grill, Durham, North Carolina

Allan Benton, Benton's Smoky Mountain Country Ham, Madisonville, Tennessee

Leah Chase, Dooky Chase, New Orleans, Louisiana

Emile DeFelice, Caw Caw Creek Pastured Pork, St. Matthews, South Carolina (2008 inductee)

Betsy and Alex Hitt, Peregrine Farm, Saxapahaw, North Carolina

Sherry and Mark Guenther, Muddy Pond Sorghum, Monterey, Tennessee

Jessica and Jeremy Little, Sweet Grass Dairy, Thomasville, Georgia

Louis Osteen, Louis's, Las Vegas, Nevada

Scott Peacock, Watershed, Decatur, Georgia

Glenn Roberts, Anson Mills, Columbia, South Carolina

Frank Stitt, Highlands Bar & Grill, Birmingham, Alabama

Margaret Ann Toohey and David Snow, Snow's Bend Farm, Coker, Alabama

In honor of new Fellow, Emile DeFelice, the following chefs will be cooking, alongside the talented roster of chefs at Blackberry Farm:

Mike Davis, Terra, West Columbia, South Carolina

Donald Link, Herbsaint, Cochon, New Orleans, Louisiana

Barry Maiden, Hungry Mother, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Hilary White, The Hill, Palmetto, Georgia

Our featured winemakers are **Mac and Lil McDonald**, Vision Cellars, Windsor, California. Spirit providers for the weekend are **Julian and Preston Van Winkle**, Old Rip Van Winkle Distillery, Louisville, Kentucky.

And our Scholar in Residence is **Bill Niman**, founder of Niman Ranch, proprietor of BN Ranch, and this country's most provocative and persistent champion of sustainably and humanely raised livestock.

For reservations and special SFA-only rates contact Kelley Clark at Blackberry Farm: 800-557-8864, kclark@blackberryfarm.com.

President's Valedictory Column

by Marcie Cohen Ferris, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

In early September, my husband, Bill, and I participated in the opening weekend of Biltmore Estate's first "Field to Table Festival"—a nine-day celebration of the mountain South's food, wine, music, stories, crafts, and agricultural heritage. We gathered with Biltmore guests and an incredible roster of panelists, most of whom are longtime members of SFA, to discuss the power of food and sense of place.

The festival was also an opportunity to explore Biltmore's historic ties to sustainable agriculture, a fascinating Appalachian story overlooked in discussions dominated by the foodways of the plantation South. Over 100 years ago, the Vanderbilt family oversaw the creation of farms and gardens both to provide the food served in Biltmore's elegant dining rooms and to feed the estate's small army of workers.

After a devastating week of watching Wall Street come precipitously close to collapse, we escaped the barrage of blaming and bailouts for the softly blue silhouettes of the Blue Ridge. In uncertain times and with a presidential election looming, our conversations about soup beans and cornbread, paw paws, and chowchow, chased by stiff drinks of corn whiskey and mellow glasses of Biltmore Estate chardonnay, were heartening.

I thought about other historic times of economic distress in this country, when the market collapsed in the 1929 Depression, the financial crisis of the 1980s, and the economic downturn after 9/11. Just as in those unstable times, Southerners gathered around the table to restore a sense of balance and to find comfort in food and companionship.

Throughout our weekend at Biltmore, we enjoyed meals and conversation with SFA friends Allan and Sharon Benton, Belinda Ellis, John Fleeer, Ronni Lundy, Tim O'Brien and Kit Swaggert, Sarah Fritschner, Mark and Kathy Sohn, and Fred Thompson. We spoke about the economy and politics, about the "super-sizing" of corn and pigs, and their shift from local farms to large agribusiness.

We discussed the need to bring these important discussions to the table at the SFA symposium, where we must confront the future of the world's food. Just when it all seemed too overwhelming, we came back to what does make sense—Benton's finely cured Tennessee ham and bacon, Belinda Ellis's stack cake, Tim O'Brien's song "Cornbread Nation," and the eloquent voice of Ronni Lundy, self-proclaimed member of the "Hillbilly Diaspora," who described the powerful ties of food and music in Appalachia.

We also talked about how women have supported foodways in the region—the mountain mothers who each day prepared hot biscuits for their families, women who gathered on summer porches to string and shuck beans, and the women on staff at Biltmore, who skillfully orchestrated the Field to Table Festival. I want to thank our friends at Biltmore Estate and, in particular, Elizabeth Sims, past president of the SFA board; Travis Tatham, and Heather Serre; chefs Brian Ross, Edwin French, Don Spears, Heather Gatesman, and Angela Guiffrida; and at Biltmore Wine Company, Jerry Douglas. I am grateful for their hospitality, for their leadership in creating a historic event dedicated to sustainable tourism, and for their continued support of the SFA.

SFA Feeds the Debate

by Henry Mencken

Rock the Debate, a free festival held in the Ole Miss Grove on September 26, in conjunction with the first Presidential Debate, included a mix of music, speakers, video presentations, display areas, games, and, of course, food (curated by the SFA). After the festival, several thousand folks gathered at the Grove stage to watch the historic debate live on 14-by-18-foot HD television screens.

This election cycle, pork barrel spending may be out but spending for pork is in! Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q sold hundreds of pulled pork sandwiches. Taylor Grocery fried catfish all day. And, thanks to the generosity of the Catfish Institute, Ole Miss faculty and staff members ate free. Taqueria del Sol came over from Atlanta and wowed the assembled with brisket and fried chicken tacos. Chef John Folse and Company offered up steaming bowls of Louisiana crawfish étouffée. Newk's (an Oxford favorite) rounded out the menu with pimento cheese sandwiches and caramel cake.

SFA Podcasts Online

The SFA Viking Range Lecture, featuring a conversation with authors Bich Minh Nguyen and Monique Truong and hosted at the University of Mississippi on September 10, 2008, is now available as a podcast. Visit <http://podcast.olemiss.edu/show-html.php?csecrn=NCP091107949> and click the link for the Viking Lecture Series to hear it online.

Or visit <http://podcast.olemiss.edu/findcast.php> and subscribe to SFA podcasts on iTunes. Podcasts of presentations from the 2008 Liquid South symposium have also recently been posted online.

Nicholas Herbemont: Pioneer of American Viticulture

by Ashley Hall

“Where wine is most abundant, there is found the most sobriety.” –Nicholas Herbemont

Nicholas Herbemont (1771–1839) could well be the most influential American vigneron that wine enthusiasts have never heard of. European wine grapes (aka *vitis vinifera*) are notoriously difficult to grow in the sultry South. Since colonial days, humidity and pests have thwarted the efforts of countless winegrowers.

But Nicholas Herbemont, a native of the Champagne district of France and resident of early 1800s South Carolina, could not be deterred. He spent more than two decades of his life tirelessly tinkering with—and often failing at—more than 250 varieties of grape vines. His unlikely laboratories were an urban garden in Columbia and several acres at his country house in rural Richland County.

Herbemont’s important writings have been collected into a volume, *Pioneering American Wine*, edited by University of South Carolian professor (and 2008 SFA Symposium speaker) David S. Shields, to be published this winter by the University of Georgia Press. Wine aficionados will appreciate Herbemont’s command of wine-growing techniques now considered industry standard. Most notably, Herbemont experimented with the grafting of American rootstock onto French grape vines, a practice that 50 years later would save all of the grape vines of Europe from the imported scourge of phylloxera.

The technical sections are, sometimes, a bit tedious for the casual reader, but the sections outlining Herbemont’s social and agrarian values are surprising treats. More than a businessman, Herbemont was gentleman scholar, an ethicist, and “cheerful philosopher,” who eagerly shared his knowledge (at no charge) with any interested party. Herbemont opposed slavery for both “philanthropic and humanitarian reasons” as a “hereditary disease” of the cotton-addicted South. And he advocated sustainable farming and diversified crops.

His most audacious proposal was for government bankrolled vineyards in the farmland of the South Carolina Midlands. The poor soils of these sand hills, thought to be useless for growing crops, are actually more than suitable for raising wine grapes. Herbemont hoped to elevate the local economy through wine production sponsored by the state of South Carolina. “In a few years, this land, now a desert, would be comparatively thickly populated,” he explained, “a green place forever replenishing itself, convivial and modest, graced with hospitality and refreshed with wine.”

Predictably, the conservative cotton planters of the day balked, and Herbemont’s utopian vision slowly evaporated from memory. *Pioneering American Wine* offers a straightforward sketch of a likable, Franco-American hybrid of a man, whose mantra—“deal honestly with the land”—still holds eyebrow-raising relevance today.



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