



# THE YEAR THAT CHANGED THE SOUTH

Why 1982 matters

BY JOHN T. EDGE

GENE HAMER AND BILL NEAL opened Crook's Corner in 1982, in a onetime taxi driver stand in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Soon, they began serving shrimp and grits for dinner; in time they shaped a new and inclusive narrative about the South. In 1982, Nathalie Dupree published her first book, *Cooking of the South*. She promised to put the "glory back in grits and gravy." That same year, Frank Stitt, a native of upstate Cullman, Alabama, opened Highlands Bar & Grill in Birmingham. He showcased food from the South and technique from the south of France.

Daniel Maye and Phillip Cooke staged the first Symposium on American Cuisine in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1982. Larry Forgione, the pioneering chef at An American Place in New York City, spoke. So did Lidia Bastianich, who rose to fame interpreting Italian-American cuisine. Collectively, they announced

that American cuisine was ready to step beyond the long French shadow. Imagined as a promotional vehicle for a new Louisville restaurant, the symposium would prove a lodestar moment in the reappraisal of American regional cooking and a boon to the rise of New Southern Cuisine.

Though the SFA did not come into focus until 1999, when John Egerton convened fifty founders in Birmingham to talk about responsibilities and possibilities, I now recognize the roots of whom we gather and what we attempt in those restaurant openings, those book publications, that symposium, and that year.

It would be a stretch to say Ronald Reagan made that 1982 moment possible. But not much of a stretch. Republicans believed that his vision stirred a new pride in our nation, its people, and its culture. His message, grounded in states' rights rhetoric, appealed to

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conservative Southerners. Democrats, citing his cuts to the social welfare network and hawkish foreign policy, saw Reagan as retrograde. Liberal Southerners thought Reagan and his Young Republicans like Ralph Reed of Georgia personified the boulders that blocked the road toward progress.

I didn't pay much attention to politics in 1982. In my third year of college, I was often oblivious to the changes that swirled around me. But I did spend a lot of time in bars. And I did listen to a lot of live music. Looking back, I recognize that my ear for my region began to shift that year, soon after R.E.M. released its first EP, *Chronic Town*. My understanding of the South began to shift then, too.

Unlike the white-boy blues narratives of the Allman Brothers and Wet Willie, the Macon, Georgia, bands I idolized when I was younger, R.E.M. crafted songs that were complicated and cryptic. They suggested that Athens, Georgia, where I went to college and where R.E.M. was born, was worthy of close attention and reinvention. They implied that the South was ready for the same. *Fables of the Reconstruction/ Reconstruction of the Fables*, which R.E.M. released in 1985, would confirm my hunch.

Rock was art, R.E.M. made clear, and art was worth paying attention to. About the time I started listening to them, I saw Jason and the Nashville Scorchers play an Athens double bill with the Psychedelic Furs. When Jason Ringenberg ripped apart the Hank Williams song "I Saw the Light" and leaped off stage into the audience, I heard the traditional South recast. Much later, as I began to think and write about food, I recognized that art might be something I could attempt, and change might be something

I could help drive.

I recently spoke with historian Grace Hale, whose forthcoming book, *Cool Town: Athens, Georgia, and the Promise of Alternative Culture in Reagan's America*, digs deep into why and how and to what effect my college town became a cultural incubator. She said that Athens in the 1970s and 80s defined itself as an oppositional force. She quoted the music journalist Greil Marcus, who, writing in that same era, said that bands can serve as images of communities. After I moved to Oxford in the 1990s and started writing and thinking about food, I realized that restaurants can serve comparable purposes. Put another way, we are more than *what* we eat. We are *where* we eat.

"I think that food in America can be all those things that we envy other cultures in being," Paul Prudhomme, the onetime Commander's Palace chef, who won international acclaim while working the stove of his restaurant K-Paul's, declared at that 1982 Symposium on American Cuisine. "Our restaurants have a huge task ahead... [We must] accept the responsibilities of who we are and what we are and carry on." Prudhomme was talking about cooking and about food. He was also arguing that food was a cultural totem and a social force.

The lyrics and voices of 1982 still echo in my head. Nearly forty years after Bill Neal served his first dish of shrimp and grits and hired his first rock-and-roller dishwasher, I recognize that food held similar power in that moment. Together, those cultural products remind me of how this all began, of what was at stake, and of what's possible when we harness the power of creativity to make change in our backyards. ♡

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# HAIR, FOOD, AND HUSTLE

In black hair salons, a cottage food economy thrives

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY

