



Gravy

"I smell your bread burnin/ turn your damper down. If you ain't got a damper/
turn your bread around." —"Mule Skinner Blues" by Jimmie Rodgers

NUMBER 32, SUMMER 2009

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

From the President: The Reach of Southern Foodways

by Angie Mosier

Every once in a while, a panic sets in. Our food traditions are going to be lost! A recipe is slipping into anonymity! A trade is dying out because the new generation is not interested in the craft! "Eat it to save it," SFA member Poppy Tooker cried out a few years ago at the "Sugar and the Sweet Life" field trip in New Orleans.

Poppy was referring to traditions like Creole cream cheese and calas, both of which, at the moment of her declaration, we were eating with wild abandon. When Hurricane Katrina hit the city a month or so after the SFA Field Trip, it became clear that the loss of dear taste traditions might come faster than any of us expected. But Southern foodways—by which I mean, the actual food of the American South, not the SFA itself—possess a strong gene, a reoccurring gene. I might even call it a mutant gene.

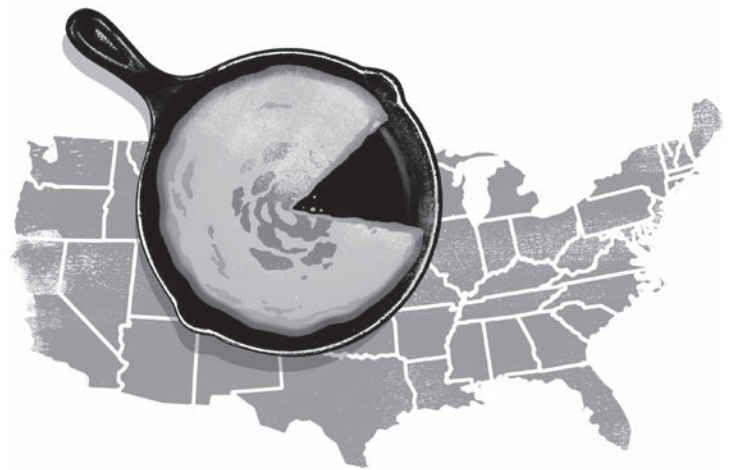
I am a redhead. A few years ago a study declared that natural redheads would be extinct by the year 2100. There are not that many of us, and now that the tribes of the world are traveling and mixing and mingling with relative ease, one might believe that we will soon be bred out. Later it was discovered that redheads are sort of a mystery. The gene for ginger hair is found in every race, although mostly in the Celts, and just because your parents have red hair doesn't mean you will have red hair. Subsequent studies have found that the gene is not only strong; it is rogue and mutant.

A few recent trips to the northeast part of our country have proven, to me, that the foodways of the South are also strong, mutant, and rogue. At a hip New York speakeasy I recently drank a "Benton's Old Fashioned." That's a regular old fashioned infused with Allan Benton's bacon. At Casa Mono, a handsome Spanish tapas restaurant, I spent an hour or so at the bar, watching a chef sort through a pile of ramps. When I

asked where he got those wild leeks, he replied, "Virginia." By way of those ramps, served alongside shavings of Iberico Ham, I was transported home, to the American South.

At Momofuku Ssäm Bar in the East Village of New York, I enjoyed redevye gravy—and sake. Later, at Marigold Kitchen, a lovely house-turned-restaurant in Philadelphia, I sampled a platter of three country hams, all of Southern origin.

It is thrilling to see Southern food showcased well. While I know that the Southern Foodways Alliance isn't totally responsible for this current evolution, I do know that a couple of my examples can be traced back to the influence of SFA members, or to the exposure catalyzed by SFA-funded documentaries, films and awards. You—our membership, sponsors and supporters—have had a hand in strengthening "the gene," in furthering the reach of Southern foodways.



Gravy, The Next Generation

Effective with the next issue of *Gravy*, look for a redesign. We're turning our newsletter into a food letter. Inspired by the *Art of Eating*, *Simple Cooking*, and the *Edible Communities* publications, we plan to refashion *Gravy* into a digest of smart articles about Southern culinary culture. (SFA promotional notices will, henceforth, be delivered via e-mail.)

We're undertaking this venture with the aid of Mountain Valley Spring Water of Hot Springs, Arkansas. Their recent investment in the SFA will power the redesign and the ongoing publication of *Gravy*. Keep in mind: Some things won't change. Devin Cox will design the effort. And Tom Head will serve as managing editor.

➤ GRAVY ◀

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Meet Alice Randall, Symposium Speaker

by Timothy C. Davis

As anyone who's ever heard John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* can tell you, listening to yourself, your true self, is the beginning of all great art. It can also be the beginning of a great dinner.

When you think of the improvisatory arts, you probably think about the freestyling of hip-hop artists, the chord-based extendo-boogie of jam bands, or, if you're really wanting to be my friend, the shuffle and skronk of blues and jazz.

You probably don't think—at least near as often—about soul food, which is a shame. Of course, recipes are part and parcel of cooking, and are roughly equivalent to notation and key in music. That is to say, they're indispensable. However, following a recipe note for note, can, on occasion, leave the end result feeling (and tasting) a little flat.

Let's continue this analogy, shall we? To your average home cook, the thrill of "covering" a great recipe is often accompanied by a certain melancholy, a recognition that the result is a mere cover version of the established dish. What that home cook might not realize is that, for any cook, the real magic often occurs outside the cookbook. After a while, such as that can begin to serve much like a fake book—a simplified how-to guide for beginners consisting of simplified tablature or notes—does for a musician. Sure, the cake is complete, but where's the icing?

These connections between traditional Southern food and music are something that novelist and songwriter Alice Randall has studied for many years. You may know her as the author of the novel *The Wind Done Gone*, or you may know that she was first African American woman to write a number-one country song.

In addition to her many duties in the halls of higher learning, Randall is a renowned cook. A writer in residence at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, she teaches a class that explores the culture of soul food, focusing on its origins, its connections to the larger African diaspora, and its place in Southern culture.

Randall's writing style is much like the food that she loves: it's spicy, it's rich, it's (re)imaginative. *The Wind Done Gone* is, famously, a polemic and parody of *Gone with the Wind*, and it's liable to carry with it a little after burn, long after you've originally ingested it. One reviewer said *The Wind Done Gone* is "intentionally provocative stuff, designed to open your eyes and make your heart burn." Think Prince's Hot Chicken Shack in Nashville transported from diner to dais, and you're beginning to get the idea of one of Randall's speaking appearances. Pull up a chair, won't you?



Food and Music at the Carter Fold: An SFA Oral History Project

by Amy C. Evans

In 1927, A. P. Carter, his wife, Sara, and Sara's cousin Maybelle, who happened to be married to A. P.'s brother, made the 30-mile trek from their home in Hiltons, Virginia, to Bristol, Tennessee, to record a few songs. The resulting Bristol Sessions not only marked the commercial debut of the Carter Family, they catapulted country music into the American canon.

Almost 50 years after those first recordings, Janette Carter, daughter of A. P. and Sara, established the Carter Family Fold. It was A. P.'s dying wish that the Carter Family's legacy be carried on. So Janette opened the small concert hall to celebrate her family and its contribution to country music, as well as the rich musical traditions of Appalachia. Janette played host to music fans every Saturday night for more than 30 years, opening shows with her brother Joe and son Dale and singing the songs like "Keep on the Sunny Side" and "Wildwood Flower" that her parents made famous. Meanwhile, Janette's homemade soup beans and cornbread were flying out the concession stand window. That's because the Carter Family Fold is not just about music. It's about family. And when you're entertaining family, you want to keep them fed.

Today, Rita Forrester, Janette's daughter, welcomes friends, family, and music fans to the Fold. When her mother passed

away in 2006, Rita took the helm and never looked back. Still, not much has changed. Rita sits in with the band each Saturday night to welcome the crowd and pay tribute to her family through song. But before the music even starts, Rita, other members of her family, and a smattering of friends work in the kitchen at the Fold, cooking the food that will be served that night. The traditional Appalachian staples of soup beans and cornbread are still at the top of the menu, but so is egg salad that's made from Janette's recipe and a menagerie of cakes that are baked by women in the community. A night at the Carter Family Fold is like a reunion—a reunion of music, family, and food.



Music and Food: What Goes with Widespread Panic?

by Ashley Hall

At this fall's symposium, the SFA will ponder the relationship between music and food. That's a topic Ron Eyester has been chewing on for a few years at his neighborhood brasserie located in the Morningside Heights district of Atlanta.

Instead of featuring a hushed jazz trio, his music dinners have celebrated the likes of Widespread Panic, Athens, Georgia's own cult jam band. At a recent dinner, Ron served a multicourse feast. One course was dubbed "Fishwater" after the track on Widespread Panic's *Another Joyous Occasion* album. The dish was peekytoe crab ravioli with local baby fennel in a sherry and shellfish consommé. Other courses were inspired by the songs "Red Beans," and "Thought Sausage," and "Ribs and Whiskey." For dessert, he served coconut beignets, a reference even the most blasé Panic fan will recognize.

"Who made the rule that a nice restaurant has to have the jazz channel playing all day?" asks Ron, a veteran chef with more than 30 years experience, one who just happens have attended more than 200 Widespread Panic shows.

When he opened Food 101, Ron rejected Muzak in favor of his packed iPod. "If I'm going to be here 14 hours day seven days a week, I'm going to like the music," Ron said.

At Food 101, the fare is simple and fresh. Ron is adamant about buying local ingredients whenever possible, a practice he began in the Charleston kitchens where he learned to cook. He's a purist about music, as well, and painstakingly assembles dining-room playlists featuring classic acts like Jimi Hendrix, Charles Mingus, and Radiohead.

The restaurant's first music dinner was Jerry Garcia-themed. The menu was five courses of gussied-up burritos and brownies, the sort of food you might find in the parking lot outside a Grateful Dead show. The idea started as a mild joke and quickly exploded into a 300-person bacchanal.

Since then, Ron has put on dinners celebrating Johnny Cash, including a "Cry, Cry, Cry" Sweet Onion Salad. James Brown got five courses of formalized soul food. Last June, a peach-themed dinner honored *Eat a Peach*, the immortal album by Macon, Georgia's Allman Brothers Band.

"I try to be real playful about the food," Ron said, "I think some people take it all too seriously. Now, I take the ingredients seriously, but it's got to be fun." Food 101's annual Jerry Garcia Dinner will be August 5 and 6. It sells out quickly; make your reservations early.

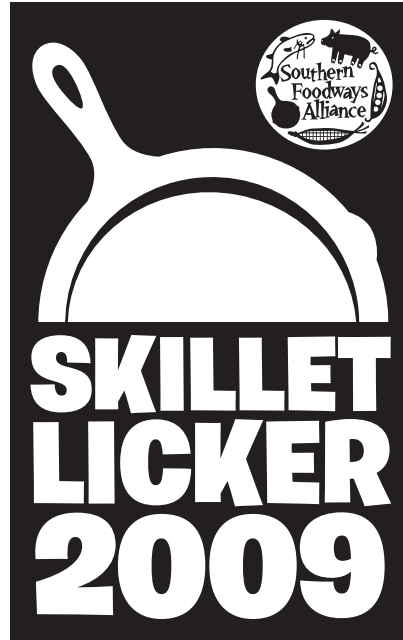
Thank You to Our Members

The Southern Foodways Alliance deeply appreciates our members. Membership dollars support all that documenting, studying, and celebrating that we do in the changing American South. To thank our supporters, we recently mailed members the new official issue SFA member sticker, 2009 edition:

According to the New Georgia Encyclopedia, the Skillet Lickers were "one of the most influential string bands that recorded during the formative years of the country music industry." Led by fiddler Gid Tanner, the Georgia band combined old-time country music with humor and showmanship. "In addition to traditional folk music, fiddle tunes, and novelty songs, the Skillet Lickers recorded a series of skits in which humorous dialogue, interspersed with snatches of familiar songs and tunes, was the main feature. Called 'rural drama records,' these skits, as their titles indicate, recounted stories about such topics as 'A Corn Licker Still in Georgia.'"

Didn't get a sticker? We have a few left if you'd like to support SFA work and renew your membership today.

Visit www.southernfoodways.org to renew online.



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