



# GRAVY

NO. 88

SUMMER

2023





BACK TO THE SOURCE™

PURE, CRISP, NATURAL,  
SOUTHERN LOVE STRAIGHT  
OUT OF THE HEART OF  
OUACHITA MOUNTAINS, USA.



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Gravy is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, whose mission is to document, study, and explore the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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GUEST EDITOR'S NOTE

# THROUGH THE SKEPTIC NIGHT

True stories, well told, offer a corrective to the threat of historical erasure in Florida.

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY



AS I READ AN ASSOCIATED PRESS ARTICLE this spring about a proposed Florida bill that would prohibit elementary school girls from discussing their periods in public school classrooms, I began second-guessing my decision to feature my home state in the summer issue of *Gravy*.


By mid-May, after the legislative session ended, the NAACP issued a travel advisory warning African Americans, people of color, and LGBTQ people, that, due to new state laws, Florida probably isn't a safe vacation spot. This warning follows last year's passage of House Bill 7, also known as the "Stop WOKE Act." It prohibits the teaching of history—from kindergarten through college—in

a manner that might make a person "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress," about their race, or the way their ancestors treated a person of another race or sex. I've read the law. It allows public schools to teach about slavery, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, "Hispanic contributions" and "women's contributions to the United States." Just not in a way that makes anyone uncomfortable or that suggests harrowing and discriminatory events fundamentally shaped the nation and continue to have lasting fallout. (And there's no mention of Native American or LGBTQ history.)

For months now, I've kept a log of such stories

State Archives of Florida

View of FAMU's campus in Tallahassee, Florida, ca.1920.



“God ever keep us true  
to thee/ Thy faith that  
truth shall make men free/  
Shall guide thy loyal sons  
aright/ And fend them  
thru’ the skeptic night.”  
FAMU ALMA MATER

under the header, “For Florida issue.” Not that I wanted this volume to center these events, but I did not want to ignore them, either. As the list neared twenty, I stopped counting.

It’s been a little more than a year now since I became deputy editor of SFA. But over its history, *Gravy* has never had a Florida theme. As a sixth-generation Floridian, I felt this omission exemplified the flawed notion held by many that the Sunshine State isn’t part of the South. As though we’re an outlier; a place with contiguous geography to the rest of the region but somehow in our own category, like...Texas. In it, but not entirely of it. Since SFA’s theme this year is “Where

is the South?” now seemed the right time to say, “It’s from Pensacola to Key West!”

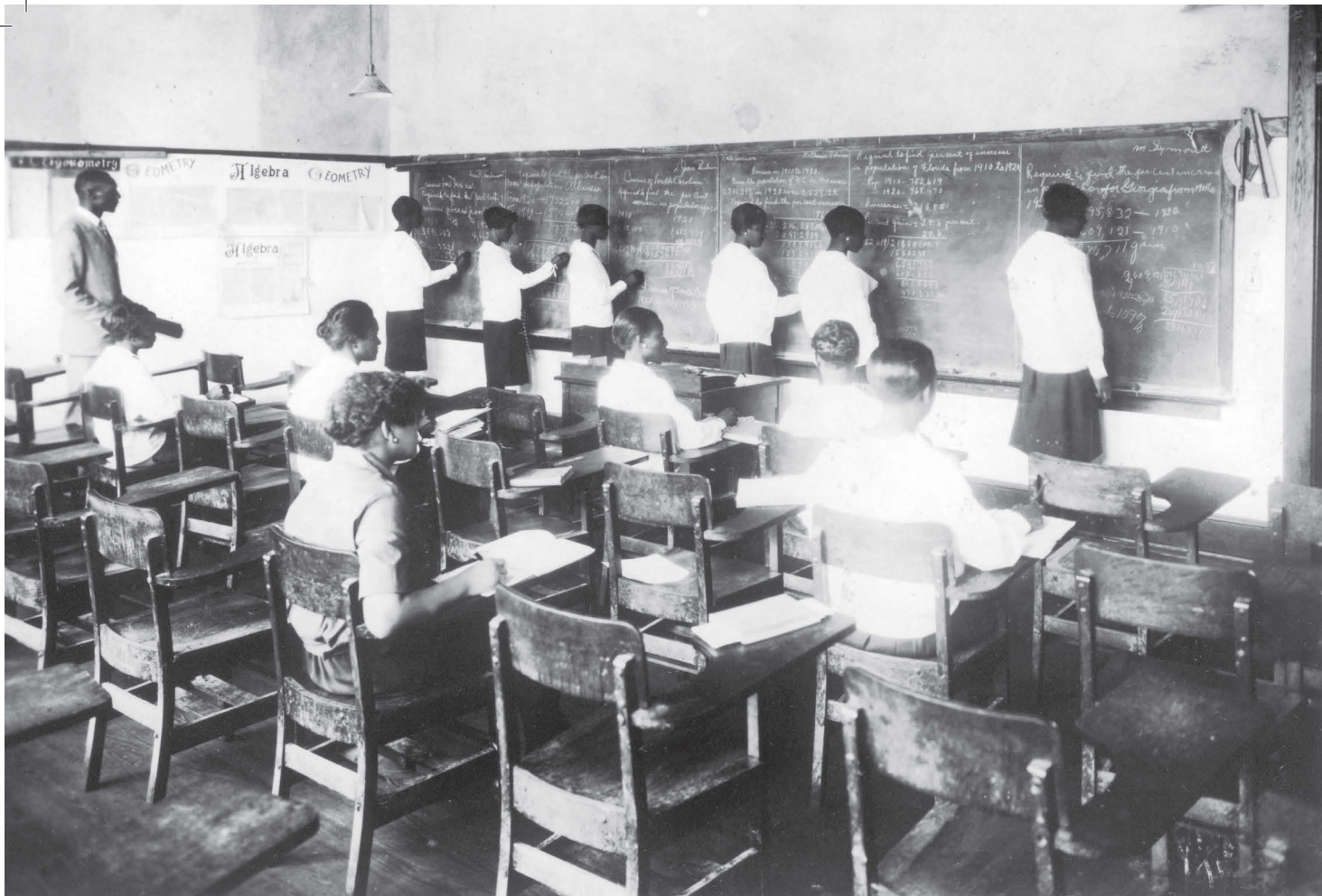
But then cities started canceling Pride parades because organizers say this new climate feels “unsafe,” and Toni Morrison’s classic *The Bluest Eye* was removed from all high school libraries in at least one county. And here I wanted to talk about swamp cabbage, oranges, and Cuban sandwiches and their place in the Southern culinary cannon.

Though I now live in Georgia, Florida’s Panhandle is my cradle. I center it in essays about how my ancestors endured in the Sunshine State from enslavement until now. I mourn the loss of Apalachicola oysters. I prefer Tupelo honey to orange blossom. Fried mullet is king. All of which makes this moment so difficult. Those are foods we all can enjoy, regardless of race or identity, yet it’s important to sit and reckon with the histories that brought each of us to the table.

As a third-generation graduate of Florida A&M University (FAMU), the only HBCU in the state’s university system, I know this moment isn’t a historical anomaly. Exactly one hundred years ago in October, students at my alma mater staged a walkout and burned down several campus buildings to protest a push by state officials to make FAMU a vocational training school for “Negroes,” rather than a full-fledged liberal arts college to enrich Black minds. According to *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s*, by Raymond Wolters, given its location “in the Florida panhandle—where many whites feared that liberal training would ruin good field hands—the college inevitably came in for criticism.” One of the buildings students torched: the Mechanical Arts Building.

Though the “Stop WOKE Act” currently is enforced in K-12 public schools, last fall a federal court injunction stopped its implementation on university campuses—for now. The judge who issued the order called the law “positively dystopian.” There’s another passage in the act prohibiting instruction that suggests a person bears any responsibility for what their ancestors did to another race or sex. I’m trying to fathom what it might mean for my alma mater if a higher court reverses the current ruling—a Black college barred from talking about systemic racism.

I visited FAMU’s campus recently, just to see how things had changed since my last trip home in 2022. My mom came along. She, too, is a FAMU alumna who later worked on campus for nearly



A mathematics class at FAMU in Tallahassee, Florida, ca. 1920.

forty years as an administrator in the Office of Continuing Education. One of our school slogans is “On the highest of seven hills.” Tallahassee, the seat of Leon County, is situated near the southernmost point of the Red Hills region, which links the Panhandle coast to south Georgia. Leon County was one of six counties along the Georgia border, called Middle Florida, that was fertile cotton territory in the 1800s. At one point, enslaved Black people outnumbered white folks at least three to one. In 1887, the school was founded—literally—on the other side of the railroad tracks of the Tallahassee Railroad Company depot, through which thousands of cotton bales were shipped. That’s how we landed on the highest hill. Later, those same tracks delivered students to the foot of campus.

Mom and I went to the pinnacle, the site of a new performing arts amphitheater named for Will Packer, a major Hollywood producer and FAMU alum. We looked down the slope where the women’s dormitories once stood. Farther down, the university administration building still stands. When I was an undergrad, my friends

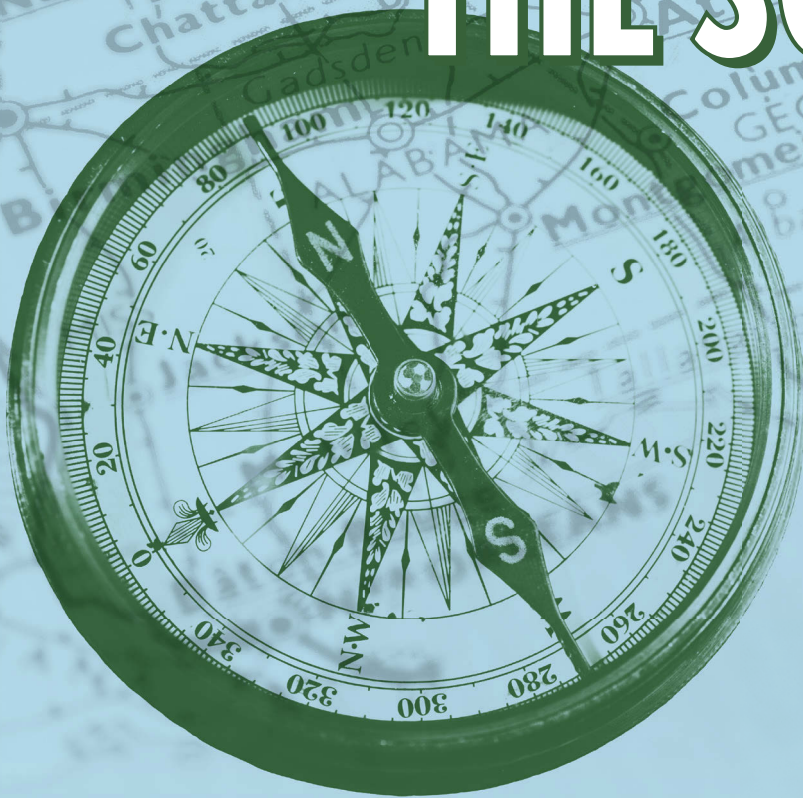
teased me by saying I was born in the financial aid office. It’s true that I was on student aid. But before it was the Foote-Hilyer Administration Center, the sprawling brick edifice was the only area hospital during segregation where Black mothers could give birth. I’m not sure what floor housed the maternity ward, but that’s where I was born, just a few months before passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

About a mile away from the amphitheater, above the live oak tree line, we could see some of the city’s tallest structures: the Turlington Building, home to the state department of education, and the Capitol tower, an unfortunate 1977 addition to the more elegant, classical 1845 statehouse. Scholars say the enslaved built the nineteenth-century classical revival legislative hall. In all the times I visited the historic grounds on school field trips, never once was that fact shared.

Now that I know, it’s up to me—and others who love this state as much as I do—to tell this hard history with honesty and pride. It belongs to all Floridians. I can’t control how other people feel, but I can give them the truth to think about. 🐾

SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

# WHERE IS THE SOUTH?



**OCTOBER 20-21, 2023**

Visit [southernfoodways.org](https://southernfoodways.org) and follow [@southfoodways](https://twitter.com/southfoodways) for details. Tickets to our Fall Symposium in Oxford, MS, go on sale in August.

## FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS

**Lindsey Bailey**, this issue’s cover artist, is an artist and illustrator based in Olive Branch, Mississippi, and a frequent *Gravy* collaborator. She graduated from Mississippi State University in 2009 with a BFA in graphic design. She has worked on editorial illustration, character design, children’s books, book covers, and portraits. Her favorite mediums are oils and digital painting, and she uses traditional representational techniques inspired by the old masters as well as contemporary painters and illustrators. This summer, she would like to read *Good Omens* by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett and then watch the television adaptation.



**Nadege Green** is an independent researcher, writer, community archivist, and audio producer based in Miami. Her reporting has appeared on NPR, WLRN, PRI’s *The World*, and in the *Miami Herald*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *The Atlantic*. She is the founder of Black Miami-Dade, a history and storytelling platform. In 2023, she created the first-ever Miami exhibition honoring local Black queer history: “Give Them Their Flowers: An Exhibit of Miami’s Black LGBTQ+ History.” She is currently re-reading Imani Perry’s *South to America* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*.

**Yuki Murayama** is an illustrator and designer based in Los Angeles. He is originally from Kyoto, Japan. His illustrations are often inspired by nostalgic feelings. Murayama loves to paint in traditional mediums such as oil and acrylic, and to make work in Riso, a type of digital screen printing. When he is not making art, he likes to cook and eat different kinds of noodles. He is also a huge fan of cookies and cream ice cream (he is eating it while writing this bio). This summer, Murayama is excited to read Haruki Murakami’s new novel, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Courtesy of Lindsey Bailey, Amber Cole; Courtesy of Yuki Murayama

**Deesha Philyaw**'s debut short story collection, *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*, won multiple awards, including the 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. The collection focuses on Black women, sex, and the Black church and is being adapted for television by HBO Max with Tessa Thompson executive producing. Philyaw is a Kimbilio Fiction Fellow and was the 2022–2023 John and Renée Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi. She is now an empty nester in Oakland, California. She is currently listening to and loving the audiobook *Big Girl*, a novel by Mecca Jamilah Sullivan.

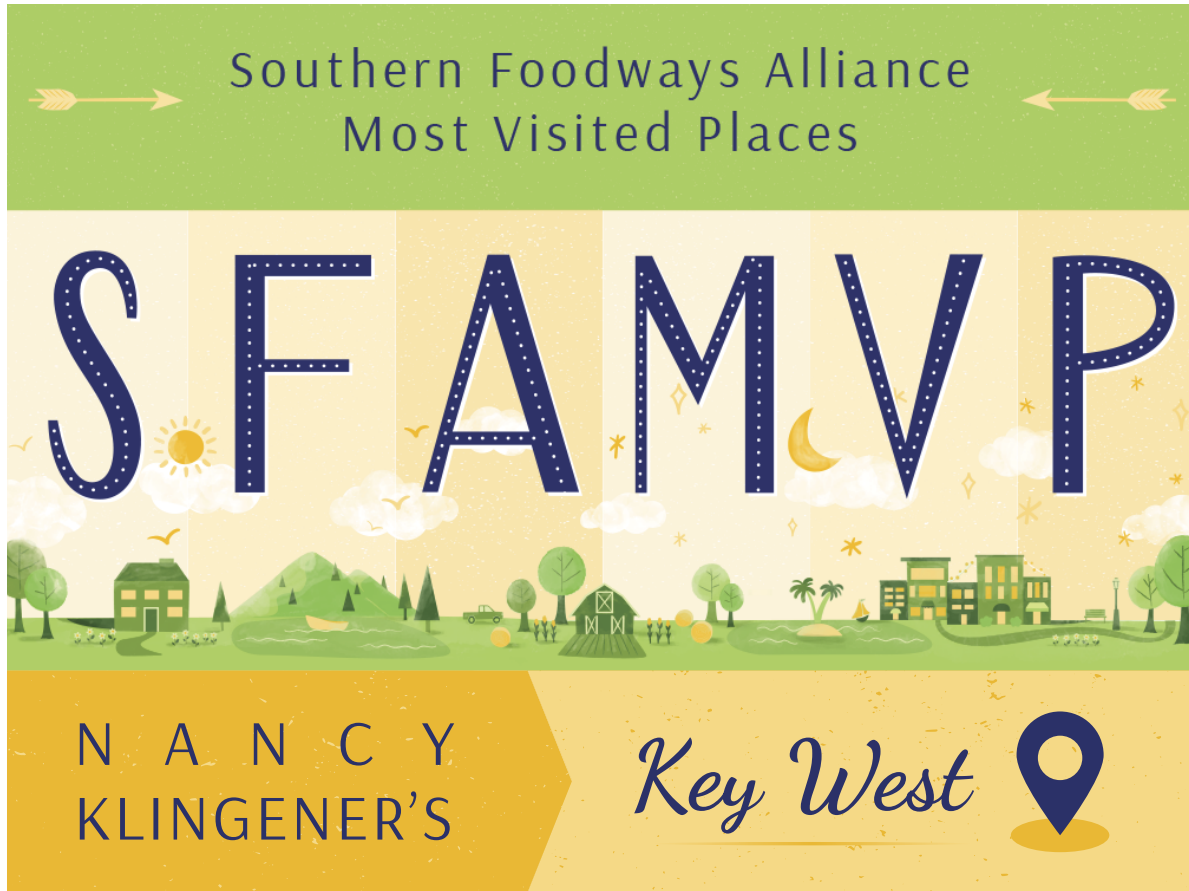


**Leslie Sainz** is the author of the debut poetry collection *Have You Been Long Enough at Table*, forthcoming from Tin House in September 2023. The daughter of Cuban exiles, she is the recipient of a 2021 National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship in poetry. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *The Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-Day*, *Yale Review*, *New England Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Narrative*. A three-time National Poetry Series finalist, she is also the managing editor of the *New England Review*. She just started reading *About Women: Conversations Between a Writer and a Painter* by Lisa Alther and Françoise Gilot.

**Thao Thai** is a former Floridian currently based in Ohio, where she lives with her husband and daughter. Her work has been published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *WIRED*, *Elle*, and *Lit Hub*. Her debut novel, *Banyan Moon*, set on the Florida coast, is an American Booksellers Association Indie Next title. The novel follows three generations of Vietnamese American women reeling from the death of their matriarch, revealing inherited burdens, buried secrets, and unlikely love stories. This summer, she plans to read *Do Tell* by Lindsay Lynch, *Tom Lake* by Ann Patchett, and *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water* by Angie Cruz.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Vanessa German; Hillary Dubie; Caroline Lohrey



I'M THE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS MANAGER AT THE MONROE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY and president of the Key West Literary Seminar. I've lived in Key West for more than thirty years. It's a small town—roughly 25,000 people—with a huge tourism industry—more than a million visitors annually. As a full-time resident, I really savor the places and experiences that are not solely aimed at getting the maximum amount of money from the maximum number of people.

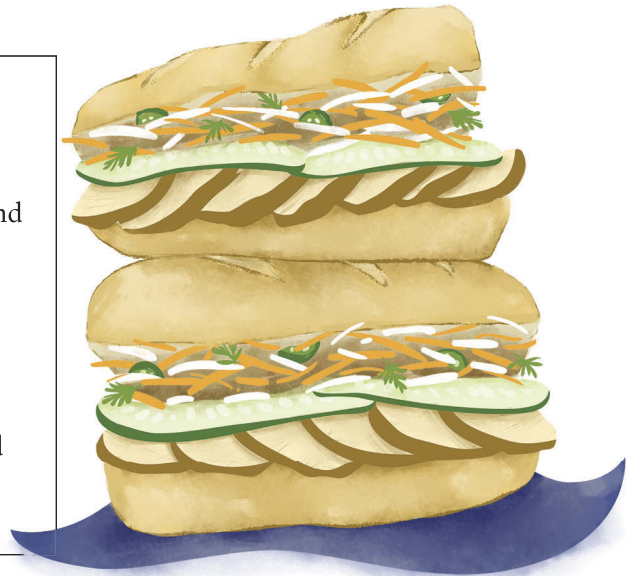


**Pepper Pot Island Cafe**

This is a real family concern. They offer Trinidadian favorites like roti and curry. My husband used to run birding tours to Trinidad and loves their food. He gets especially excited on Saturday, Doubles Day. Doubles are a Trinidadian street food made with bara (a flatbread) filled with chana (curried chickpeas) and flavored with an array of condiments. Pepper Pot is in Key West's historic Black Pepper Pot is in Key West's historic Black neighborhood, known as Bahama Village.

## Five Brothers Grocery and Sandwich Shop

Key West was basically the Miami of the nineteenth century: huge in the cigar industry and a hotbed for Cuban exiles working to overthrow the rulers on their home island. Back then it was Spain, not Castro. So, Cuban food and culture have been integrated for generations here. Five Brothers is one of the last real bodegas left in Key West. Every morning you see half the public employees and tradespeople on the island stopping here for their café con leche or buche (what we call a cafecito, or shot of espresso).



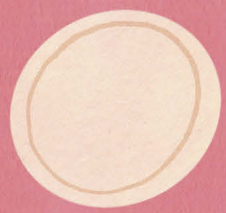
## Books & Books @ The Studios

South Florida's legendary independent bookstore was founded in Coral Gables in 1982. It got its southernmost affiliate seven years ago when Judy Blume—yep, *that* Judy Blume—decided to quit writing books and start selling them. She and her husband, George Cooper, founded the store. They work there almost every day when they're not attending movie premieres or library conferences. And even if Judy's not there, they'll sell you one of her books for her to sign and send it to you later.

## Key West Cemetery

The cemetery is at the center of the historic district on (relatively) high ground. I ride my bike through there almost every day on my way to work, appreciating what makes it special—like the memorial to the sailors killed in the explosion of the *USS Maine* in 1898. And the Otto family plot, which includes a small memorial for Elfina, their pet deer, and marble headstones for three of their dogs. This cemetery has some pretty good epitaphs, the most famous being, I TOLD YOU I WAS SICK. But my favorite is for Sunny Otto, beloved Yorkshire Terrier, born April 21, 1952, and died February 26, 1970: HIS BEAUTIFUL LITTLE SPIRIT WAS A CHALLENGE TO LOVE.





# *Carne Fría: A Love Story*

BY EMMA TRELLES

Her strip of a kitchen the surface  
Of the sun when she cooked in the eternal  
Summer of our city of reinvention. Miami  
Still shunned us then, if you can imagine  
A place without the persistent glint of Spanish  
And the way café levitates every rough juncture.  
She never spoke English and what she might have  
Understood about that time was buried beneath her  
Eyes, alive even now in a hand-painted photograph  
Where I keep her near my own little stove.  
I never saw my grandmother make it,  
The meat arrived silvered and flecked  
With olives and the knowledge of a woman  
Of obsidian will, who survived by refusing not to.  
There are years since when she still visits me  
Circled in blue flame, and she looks  
Pleased with her unseen arrangement,  
A home where she knows every tongue.  
I ask her about my uncle Tito, if he is there  
With his books about astral projection and his chess board,  
If the place she now lives has the same island light of where  
She was born and where she died. She shines and says nothing.  
She always preferred to listen, her face open to me, soft  
As gardenias she cut from the yard and set in a cup of water  
Beside my bed. I ask her what the recipe was  
For her carne fría, if I will again taste  
Its cold and wondrous salt. To this, she lifts  
Her hand and presses it to my heart.

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*Emma Trelles is the ninth Poet Laureate of Santa Barbara, California, and in August 2022, she was named one of twenty-two Poet Laureate Fellows across the country by the Academy of American Poets. She is the daughter of Cuban immigrants and the author of Tropicalia (University of Notre Dame Press), winner of the Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize.*

Q&A



# “MY OWN COWS, MY OWN LAND”

Huey Howard, one of Florida’s few Black cattle ranchers, has built a legacy over sixty years.

BY DALIA COLÓN

Photos by Benjamin Rusnak



ABOVE: Some of Huey Howard's cattle in Hendry County, Florida; OPPOSITE: Rancher Huey Howard, May 2023.

IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA, NESTLED AMONG the citrus groves and strawberry fields off State Road 29, there's a white post-and-rail fence with a matching sign in all caps: HOWARD CATTLE CORPORATION. Beyond it are acres and acres of lush grass dotted with brown-and-white speckled cows. They belong to Huey Howard.

Howard was born in 1935 in Leland, Mississippi. He's one of seven children born to James and Mary Howard, who farmed cotton and beans. Howard came to Immokalee in 1953, following friends who had moved to the area because they'd heard about work opportunities in Florida's vegetable fields.

I visited Howard on an unseasonably humid February afternoon. Eschewing the heat in favor of his air-conditioned gray Chevy Silverado, Howard invited me to sit shotgun while we parked in the shade. I wanted to know how he became one of the state's few Black cattle ranchers. His nephew, Gerald Howard, sat in the truck's back seat and chimed in occasionally. Huey Howard is a hugger with pecan-brown skin. His soft white hair peeks from beneath a straw cowboy hat. In his voice I heard his native Mississippi and the

rural patch of Florida he has long called home. He's the father of three adult sons, granddaddy to more grandchildren and great-grandchildren than he can count, and widower to Dorcas Howard, the longtime principal of Village Oaks Elementary School in Collier County. She passed away in 2018. He keeps her work ID in his wallet.

Howard is the type of man who'll trick you into holding out your hand so he can drop a twenty-dollar bill into it. Gas money for the long drive back to Tampa, he insisted, when I fell for the ploy. I tried to return the cash, but Gerald warned me about the futility of arguing with his uncle. (I later returned the twenty dollars via mail.) After all, Huey Howard is a man who knows about perseverance.

When he wanted to start a ranch, around 1963, no one would sell to a Black man. So, Howard got a white friend to buy the land for him in Felda, just outside Immokalee and about thirty-five miles east of Fort Myers. The friend later signed the deed over to Howard. That's how Howard bought his first twenty acres for \$5,000.

Today, Howard and his family raise more than 400 head of cattle. They own several varieties.



ABOVE: Howard and his sons and nephew raise multiple varieties of beef cattle. OPPOSITE: A panther crossing sign on the highway near Howard's ranch. Florida panthers have been known to roam the area, killing donkeys.

Beefmasters are their bread and butter. According to the USDA's 2017 Census of Agriculture, there were 1,034 beef cattle ranches and fourteen dairy cattle and milk production farms in Florida run by Black producers, out of a total of 30,590 beef producers and 489 milk and dairy cattle farmers in the state. This puts Black ranchers like the Howards in a rare club, among only 3.3 percent of Florida's beef producers.

After nearly six decades of growing his ranch, teaching his children to herd and care for the animals—including sending his son Huey Jr. to sell cattle at the Okeechobee Livestock Market—Howard's legacy was finally recognized by his community. In 2020, the Howards were to have been honored at the Immokalee Cattle Drive and Jamboree as a “pioneer” ranching family, part of Florida's centuries-old cowboy history. But just a day before the roundup and parade were set to kick off, the event was cancelled because of the pandemic. It was called off again in 2021. When the Jamboree finally came back last year, the Howard family was there, including Huey, smiling, and waving to the crowd.

**Dalia Colón: *How did you get into cattle ranching?***

**Huey Howard:** I made myself a promise that one of these days, you are going to get in the cattle business. And I held my promises. I got into the cattle business. I had some friends that owned a bunch of cattle and I wanted to get into business also, but back then, they wouldn't sell me no land, or they wouldn't lease me no land [because] of me being Black. But we finally got where we could buy some land. Me and my son own 1,600 acres.

**DC: *How has your job changed since you started ranching?***

**HH:** We used to sell cattle cheap. I can remember selling cattle for fifteen, sixteen cents a pound.

**DC: *What would they go for today?***

**HH:** Probably a dollar and a half, two dollars and something today.

**DC: *What else has changed?***

**HH:** You know, we used to be able to go out and catch wild hogs and butch 'em and all that stuff,

but the panthers—we got such a panther problem until we can't hardly do that anymore. I put eighteen donkeys in my cow [pasture] over there. And the panthers killed all eighteen of my donkeys. And I know if they kill eighteen donkeys, they probably gonna kill forty or fifty cows.

**DC:** *Wow. I did see the panther crossing signs on my way here. How much total land do you have between the land that you own and the land that you lease?*

**HH:** 7,000 acres.

**DC:** *That sounds like so much work. Isn't there something easier you could do to earn a living?*

**HH:** Probably is, but I don't want to. I love to go out there and look at the cows. It's a full-time job to try to keep the fences up and everything. It's a lot of work involved, but I just love it.

**DC:** *When you were a kid, what did you imagine you would be doing as an adult?*

**HH:** Well, when I was a kid, I always wanted to be in the cow business. Why? I don't know. When I first started, I bought dairy cows. Every time I'd buy five or six dairy cows [we would get a] big rain, they'd get wet, they'd catch pneumonia and die. I'd go back and buy five or six more, and they would do the same thing. So, I quit buying dairy cows and started buying [beef] cows.

**DC:** *Have you thought about retiring?*

**HH:** I thought about it, but lemme tell you now. The first morning I wake up and can't get out the bed, I'm going to retire. Up until the end, I ain't gonna retire.

**DC:** *All right. How many kids do you have?*

**HH:** I got Ivan and Kevin and Huey. Kevin...he's the lawyer [in] San Francisco.

**DC:** *What does the future look like for the cattle ranch?*

**HH:** As far as I'm concerned, the future looks a little good for the cattle ranch. We're going to try to stay [here] as long as I'm living, and I imagine when I'm gone, we'll still be [ranching]. Ivan owns the ranch, and he's gonna be in ranching

for a long time. I'm sure he won't get out of it. He's going to probably turn the ranch over to his children when they get out of college.

**DC:** *This country has a rich tradition of Black cowboys, and you are carrying that on here in Florida. What does that mean to you?*

**HH:** It mean everything to me. I can get up in the morning and know that I can go to the ranch and look at my own cows and look at my own land.

**DC:** *What's it like today, interacting with the other predominantly white cattle ranchers? Do you feel like you're part of the club now?*

**HH:** Yeah. When we work our cows, we always have a bunch of cowboys to come in and work the cow—a bunch of white cowboys. It's not a problem.

**DC:** *What's your favorite way to enjoy beef?*

**HH:** I'll always eat a big steak. Well-done, with a lot of onions on it. 🍷



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*Dalia Colón (@daliacolon) is a multimedia journalist in Riverview, Florida, specializing in food, travel, and the arts.*



# THE OTHER SIDE OF SUNLIGHT

A meditation on two lives intertwined

BY THAO THAI

Illustrations by Yuki Murayama

YOUR LIFE BEGINS WITH A MISNAMING. They call you many things, actually. Scientists know you as *Cynoscion nebulosus*, or a weakfish, named for your tender mouth that tears with the first graze of a hook. Because of your protruding fangs, you've also been called a Nosferatu fish, summoning images of sunken-eyed vampires lurking in dark corners. Fisherpeople refer to you colloquially as a spotted seatrout or a speck, a title that belies your size. (The largest among you are called gator trouts. One of your captured kin topped seventeen pounds, roughly the size of a six-month-old baby.)

The thing is, you're not a trout at all. You belong to the drum fish family, named for the *rat-a-tat* sounds male seatrouts make to attract females during mating season. Locals say that on summer evenings, an hour or two before nightfall, boaters can press their ears against their hulls and hear the drumming of seatrouts just beneath the surface of the ocean.

I wonder how often I've stood on the narrow piers above your habitat, studying the sway of palmettos from shore, the pinched white peaks of tides in the distance, completely oblivious to your movements beneath my feet. I'd drink a Sprite and crumple the can between my palms, thinking of what I'd watch on Nick at Nite later, or why Justin Waters flirted with every girl in the fifth grade except me, or why it was just so difficult to talk to my mother about even the simplest things.

I thought you and I belonged to two separate worlds. All the while, my life intertwined with yours in silent and mysterious ways, though it would be years before I understood how we coexisted.

MY LIFE STARTS with a misnaming, too. My name—Thảo—translates to “one who honors their parents” in Vietnamese. Minutes after I was born, my grandfather named me with the hope that I would take on some filial virtues of obedience, respect, and gratitude. I was respectful and grateful, but I never felt obedient. In my mind, I rebelled against my family's rules about what I could read or watch on television. (Nothing involving romance or untoward behavior.) I

hated that I wasn't allowed to stay in the sun for too long, out of their fear of darkening my skin, or that I couldn't swim in the ocean, because of sharks. Sundays at the beach, plunked sullenly in the sand, I'd watch other kids skimming the waves on their boogie boards, and I'd tell myself that someday, I'd go anywhere I want. Even the ocean, sharks be damned.

Back then, the sea seemed interminable, clear and faithful, dependable as air. Back then, I didn't foresee the way the world around us would change.

Maybe if I was allowed in open water, I would have met you earlier, flicking past me, on your way to catch the annual migration of shrimp with the rest of your school. I might have shivered as your body brushed against my leg hairs, standing at attention at your touch. “Mom!” I'd have called, wonder supplanting my usual reticence. “Come look!”

You're something of a celebrity in Florida, especially where I grew up an hour from Tampa Bay, the state's largest open-water estuary, known for

I thought you and I belonged  
to two separate worlds.  
All the while, my life  
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its proliferation of seatrout. About Bradenton, my sleepy hometown, we always joked that the only things to do were go to the beach or die. We were overrun by the very young, who could not yet escape, or the very old, intent on spending their last years wallowing in sunshine.

They all say you're good eating. Your sweet, tender flesh flakes off in buttery chunks, ideal for grilling, braising, or baking. That makes you a boon for lay fisherpeople as well as commercial boats, especially since it's open season on spotted seatrout all year round. Every day, you're in danger of getting caught. There's no seasonal reprieve. No mercy. Maybe that's why I feel your life to be precarious, in a way that endears you to me.

LOOKS-WISE, YOU'RE an undeniably captivating specimen. You've got that long, silvery body with a slight blue cast; that protuberant lower jaw; prominent canines; a tail fin like a paper fan snapped open. And, of course, there's that speckled pattern running along your spine. The spots resemble ink blots or black holes dotted among the luster of a shifting galaxy. In pictures, your body undulates ever so slightly, belly sagging as your head arches for a sky you'll never get close enough to touch. Did I ever draw you? I should have.

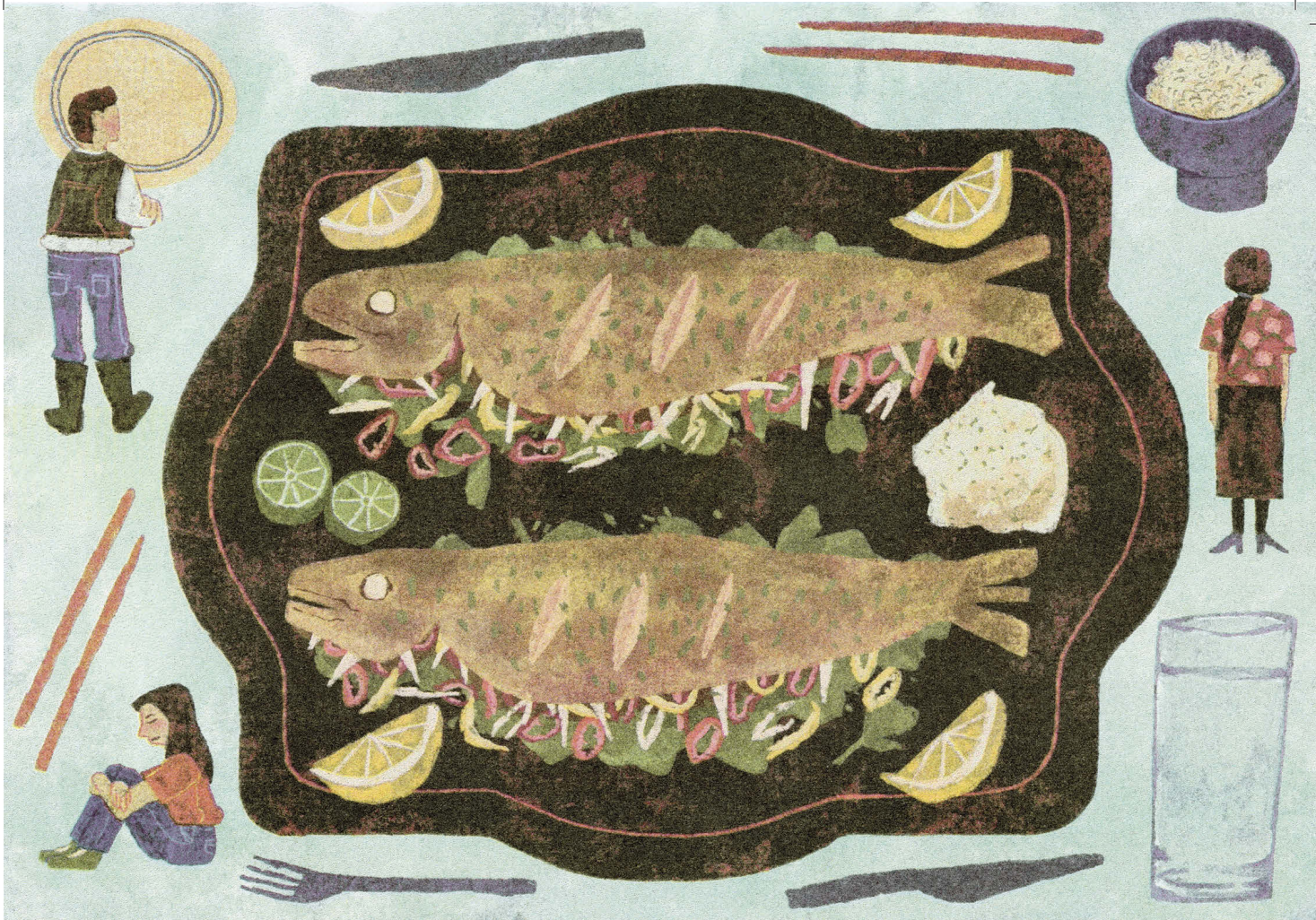
As a kid, I was obsessed with the ocean. After all, the ocean carried me to America from my birthplace in Vietnam near the Mekong Delta—another estuary where the fresh water of the rivers melts into the salty brine of the sea. And even before that, a decade before I was born, my mother and grandparents looked to the sea for

escape during the war, their bare feet flopping in soggy swamps under the moonlight, eyes squinting for the black thread of water that might tug them to safety. In some ways, the ocean was a mother to us, offering rebirth even as it threatened doom. I loved those stories of the ocean. I wanted not to be above it, in a boat keeping me afloat, but within it, like you.

I spent hours drawing fish in my notebooks: marlins with their needly snouts, curly-finned bettas, catfish with trailing whiskers. I went through so many blue crayons, trying to fill the depths around the fish, unable to capture the shifting, jeweled hues. I was an isolated kid, never allowed to go on sleepovers or attend birthday parties, so the idea of the sea—teeming with creatures, all operating in varying degrees of consciousness—appealed to me. One could be lonely in the ocean, yet never alone.

I loved those stories of the ocean. I wanted not to be above it, in a boat keeping me afloat, but within it, like you.





MY STEPFATHER WAS the kind of avid fisherman with khaki vests to hold all his hooks and a tackle box that slid open into stepped compartments, like the ledges of a Maya temple. When he drove to the beach, my mother sometimes tagged along to clean his catch on the pier. Working with her fillet knife, she stained the barnacle-crust wood rust-red before tossing fish guts back into the sea. I watched the sacs sink slowly out of sight and wondered what it would be like to fall that gracefully.

At night, I had a recurring dream where I floated in the depths of the ocean, watching the porous gauze of the afternoon dance above me. Fish would glide past—once, a giant whale with a plaintive moan—and I'd stare up, wondering what lay on the other side of sunlight. Now, decades later, I find myself wanting to kick my way back to that dream. Like it's home.

Do you dream? There's evidence that fish enter a phase similar to REM sleep in humans. But scientists warn us not to conflate experiences between species. Humans are not fish, and fish are

not humans. I seem to forget this when thinking about you for too long.

NOT TO BE indelicate, but it seems like the right time to talk about how you ended up on our table. I'm sure that my stepfather would have pulled his mud-stained white truck off near some shallow grass flats after finishing his work as a gardener for the wealthy. He'd have wiped the sweat from his brow as he fumbled for the right lure. You're not particular: You'll chase live bait, dead bait, artificial bait. Fisherpeople know you as a brawler, those teeth put quickly to work the moment you spot your prey. You fight back, they warn, twisting their lips in reluctant admiration. But your mouth tears easily, so reeling you in takes care. It's a parry, not a battle. My stepfather would have understood gentleness in fishing, even if he and I could not find such grace for each other.

After he caught you, he'd have placed you in the old cooler to flop on ice from the Shell gas station. He'd drive you past the emergency room where



the doctors once examined a mysterious speckling of hives along my body when I was ten; past our preferred Applebee's, where my mother ordered chicken fajitas every time; past the community college my family wanted me to attend one day, even as I yelled, "No, no, no, I need to go *much* farther than that," making my mother cry and ask why she wasn't enough to keep me close.

Once home, my stepfather would have deposited you in our laundry room, announcing that he'd caught dinner. He always seemed proud of himself after a fishing expedition, though I'm sure I looked at his splattered, brackish-scented clothing with disgust. There'd be a flurry of excitement in the household, my mom peeking in to measure you with her thumb and index finger lined up against your scales, my stepfather washing the murk and salt off his hands and his face.

And me, I'd have pushed myself off my narrow twin bed to see what the commotion was about. I'd probably have said something ungrateful, like, "Fish, again? I'm sick of it." Maybe my stepfather would have corrected me and said, "Speck. It's

seatrout." Then I would have rolled my eyes, and he and my mother would have gotten in a fight over how bratty I was. The three of us never did learn how to talk to each other.

THE TRUTH WAS, I loved when we had fish for dinner. My mom had this way of preparing seatrout. She cut parallel grooves along the flesh, then stuffed each groove with a mixture of lemongrass and salt and shards of dried chili pepper from her garden. She fried the whole thing in peanut oil, even the fins, which crisped up so beautifully that they shattered like potato chips in your mouth, saltier even than the sea. Salty enough to cut my gums and still be 100 percent worth it. She'd have done that with you, I'm sure.

We didn't have a lot of family dinners once I entered high school. Mostly, the three of us took our plates to our bedrooms, outdoors, or in front of the television. I think we imagined it safer that way: keeping our fangs out of reach. But eating fish is a communal activity; we couldn't take a

whole fish to our rooms. So there you'd be, splayed on a platter at the center of the dining room table, long and golden from the fryer. We'd lean forward to scoop pieces of you with our chopsticks, dropping them onto mounds of white rice in porcelain bowls purchased at the local Asian mart. Chewing slowly, careful of wayward bones that might jut into the soft flesh of our cheeks and draw blood.

With nowhere else to go, we'd have to talk: about my mom's jealous coworkers; my shifts volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, where I'd mostly stand around with a hammer and peer at piles of lumber; my stepfather's gardening clients, aging heiresses who'd waft onto their porches in Lilly Pulitzer caftans, offering him cold, too-sweet glasses of lemonade. Dinner was the detente we'd been waiting for. For a few minutes, I wasn't thinking about my future escape to great cities with skyscrapers or to castles under the sea. I was eating seatrout with the people who raised me. That probably doesn't seem momentous to you, who lived among schools of your own kind, but I'd always struggled to feel a part of something bigger, even a family, so this meant something to me. Sitting still with my people.

After dinner, my mother gathered your leftover flesh and formed it into patties to fry for her lunch at work, ignoring the rule about not microwaving fish in communal spaces. Even though I wasn't hungry, I tore off a corner of a fried seatrout patty for myself, licking the oil off my fingers before slinking back to my room-cave.

If I bothered to look out my bedroom window, which gave a direct view of the overgrown garden out back, I would have seen how she dug a hole by her new orange tree, then emptied your remains into the hole. Bone, gills, guts, all covered with care, transformed into fertilizer. Sea to earth, down to the tentative roots that twisted into the soil.

My mother might have stood with her wrist against the divot of her waist, clicking her tongue at the darkening sky, like a secret language. A rat-atat eulogy for a day that would never return.

Years later, at my engagement party, she'll carry a dozen oranges in a wooden crate from Florida to Georgia, where we'll be celebrating. "They're from my tree," she'll say proudly. "Do you remember?" I won't think of you, of course. What

were you but another meal somewhere in time, a forgotten taste in a moment too fuzzy to parse? But I will remember the orange tree silhouetted against a sherbet sky, blackish-green leaves speckling my vision. I will understand the sweep of years and the precarity of trying to hold onto a world that insists on rushing forward, like the currents that come to claim us all.

DID I ESCAPE my childhood home, like I once imagined? I did, at least temporarily. For college, I moved to Chicago, where the cold froze my breath into airy curdles that fell into Lake Michigan, home of the lake trout. As I graduated high school, a teacher said to me, "I can't wait to hear what it's like when you're a small fish in a big pond." Maybe he hoped being anonymous would teach me humility. But really, being small made me feel like great things were possible. I wonder if fish ever feel a capacity for grandness. Or was existing, even so briefly, enough of a gift for you?

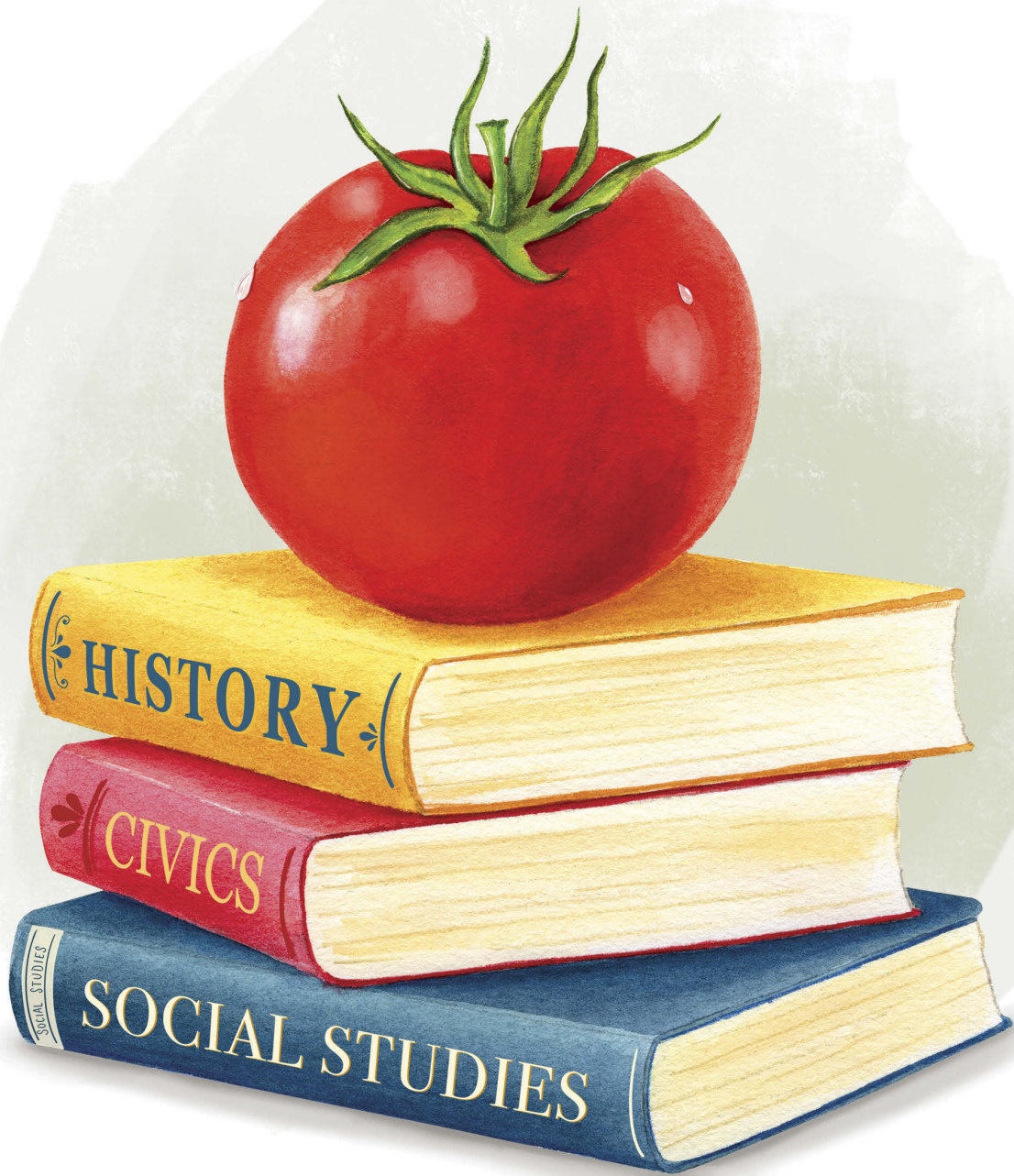
After I first migrated northward, I came home to Florida often, during holidays and sometimes in the summers, when the sun roared its hot breath onto our necks. I remember one summer when I worked as a hostess at a fancy resort on a fancy island. I'd drive down the coastal highway in my clunky 1980s convertible, hair flailing like seaweed, the shushing lull of the ocean somewhere next to me, like a faithful passenger. The thing I love so much about the sea is that it promises infinitely more than what the eye can behold, what the mind can grasp. The surface is just the beginning. Sometimes, the surface is where it all ends.

All that time living near you, I wanted to go far away—as far as the horizon. But now, all I do is write about Florida. All I dream about is water.

In the end, I can't talk about the life of a spotted seatrout—your life—without also talking about the perils your species faces. You have your natural predators, of course, the sharks and the barracudas and sharp-eyed pelicans, but the world is changing around you, too. Around us all. The sea warms. The ocean levels rise. We are sinking, and you fish are rising, and someday we will meet somewhere in the middle. Then we will find ourselves on the other side of sunlight, where home becomes a dream we'll all swim toward. 🐟

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*Thao Thai's writing has appeared in the Los Angeles Review of Books, WIRED, Catapult, Eater, and other publications. Her debut novel, Banyan Moon, was published by HarperCollins in June 2023.*



Illustrations by Disha Sharma

# ROOTED IN SAND

A reflection on teaching and tomatoes

BY CATARINA PASSIDOMO

I DON'T REMEMBER BEING A PICKY EATER as a kid growing up in south Florida. But I had strong feelings about tomatoes. They were the everyday food I most detested, the food most likely to show up in a meal and offend me with their presence. I hated them. When I was about ten, my aunt offered me a tomato slice for my hamburger. "I HATE tomatoes!" I said.

"Hate is a strong word, Katie. We say, 'I don't care for tomatoes.'"

"I know it's a strong word," I said. "That's why I chose it."

Conversations like this led to bargaining and whataboutism: "What about ketchup? Ketchup is made from tomatoes!" This sort of gotcha never worked. Ketchup is also made from sugar.

At some point, my repulsion toward tomatoes softened. I slowly grew to tolerate them, even like them. Eventually, my feelings were as strong in favor of tomatoes as they'd once been in opposition. When I was pregnant, I craved tomatoes. I slurped tomato soup, chugged tomato juice, spooned salsa straight into my mouth. I bought Bloody Mary mix and drank it neat. I couldn't get enough. What the hell happened? I guess taste buds, like the rest of us, change.

Yet my relationship with tomatoes remains complex. The fruit forces me to confront the place I'm from and my complicated relationship with it, particularly in this moment of Florida's political and social history. I fell in love with tomatoes after leaving home for college, around the same time I came to think more critically about their origins; college taught me to think more critically about everything I thought I knew. When I was growing up, most of the winter tomatoes Americans ate grew in the nutrient-poor sand of south Florida, about fifty miles from where I was cultivated in the extraordinarily valuable sand of Naples, home to some of the country's most expensive coastal real estate. Tomatoes are not Florida's most iconic crop, but they help me draw connections among food, labor, politics, and history—connections that feel especially resonant right now.

I have been thinking a lot lately about efforts to restrict what we teach about the past and how it informs our present. From 2022's "Stop WOKE Act" and the removal of library books deemed offensive to restrictions on the content of K-12 curriculum and eliminating state funding for DEI efforts in higher education, Florida has been particularly egregious in its attempts to contort

diverse and nuanced histories, people, and narratives into a single, simplistic story. Mostly, I think about these efforts as a teacher and a parent and as someone who is personally committed to truth-telling. But I am also in the unique and occasionally thorny position of being those things while also being the daughter of the current Republican president of the Florida Senate. In that role, my mother has been known to work across the aisle on conservation and affordable housing issues and to listen to alternative viewpoints (even my own). Still, if the personal is political, the inverse can also be true.

I TEACH SOUTHERN Studies, anthropology, geography, and food studies classes at the University of Mississippi. I also research and write about food's relationship to place, race, and power. Teaching and writing about food necessarily means grappling with culture and history; food is embedded in both. Tomatoes, for example, make me think of the modern industrial fruit's wild ancestors that grew on the slopes of the Peruvian Andes and then, through forces of colonization and culinary experimentation, became a staple ingredient in the Italian cuisine of my ancestors, and then, eventually, the most ubiquitous and popular "vegetable" in the whole damn world. Connecting our ketchup or the red wedges studying our salads to colonization, empire, and a massive industrial food regime is not an attempt to stir up controversy. It is an earnest effort to

When I show *Harvest of Shame* in my classes, I don't imagine I am indoctrinating students into a woke ideology.

better understand the world around us and the meaningful and often unseen connections we have to other people, places, and times.

Of course, I didn't really think about these things as a child. I didn't even know that tomatoes were big business in Florida, despite the fact that I had some very formative experiences in the place where they grew. Every Thanksgiving when I was a kid, my dad and I would drive from our home in

Naples fifty or so miles to the town of Immokalee to assist with a local faith community's effort to provide a hearty meal to people living in poverty there. Suspecting this may have been an attempt to extract himself (and me) from the food labor happening at home, I asked my dad recently why he felt called to make this annual pilgrimage. "To expose you to another perspective, obviously," he responded. My dad knew it was important for me to understand that our rarefied existence in Naples was just that.

The meal service was massive in scope—dozens and dozens of turkeys! Hundreds of pounds of potatoes! Over a thousand people to feed. In the early days, when I was so little I could only be trusted with the empty plate, which I handed to my dad to pile with turkey (an important job in which he took considerable pride), nearly all the people who came to eat were men who had come from Haiti, Mexico, and Guatemala to work in Florida's tomato fields for a portion of the year. Before the meal service began, a priest led us in prayer, and reminded the volunteers that we were here on this one day to feed the community that fed us all year long—the farmworkers. He switched languages to thank those gathered for their labor in the fields surrounding Immokalee, where they spent the winter months harvesting tomatoes.

As far as we both can remember, my dad and I kept this tradition for over a decade, stopping only when the number of volunteers became so great that we felt obsolete and unhelpful. At some point, my Spanish proficiency had moved beyond the rudimentary vocabulary we learned and relearned in school each year. I must have been in high school when I graduated from my spot at the beginning of the Styrofoam plate assembly line. No longer in charge of the empty plates, I was entrusted with full ones, which I handed through a window to people who had waited hours in line to receive them. We exchanged *holas* and *gracias* and awkward smiles.

When I was in high school handing out those Thanksgiving plates, I did not yet know about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and their efforts to make consumers aware of the conditions in Florida's tomato fields, where wage theft and debt peonage were common, where women workers endured sexual violence, and where at least one worker was severely beaten by a crew boss. I don't recall ever seeing members of the CIW marching, or protesting outside of Publix,



our beloved Florida supermarket chain “where shopping is a pleasure.” When did I begin to contemplate all the things that happen before the shopping, prior to the pleasure of encountering bountiful mounds of colorful produce comprising a postmodern Garden of Eden?

I don’t know. Memory is so slippery. This is just one reason we need history—it offers a corrective to our reliance on own muddled memories as a way to make sense of the world. I have some impressions of standing on one side of the food line, but I did not really appreciate or understand the experiences of people on the other side.

HERE IS WHAT I know now. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers began organizing for better wages and working conditions in the 1990s, when I was in middle and high school. The demographics of agricultural labor are constantly shifting, as commercial agriculture replicates the logics of the plantation—that is, its reliance on un- or underpaid labor performed by racial and ethnic minorities. The historian Cindy Hahamovitch writes that the first paid farmworkers in south Florida were the Seminoles, whose ancestors first

fled to the Everglades from the upper South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Next came Bahamians, who, by the 1920s, migrated to south Florida at the rate of about 6,000 per year, as wartime labor constraints compelled the federal government to relax immigration restrictions. And as Jim Crow laws and racial terror swept the South between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Black Americans migrated north, west, and, yes, south, where they came to comprise a majority of the agricultural workforce in south Florida through World War II. Some of their enslaved ancestors had labored throughout the South for centuries, including those who arrived with Hernando de Soto in 1539 and those who helped construct the first permanent European settlement at Saint Augustine.

Of course, north and south Florida feel worlds apart, even today; while north Florida is an extension of the South, south Florida feels more like an extension of the Caribbean, creolized with a hefty dose of New Jersey. Before the advent of canal dredging and mosquito control, not to mention air conditioning, south Florida from Lake Okeechobee to Key West was mostly uninhabitable

swampland. But it held high commercial potential in the form of agriculture. The draining of the Everglades in the early 1900s opened up south Florida to commercial agriculture on a large scale and drew large pools of migrant laborers who were willing to travel south each year for the winter harvest of beans, tomatoes, potatoes, and sugarcane.

The 1960 CBS documentary *Harvest of Shame* traces the desperate living and working conditions of the migrant farmworkers of that era—the pitiful wages, the hopelessness, the generational poverty, the instability of a life spent following the harvest, the government’s consistent failure to

**We are, after all,  
products of our distinct  
place and time, but we  
do not live exclusively  
in the here and now.**

protect contingent workers. The film begins and ends in the fields of Belle Glade, Florida, about seventy miles across south Florida scrubland and swamp from Immokalee. At one point, a farmer quips, “We used to own our slaves. Now, we just rent them.”

When I show this film in my college class, I don’t imagine I am indoctrinating students into a woke ideology; they are smart and thoughtful enough to understand the relevance of this particular documentation of history, social attitudes, and food production to how we eat and treat people today.

In 1960, nearly all East Coast fieldworkers were Black. Half a century later, the documentary film *Food Chains* highlights the work of the CIW but includes a clip from *Harvest of Shame*, suggesting both progress and continuity. Same place, same backbreaking work, different people doing it. And a few very hard-earned improvements in working conditions and wages, thanks largely to the success of the CIW’s Fair Food Program.

As a college teacher, one of my jobs is to provide context for students, so that they might better understand the increasingly confusing and

complicated world they are navigating. Sometimes this means reflecting on their own histories and situating them within broader social histories; we are, after all, products of our distinct place and time, but we do not live exclusively in the here and now.

In some places, history is easily discernable. In others, it has been nearly erased. Obscuring those histories we find uncomfortable leaves us with an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of ourselves and one another. If we refuse to study the history of agricultural labor in the United States, beginning with indentured servitude and race-based slavery, it is more difficult to understand contemporary connections between labor, migration, and our food system. It is easy and expedient to dehumanize those people and histories we choose not to understand.

Acknowledging that we inhabit just one thread of a richly woven tapestry that spans space and time should humble and awe us. Some of our ancestors endured and survived tremendous suffering, and some other of our ancestors inflicted it. Some of our contemporaries are enduring and surviving tremendous suffering, and some other of our contemporaries are inflicting it. I’m not saying it’s easy, but we are capable of holding all these truths in our head at once. In fact, it is our obligation to do so.

Ultimately, cultivating curiosity about our connection to places, people, and times unknown to us can only serve to deepen our reserves of empathy. We can remember our own pasts with nostalgia, sadness, pride, anger, or any combination of those. The maligned tomatoes of our childhood can make way for adult adoration. My own memories of those Thanksgiving forays away from the familiar and the comfortable suggest that my dad’s efforts to expose me to another perspective were successful and deeply formative. I also have some conflicted feelings about the impulse toward charity, given what I now know about structural inequality. But we can and should also scour the past for clues to our present, and seek out even and especially the truths that challenge us. We may be surprised by our capacity to learn something new, just like taste buds do. 🍷

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*Catarina Passidomo is the Southern Foodways Alliance Associate Professor of Southern Studies and Anthropology at the University of Mississippi. She is at work on a book called Gastroimaginaries: Dreams of Food and Place in Peru and the American South.*



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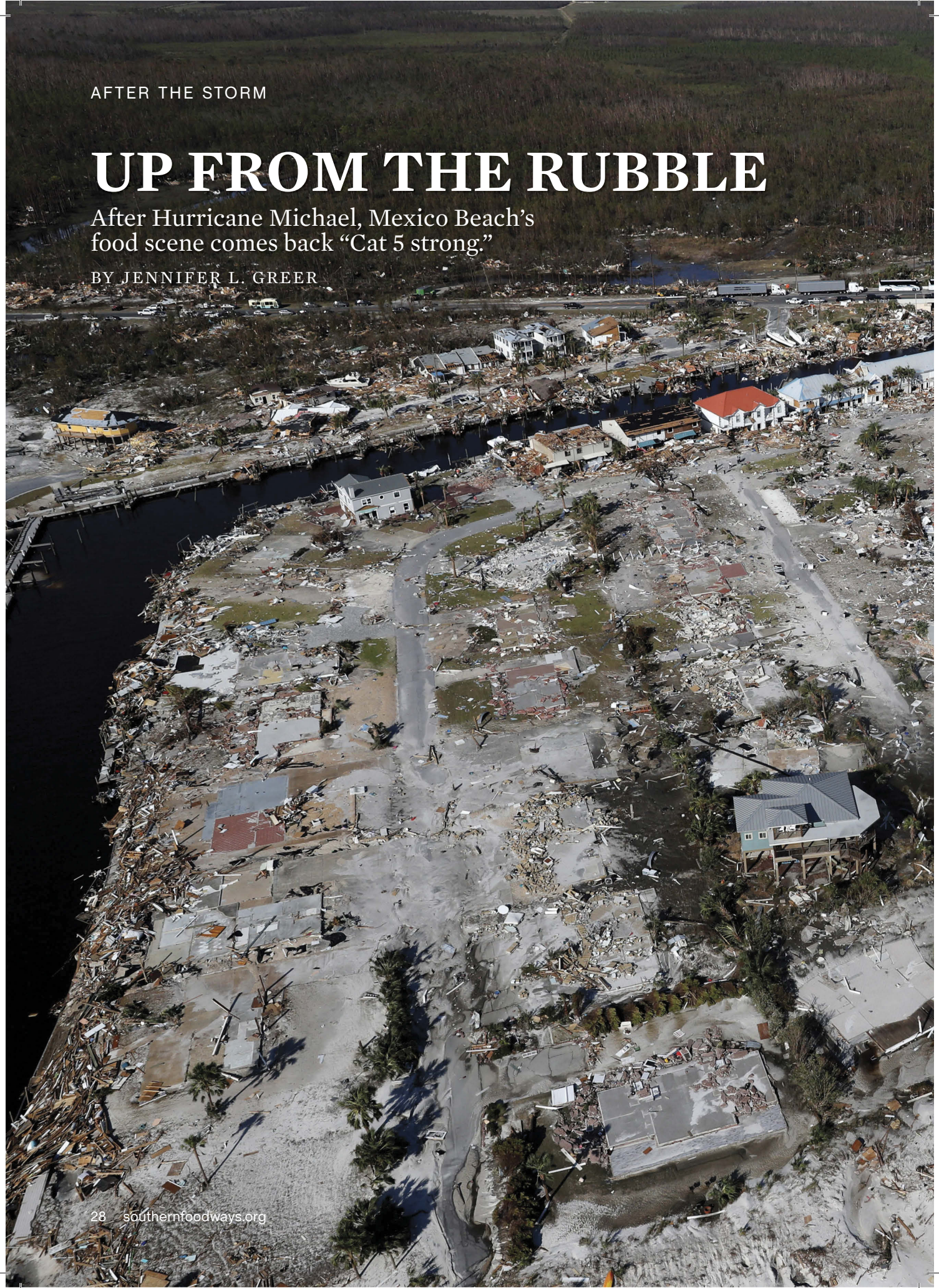
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AFTER THE STORM

# UP FROM THE RUBBLE

After Hurricane Michael, Mexico Beach's food scene comes back "Cat 5 strong."

BY JENNIFER L. GREER





Devastation from Hurricane Michael is seen in this aerial photo over Mexico Beach, Florida, Friday, Oct. 12, 2018.



Michael Scoggins is the co-owner of Killer Seafood in Mexico Beach, Florida.

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**CUSTOMER  
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BE TOWED**

ON OCTOBER 11, 2018, THE MORNING AFTER a Category 5 hurricane wiped out the tiny town of Mexico Beach, Florida, Michael Scoggins walked nine blocks from his waterlogged house to his business, Killer Seafood, on US 98, the coastal highway that runs through town. During the storm, he and his domestic partner escaped the crush of two falling pine trees by sheltering inside their garage, in a car, with their three cats and a litter box. Now the sun was up, and Scoggins needed to check on the restaurant that had been his life for fourteen years.

Killer Seafood lured repeat customers with its take on coastal classics: Baja California-inspired marinated and grilled tuna tacos (on warm corn or flour tortillas); baskets of fried or grilled Gulf shrimp with skin-on french fries, wasabi coleslaw, or hushpuppies; fresh catch of the day (such as flounder, grouper, or red snapper); and bread bowls full of shrimp or scallops cooked in Simmerin' Sauce, an original, New Orleans-inspired tomato sauce stewed with beer, seafood stock, butter, and aromatics like rosemary, fennel, and thyme. Before leaving, patrons could buy a jar of Simmerin' Sauce and a Killer Seafood T-shirt, with the CHUM AND GET IT shark-jaws logo. They might even snap a selfie with the Captain, a life-size wooden statue with a flowing white beard and peg leg, who served as the restaurant's mascot and front-door greeter.

On that October day, downed trees and power lines blocked the highway. Overtaken boats and cars littered yards. Houses lay crumpled, reduced to piles of rebar and rubble. "I didn't know exactly what I would see at the restaurant. There were no phone lines or communication, so nobody knew how bad the damage was," recalls Scoggins, a Georgia native and former actor. A tall, wiry man, he pushes graying hair off his tanned forehead and frowns at the memory.

In 2004, Scoggins left the Los Angeles film scene to come back to the South and start Killer Seafood with a longtime friend, Kevin Crouse. Their sea-to-table approach bred success and took Scoggins to depths that perhaps few restaurateurs go. In 2018, a month before the Hurricane Michael hit, he went diving with the Mexico Beach Artificial Reef Association, a local conservation group, to spear invasive lionfish to serve at the restaurant.

My husband and I were in town that day, and I remember when Scoggins set down a whole

fried lionfish in front of me. It was spiny and ferocious-looking, even with the venomous tips removed. My table companions stared. I grabbed the lemon wedged in the fish's mouth, squeezed, and dug my fork into the golden skin. It was hot and crispy; a dusting of flour sealed in the juices. The meat tasted slightly sweet with a light, delicate texture like flounder. I worked my way slowly from fishtail to neck, nibbling a jalapeño-onion hushpuppy between bites as I savored the meal.

Scoggins boarded up Killer Seafood as Hurricane Michael churned across the Gulf of Mexico, its winds exceeding 160 miles per hour. But when he laid eyes on the restaurant in the clear morning after landfall, he knew it was history. The former cinderblock bakery he'd transformed into a "rustic boathouse" was now a huge mound of twisted metal, mangled plywood, and broken framing in a sea of sand. "I remember being in a state of shock," says Scoggins, with a catch in his voice. "It took a few days for me to get past that."

The wind and storm surge destroyed most of the town's restaurants: Toucan's on the Beach, the breakfast favorite Sharon's Café, the surf-and-turf-style Fish House, the organic Caribbean Coffee & Cafe, Crazy Beach Pizza, old-Florida institution Shell Shack, and family pub Mango Marley's. Mexico Beach's only grocery store was obliterated, too. Gone were the locally owned, mom-and-pop businesses that nourished a town of 1,000 residents, which swelled to more than 10,000 people during the tourist season. With no chain restaurants, traffic lights, or high-rise buildings, Mexico Beach, a place of second- and third-generation residents, had resisted overdevelopment. Assessing the disaster, federal experts said the storm caused "severe damage" to more than 80 percent of Mexico Beach's building structures.

Everyone wondered: Could the town even rebuild? If so, could it resist the kind of high-density developments that would change its small-town character?

LOOKING BACK, IT is easy to see why Mexico Beach evolved from a seasonal fishing village into a dream beach town. Situated between Port St. Joe and Panama City, along a semirural stretch of highway known as the "forgotten coast," the town has three miles of white sand beaches that curve around the Gulf of Mexico and frame a

bottle-green sea. Spring and fall runs of migratory fish first attracted anglers here in the early 1900s. The newly constructed Route 98 brought visitors in the 1930s, and Tyndall Field (later renamed Tyndall Air Force Base) opened in 1941. In 1946, Southern businessmen Gordon Parker, W.T. McGowan and J.W. Wainwright formed the Mexico Beach Corporation and bought 1,850 acres of undeveloped property, mostly piney woods and cattle pastures, along the coast in eastern Bay County. In an act of prescience, early residents deeded one mile of unobstructed beach for conservation.

In 1975, Mexico Beach survived Hurricane Eloise, a Category 3 storm that made landfall at nearby Fort Walton Beach. It survived Hurricane Opal, a Category 4 storm that hit Pensacola in 1995. But in a sign of changing climate times, Mexico Beach was no match for a direct hit from Hurricane Michael's ferocious winds and fourteen-foot storm surge. Four people died in Mexico Beach because of the storm. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's chief administrator said the town was completely "wiped out."

In the four-and-a-half years since the storm,

with more than \$100 million in state and federal disaster aid, the city has removed massive amounts of debris and restored essential infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, utilities, the public canal, and city hall, says Douglas Baber, the city's administrator. Officials continue to work with federal and state agencies to rebuild the town's much-loved public pier and jetties and to construct a new municipal complex with a police station, fire station, and civic center.

Though restaurants were essential to the town's economic health, strategically, city officials prioritized restoration of beaches and parks popular with residents and tourists alike, including Sunset Park, Canal Park, Municipal Park, and the public boat ramp. But as amenities and basic infrastructure were replaced or repaired, Al Cathey, the former mayor who led Mexico Beach through Michael's onslaught and aftermath, knew the local food scene was key to the town's future: "It's the lifeblood of the community. Our recovery as a town comes from our ability to bring back these local food businesses and encourage quality new ones. When people come to the beach, they don't want to eat a bologna sandwich. They want to



enjoy the Gulf and its bounty.”

To that end, his town began planning how to defend itself against future storms and help its signature restaurants survive another mammoth storm. Starting in 2019, Mexico Beach adopted tougher building codes to qualify for federal recovery funds. Specifically, these codes call for increasing wind load to 140 miles per hour and elevating new structures to mitigate future flooding. Second, the town formed a “recovery and resiliency partnership” dedicated to stormwater management and greenspace development. In particular, the plan prioritizes flood mitigation, because the storm surge caused much of the damage.

None of this may matter to vacationing diners looking for locally sourced meals. But given accelerating climate change, scientists predict stronger, more volatile hurricanes. Gulf communities may be uniquely vulnerable to these storms, according to University of Florida historian Jack E. Davis, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning history, *The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea*. Of the top twenty costliest hurricanes to hit the United States, seventeen have occurred since 2000 and fifteen passed through the Gulf, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Restaurants along the coast will have to adjust, structurally and economically.

As Mexico Beach approaches the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Michael, five of the original food businesses have returned in their same locations: Killer Seafood as a mobile trailer and Shell Shack, Mango Marley’s, Caribbean Coffee & Cafe, and Crazy Beach Pizza as permanent structures. They’ve had to adapt their respective recoveries to their financial pictures, the risks of their sites, and their evolving business models. Killer Seafood, for example, chose a trailer it can move if another Category 5 storm threatens Mexico Beach. Shell Shack raised its foundation to better withstand flooding, and Mango Marley’s rebuilt with stronger, more hurricane-resistant materials.

Two beloved restaurants, Sharon’s Cafe and The Fish House, have not rebuilt. This spring, however, cheers erupted on social media when Toucan’s on the Beach, a fixture since the 1960s, received a permit to start construction at its old location near highway 98 and 8<sup>th</sup> Street. A three-level, indoor-outdoor, tiki-style restaurant, gift shop, and event space with a back door to the beach, Toucan’s once employed 130 people who served thousands daily.

Andrew Wardlow



LEFT: A sign welcomes visitors to Mexico Beach.

ABOVE: New building codes in Mexico Beach attempt to mitigate structural damage by future hurricanes.

A convenience grocery and a liquor store have opened in Mexico Beach post-Hurricane Michael. And although the Covid-19 pandemic slowed the economic recovery, tourists have returned. But some changes to the town’s laid-back, low-density, old-Florida past are proving inevitable. The St. Joe Company, developers of the luxury Pearl Hotel in nearby Rosemary Beach, have broken ground on a 554-acre “master-planned” community of townhomes, single-family homes, apartments, and a commercial village in Mexico Beach. Whether the development will include locally owned restaurants is unclear.

FOR NOW, THREE legacy establishments lead the way in the revival of the town’s food scene: Mango Marley’s, Shell Shack, and Killer Seafood. They are “Cat 5 strong,” as the locals say. Near the higher ground in the town center, people in shorts, flip-flops, and sundresses line up outside Mango Marley’s, a funky, family-friendly pub in a small shopping center on highway 98. Started in 2007 by Cathy and Steve Johnson of Valdosta, Georgia, the restaurant specializes in wings and burgers with sandwiches, seafood, and sides influenced by Caribbean and Southern cooking. When the storm hit, the building’s walls held their



Shift manager Hailey Harriman serves lunch at Mango Marley's in Mexico Beach, May 2023.

ground, but the roof peeled up, allowing rain to drench the interior, so the restaurant had to be gutted. The Johnsons' Mexico Beach home also flooded. They spent weeks in a camper overseeing reconstruction at the restaurant. Yet the couple did not consider leaving. "Everyone came out to help us, and we realized how much we were a part of the community," says Cathy Johnson.

Given how bleak the post-storm culinary scene was, the Johnsons quickly mustered a mobile kitchen, set out picnic tables, and accepted a customer's gift of an army surplus tent. For two years, Mango Marley's stayed afloat and fed the town, selling sandwiches, chips, and pasta salad to residents and construction workers alike. Staffing has been a challenge, with some employees moving on, but the Johnsons reopened in late 2020 for indoor, sit-down dining and broke sales records in 2022, says general manager Zac Emerson.

A family business built in 1965, Shell Shack was a classic Florida seafood and souvenir market that fronted highway 98 and backed up to the main canal. Hurricane Michael blew out its back wall, causing the building to collapse. Black muck coated what remained. "When I saw it, I thought my

life was over. I've been working here since I was zero," says Nick Hunter, who remembers standing on a stool to clean fish and help his grandmother, Bennie, run the market. The family got temporary jobs while the rebuild was underway. Today, a new shack-themed building mimics the old but rises several feet off the ground. A huge set of faux shark jaws still fills the front display window. "They made it through the storm, although we had to do a little dental work on them," Hunter says, grinning.

The Hunters—Nick's father, George; mother, Theresa; and uncle, Fred—catch shrimp and mullet locally. They buy other Gulf seafood, such as grouper, snapper, flounder, tuna, and crab, from wholesalers in Apalachicola. While we talk, Theresa chops celery for the smoked mullet dip she prepares for "Fish Dip Thursday." Nearby, a white board lists the names of those who pre-order her dip, sometimes two weeks in advance. Did Shell Shack ever think about *not* coming back? No, says Theresa, a petite, energetic woman in jeans, sneakers and a backwards baseball cap. "I admit that recovering from this storm was a lot harder than anything I have ever done. But we

Andrew Wardlow



Patrons enjoy lunch at Killer Seafood in Mexico Beach, May 2023.

built back stronger and better.”

At Killer Seafood, Scoggins is making a video to promote “Flatfish Friday.” The picnic tables in front of the thirty-six-foot-long trailer are filling up with lunch customers. Inside, coworkers take orders, flip grouper fillets, and load deep fryers. Scoggins and Crouse’s new business model requires half of the former staffing and includes four former employees and three new employees. They wanted to keep the business in Mexico Beach, but construction costs were too high to build a new flood-proof building on the current site. Nearing retirement age, they didn’t want to take out a big loan and opted for a less expensive, portable structure. The new setup means they are open fewer hours and serve no alcohol. Yet loyal customers have returned, and with smaller overhead, profits add up about “the same as before,” says Scoggins. The Captain statue is back, too. After the hurricane, he was found under a

boat six blocks away on 15<sup>th</sup> Street.

On another morning, Scoggins makes five gallons of Simmerin’ Sauce. That afternoon, he speaks via Zoom to the 2023 National Hurricane Conference. The conference is hosted by a Tallahassee-based nonprofit that provides a national forum for education and training in hurricane preparedness. His talk is about “how small businesses can pivot and recover post hurricane or other natural disaster,” he tells me. Is he worried about future hurricanes? “The climate is changing, but it’s changing everywhere, not just here. It will take more than a storm to get me to quit.”

It’s hard to argue with him. From wildfires and droughts to tornadoes and flash floods, we are in the climate crisis together, no matter where we live. If we draw lessons from Hurricane Michael and Mexico Beach, maybe one of them is this: The local restauranteurs took the worst day the Gulf has given them, and they gave back their best. 🍷

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*Jennifer L. Greer, PhD, is a freelance journalist who worked in newspapers and magazines for twenty-five years. She also taught research writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). In 2018, Jennifer and her husband suffered severe damage from Hurricane Michael to their fish camp on Wetappo Creek, six miles north of Mexico Beach.*

# ON GRATITUDE & BLUE CRABS

*The ritual of the boil is both comforting and complicated, familiar and fraught.*

*by* **DEESHA PHILYAW**

*Illustrations by* **LINDSEY BAILEY**





## STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT: *Spring 1994*



There's a joke I used to tell about the time my then-fiancé, Mike, gave me crabs. *Brought me crabs* is more specific, but the clarification ruins the joke. He brought me a dozen live blue crabs in hopes of relieving my stress in the midst of grad-school finals. Mike knew that seafood is my favorite food, that crab is my favorite seafood, and that some of my fondest memories of growing up in Jacksonville, Florida, were of crab boils with family and friends. Whenever he visited me in Jacksonville, we'd sit in the backyard for hours with my mother, my grandmother, and whoever else was invited, eating dozens of crabs, corn on the cob, and potatoes. On that spring afternoon in Stamford, he bought the crabs to give me a taste of home, a thousand miles away.

Mike and I met at Yale, both first-generation college students. On my eighteenth birthday, we went on our first date. I can't say that we were still going strong five years later, but we were still

*going*. Engaged to be married that summer of '94. Then, after twelve years of marriage—for reasons we would sort out, separately, in therapy—we divorced. Suffice it to say, we were incompatible, too young, too wounded.

But the day Mike brought me blue crabs? We were still possible, inevitable, enthralled. He saw how stressed I was and remembered how much I love crabs. He remembered how my mom always bought medium or large crabs (never small), how everyone at the table competed to see whose piles of discarded shells would be largest, and who would fail to pace themselves and tap out first.

But Mike forgot he didn't actually know how to boil crabs, which meant I had to do it. He forgot the crabs had to be cooked alive, which meant they couldn't wait until I finished studying. I would have to stop reading and heat a pot of water before they died. Instead of relieving my stress, Mike had inadvertently added to it.

# JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA: *Summer 1990*



“Do you eat crabs?” I had asked Mike before his first visit to Jacksonville. We’d dated all through freshman year, and while he’d never mentioned any food allergies, I wanted to be sure. I also asked because over the course of our relationship, I’d learned from him, a Black man from the predominantly white Pittsburgh suburbs, that much of what I’d grown up attributing to Blackness and Black culture were actually facets of Black *Southern* culture. How I spoke, for example. I didn’t realize I had an accent until I left the South for a campus in New Haven with very few Southern students or faculty. Years later, I read an interview with actor Angela Bassett, who grew up in St. Petersburg, Florida. During her undergraduate years at Yale, her classmates remarked on her saying, “finna,” as in, “I’m finna go.” When I read this, I felt so seen. Or rather, heard.

Like Bassett, I grew up in a Black neighborhood and attended predominantly white schools. I didn’t recall any of my white classmates ever mentioning crab boils. So it didn’t occur to me back then that white folks might eat them, too. Prior to college, I hadn’t traveled much beyond Florida and Georgia. Pittsburgh, like New Haven, like every place that wasn’t the South, might as well have been another planet. I had no idea if anyone in the suburbs of Pittsburgh ate crabs. My family ate crabs on special occasions and just because. Mike’s visit was a special occasion, so we wanted to have a crab boil. I was relieved when he told me, yes, he ate crabs.

On the Saturday morning after Mike arrived, when my mother went to the fish market to buy dozens of live crabs, she included him in her estimate. We rarely had leftovers after a crab boil because my mother had a knack for knowing the right amount to buy so that everyone left the table stuffed and satisfied. My mother, my grandmother, and I could easily put away two or three dozen ourselves. Crab boils were the only time my hospitable family hoped folks wouldn’t stop by unannounced.

Before she left for the market that July morning, my mother Phyllis stacked three rows of bricks in a loose circle in the backyard, piled firewood in the middle, and made a fire. Mike helped her

carry a large aluminum washtub about halfway full of water and set it on top of the bricks.

My mother, who, for much of my childhood, was partial to wearing high heels, Daisy Duke shorts, and a full face of makeup to the grocery store, wasn’t exactly a build-a-fire-in-the-backyard type. But she did it. My maternal grandmother, who we lived with, was an excellent cook in her own right, but crabs were my mother’s domain. My mother believed there was a right way to cook everything, and that way was her way. She preferred chain restaurants and had no interest in trying something new or being adventurous when it came to food or anything else. We clashed a lot, about food and everything else, because I was adventurous and curious. We clashed because my mother had wanted me to stay in Florida for college, and I couldn’t wait to leave. We clashed because I saw myself as my own person, and my mother saw me as an extension of herself. She took my independence as a personal rejection of her. Our fights about food—how to make spaghetti, how to make potato salad—were never really about the food. They were about my mother’s fears.

***Learning to pick my own crabs had been a childhood rite of passage, and I was excited to teach Mike.***

But blue crabs were neutral territory for us. I had no interest in experimenting, and I loved watching my mother work her magic.

To the water in the washtub, my mother added rock salt, whole bottles of cayenne pepper, and several mesh bags of Zatarain’s seafood boil seasonings—a mix of brown mustard seed, coriander seed, red pepper, dill seed, bay leaf, and allspice. Then she added halved green peppers and white onions, whole russet potatoes, corn on the cob, uncracked eggs, and thick chunks of sausage.

My mother told Mike and me to keep an eye on the fire while she was gone and make sure we

## ***I learned to boil crabs the way I'd learned to cook everything else—by watching my mother and my grandmother, who didn't measure or write down anything.***

didn't burn down the yard. While we waited for her to return, Mike and I prepared the two card tables where we would eat. First, we positioned them end-to-end, then covered them with newspapers.

"You don't have a tablecloth?" Mike asked.

"We do," I said, not sure where he was going with this. We had a tablecloth—somewhere. But why would we mess it up with funky crab gunk? I shrugged and put a brand-new roll of paper towels on each end of the table.

Soon, the water in the washtub came to a boil and roiled red from the cayenne. The water would be perfectly seasoned by the time my mom returned. The fish market wasn't far.

I looked at Mike, in his white button down shirt and a pair of khaki shorts. "You should change into a T-shirt," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

I laughed. "So you don't mess up the shirt you're wearing."

"Mess it up how?"

"From eating the crabs. Duh," I said. Why was he being so weird?

It wasn't until my mother returned with several brown paper bags full of crabs, their claws click-clacking through the bags, that it dawned on Mike, and on me. All this time, he'd thought my mother and I had been talking about *snow crab legs*, which is the only crab he had ever eaten, always in restaurants.

Whole blue crabs caught locally were a summertime staple for my family, but they were entirely foreign to Mike. From dumping the live crabs, claws flailing, into the boiling water, to pressing their frantic bodies down to their deaths with a long-handled spoon—all of it was new to him. He watched, amazed, as the crabs cooked. "I promise, it's going to be delicious," I told him.

In the meantime, we finished prepping the table. We set out bowls of plain melted butter, my concoction of melted butter mixed with Louisiana Hot Sauce and ketchup, and a mayonnaise-mustard dip. My family never owned the kind of shell pliers and pickers you get at seafood restaurants to extract the meat. Instead, we used an assortment of tall glass Nehi soda bottles, nutcrackers, and our

fingers and teeth. Mike was mildly scandalized when I put my grandmother's favorite nutcracker on the table, the bawdy one shaped like a woman with a curvaceous body and legs that opened wide to crack nuts—or in this case, blue crab legs.

The formerly blue crabs were a deep red by the time my mother spooned them from the spicy depths of the washtub into large aluminum serving pans, along with the potatoes and corn. She set the pans on the table, my grandmother joined us, and we prepared to dig in.

Learning to pick my own crabs had been a childhood rite of passage, and I was excited to teach Mike. I took two crabs from the pan, a male and a female. On the crab's "belly" (underside), the section you pull open to separate the outer shell (exoskeleton) from the rest of its body is called the "apron." On a mature female, the apron is short, resembling the United States Capitol Dome. The apron on a mature male is longer, resembling the Washington Monument.

I removed all the legs from the male. I chewed on one of the smaller legs (a walking leg), crushing the thin shell and sucking the peppery, flavorful juice. I handed a walking leg to Mike, and he did the same. "We spare nothing," I said.

I picked up two of the larger front legs (the claws or pincers) and gave one to Mike, along with a nutcracker. Or if he preferred, I told him, he could put the claw on the table and gently crack the shell with the soda bottle. But I warned him not to smash it, or he'd grind bits of shell into the meat.

Mike nodded and carefully cracked the shell with a bottle. "How are you going to do it?" he asked. I pointed to my mother and grandmother who were using their canine teeth to crack claws. Once cracked, the claw was easy to break apart, revealing the tender meat.

Next, I picked up the female crab and demonstrated how, with the right amount of pressure and at the right angle, you can pull a hunk of meat from the crab's body through one of the leg sockets. I dipped the meat dangling from the end of the claw into my butter-hot sauce-ketchup mixture and handed it to Mike. He loved it, as I knew he would.

I removed the shell from the legless male crab

and broke his body cavity in half. The cavity halves, lined with cartilage, are filled with meat. After removing the crab's gray, shriveled gills—from each half, I call them “dead man's fingers”—from each half, I dragged one of the cavities across the newspaper to remove the yellow gunk some folks call the “mustard.” It's actually the crab's hepatopancreas, an organ that functions like the human liver, filtering impurities from the crab's blood. Next, I picked around the cartilage to get to the meat, which I shared with Mike. Then I gave him the other cavity half to clean and pick himself.

After Mike and I ate the female crab in similar

fashion, I chose another female in hopes of getting one filled with “cheese,” our name for the tasty, fatty, bright orange crab roe (eggs). Third time was the charm, and we found a female with cheese.

Describing this now, it all sounds so...barbaric. “We ate the whole crab, like savages!” Mike would tell people when we went back to Yale for sophomore year, and for years to come. I didn't unpack the racism inherent in “like savages.” We didn't “unpack” things in the '90s. Eighteen-year-old me was just happy to share something so special, so fundamentally *home*, with this great guy from Pittsburgh I'd fallen in love with.

## STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT: *Spring 1994*



Unfortunately, on that evening four years later, that great guy from Pittsburgh did not think through his idea for an impromptu crab boil. For starters, my roommate and I didn't own a pot big enough for the crabs and all the fixings. Further, I learned to boil crabs the way I'd learned to cook everything else – by watching my mother and my grandmother, who didn't measure or write down anything. I learned to season food by eye and hand, by look and feel, trial and error. There was no recipe I could jot down for Mike to follow. Already anxious and pressed for time, I'd have to take a break from studying for my finals in order to cook the crabs before they died.

*Don't be ungrateful*, whispered the voice in my head. That voice sounded a lot like my single mother, who talked about my engagement and pending marriage like it was an act of charity. She'd actually thanked Mike when he formally asked her for my hand in marriage. When he told me this, I felt like some damaged goods my mother had managed to sell off. I know that wasn't her intention; she had never married, and no doubt imagined that with a husband, my life would be happier, easier than hers. But there was also the implication that I was a difficult person, so Mike should be commended for signing up to do life with me. And I should be grateful.

In the end, gratitude and nostalgia conspired against me. I reluctantly pulled myself away from my studying and began prepping for the boil while

Mike ran out to buy a large pot. This would not be the last time I settled for a man giving me what he thought I needed, rather than what I really needed. I didn't feel homesick; I felt overwhelmed. I just needed a quick bite to eat that I didn't have to cook so that I could get back to prepping for finals.

Under different circumstances, I would've welcomed Mike's crab boil surprise. In fact, a version of the sweet gesture showed up twenty years later in my short story, “Snowfall.” Rhonda surprises her girlfriend Arletha with a crab boil when their relationship hits a snag after they move from the South to Pittsburgh. Here, though, Rhonda does the cooking and all her lover has to do is partake.

## *After*



When Mike and I moved from Connecticut to Pittsburgh three years later, I learned that Wholey's, the city's big seafood market, shipped in live crabs weekly. They sold out within hours; during the twenty-five years I lived in Pittsburgh, I only managed to get them twice. Not that I tried every week. Over time, life and motherhood took over. Scoring crabs became less of a priority. Boiling them and eating them felt less like a ritual that

reminded me of home and more like another chore.

Whenever we visited my family in Jacksonville, my mother always had a crab boil for us, and I was delighted to introduce my daughters to the whole production. But for the most part, their idea of “crab” is still snow crab legs.

The last time my mother boiled crabs for me was in the early 2000s, prior to her death from breast cancer. I didn’t have blue crabs again until my daughters and I visited Jacksonville in 2019. We ate them at a restaurant recommended by a family member. My mother always turned her nose up at the steamed crabs sold at the grocery store and in restaurants, so I imagined her disapproval from the afterlife. The restaurant’s crabs were meatier than the ones I grew up eating, but not as flavorful.

Last summer, I left Pittsburgh for good after my younger daughter graduated high school. I

still don’t know where *home* will be in the future, but my first stop has been a yearlong writing residency at the University of Mississippi. Excited to return to the South, I had every intention of finding blue crabs upon arrival in Oxford, but to date, that hasn’t happened. Maybe I’ve put it off because what I want isn’t just the crab, but the experience of the boil. That experience won’t be the same without my mother, and I’ve been in no rush to recreate an approximation.

Blue crabs will always be a bittersweet reminder of two of my most complicated relationships, both of which ended in 2005, the year my mother died and Mike and I divorced. Almost twenty years later, I prefer to dwell on the sweet. On memories of rituals of care and food. Memories of messiness, tenderness, and laughter. And of love, however imperfect, shining through. 🦀

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*Deesha Philyaw’s debut short story collection, The Secret Lives of Church Ladies, won the 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction. She was the 2022-2023 John and Renée Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi.*





# MIAMI'S BAHAMIAN ROOTS

How a shellfish became soul food

by **NADEGE GREEN**  
Photos by **TAIMY ALVAREZ**





# ON EASY SATURDAY NIGHTS,

when I plan to curl up on my comfy blue couch to binge-watch the latest series I'm behind on, first, I like to pick up loaded conch fritters from Miss Tammy Gallon. She's one of the street vendors who used to regularly set up on Northwest 79th Street and 12th Avenue on the edge of Liberty City, the Miami neighborhood where the movie *Moonlight* was filmed and where I went to high school. Miss Tammy's people are from the Bahamas, and she calls her stand Conchtime. A master of conch, she's also a public health sweetheart who places free condoms next to the rolls of paper towels because that particular strip where she transformed an empty lot into a conch kitchen is known to be a hub for sex workers.

While Miss Tammy has expanded into a pickup and delivery business, the same area continues to attract at least half a dozen food vendors competing for customers with the allure of smoked meats, fried seafood, and even more conch options.

When I was growing up in Miami, conch—pronounced *kunk*—was on most menus in Black restaurants. Conch salad, fried conch, conch fritters, stewed conch, dressed conch, cracked conch, there was always conch. And this remains the case.

Most weekends, weather permitting, conch is sold by roadside vendors across Miami. They set up beneath canopy tents with propane-powered deep fryers dropping ladles of conch fritter batter—a chunky mixture of diced conch, peppers, and onions, seasoned with held-close-none-of-your-business blend of spices—into sizzling oil. In minutes, puffy, golden fritters float to the top, waiting to be lifted up with a slotted spoon and placed onto a platter lined with paper napkins.

Nearby, folding tables hold giant clear bins brimming with freshly made conch salad. Finely chopped-up raw conch meat is studded with diced tomatoes, onions and bell peppers and marinates in a seasoned citrus juice mixture. For the spice cautious, some vendors offer their conch salad on the milder side, accompanied by an optional selection of hot sauces or pepper sauces. I prefer my conch salad from vendors who mix in scotch bonnet peppers.

Conch is a fleshy sea snail that can be found in the Bahamas, the Florida Keys, and throughout the Caribbean and western Atlantic Ocean waters. The large, spiral, caramel-cream colored shell it's harvested from is a showpiece, revealing a flush of pink on its interior lip. This beautiful shellfish isn't just a popular menu item offered by Miami's Black food entrepreneurs. It tells a deeper story about Miami's history.

Miami is a Deep South American city with Bahamian roots.



Built by Bahamian immigrants Mariah and Ernest Brown in 1890, the Mariah Brown House is one of the oldest in the Little Bahamas section of Coconut Grove, Miami.

## BEFORE THE CITY OF MIAMI WAS INCORPORATED

IN 1896, Black Bahamians brought their culinary practices to this place they would call their new home, migrating to south Florida for maritime jobs, farm work, and, later, to build the city's physical infrastructure. In 1834, decades before slavery was abolished in the United States, the British emancipated the Black people it had enslaved in the Bahamas since at least the 1700s. As in the United States, many Black workers in the Bahamas post-enslavement were ensnared in a sharecropping-like system that saw them working pineapple farms owned by predominantly white landowners with exploitative labor practices. As economic prospects continued to dwindle at home, Bahamians in search of stronger financial futures found work plentiful in nearby south Florida in the late 1800s.


Miami could not have become a city without Black Bahamian laborers. Forty-four percent of the men who signed the incorporation papers in 1896 to establish Miami as a city were Black men, some of whom were Bahamian.

When I give talks about the making of early Miami, I always make sure to tell folks that many of the Black men who signed the city's incorporation

papers were from the Bahamas, such as Alexander C. Lightbourne, who gave a passionate speech that day in support of Miami's incorporation. Miami is a city that loves to reinvent its image over and over and over again, more recently presenting itself as a waterfront-diverse-colorblind-utopian amalgamation of Latin America and the Caribbean. There are regular jokes that Miami isn't even in America. In the process of this imaginative remaking, Miami makes invisible its integral Black history, in part to rebrand from the legacy of racial terror here, which reminds you that this is in fact the Deep South, an American city with a strong Black Caribbean influence.

"Bahamian ancestry in Miami is deeply rooted," says Miriam King, who grew up in north Miami-Dade County to Bahamian parents from Nassau and Eleuthera. It is that history, just beneath the surface, that isn't always visible—even as our modern foodways in Miami remain strongly influenced by Bahamian culture.

"It's very special the way our food intertwines," says King. "You can't go into a soul food restaurant in Miami and not see some island food, too. Mac and cheese, collard greens, and there's going to be some conch, too."



In 1920, Bahamians made up just over fifty percent of Miami's Black residents. In their quest to build a new life in this very young city, Bahamians found work and white terrorism plentiful.

Their wages made it possible to ease the burdens of loved ones back home by sending them money, as most immigrants do, but then there was the cost of existing in Miami as a Black person. Black Bahamians experienced the indignities of segregation, fear of lynchings, and abuse from Miami's white police force, which had close ties to the Ku Klux Klan.

After H.H. Higgs, a Black minister from the Bahamas, built a congregation in Miami's Black section of Coconut Grove to share his theological teachings about justice and racial equality, he was kidnapped and brutalized by the Klan. Higgs was only released on the condition that he'd leave the country immediately for Nassau.

"I am going to leave," he told *The Miami Herald* in 1921. And he did. This is a common historical thread in Jim Crow Miami: Black people being chased away by white-supremacist violence.

I was in high school the first time an elder told me, "The Klan ran him right outta here," referring to Hollywood great Sidney Poitier. His mom, a poor farmer from Cat Island, sailed from the Bahamas to Miami to sell her tomato crop in 1927, not knowing the child she was carrying

would come much sooner than expected. Though born nearly three months premature in Miami, Poitier spent his early years in the Bahamas before being sent back to Miami as a teenager to live with relatives. Before he became *the* Sidney Poitier, the first Black man to win an Academy Award, he was a fifteen-year old Black boy making deliveries for the Burdines department store in Miami. One day, Poitier upset a white woman by bringing a package to her front door instead of using the servant entrance for Black workers.

Two nights later, the Klan showed up searching for Poitier, but he wasn't home.

This snapshot of Poitier's experience in Miami is told in his eponymous biography by Carol Bergman. Over his lifetime, the actor shared bits of that harrowing story in press interviews. After the Klan incident and a racist run-in with the police, Poitier decided to head North, leaving Miami.

"I just had to get out of Miami when I had accumulated enough money, by whatever means," Poitier said in an interview with the PBS series *American Masters* nearly half a century later.

I spend a lot of time digging through old public records and periodicals and talking to elders about Miami's Black past as a researcher and cultural memory worker. What I've learned is that, though many left justifiably disaffected and out of fear for their safety, the perseverance of the

BELOW, LEFT to RIGHT: Miss Tammy shows a "dirty conch," before she skins and tenderizes the meat, and a "clean conch," which has been skinned and tenderized.





Black folks who remained is a story worth telling.

So populous were Bahamians in early Miami, *The Miami Times*, the largest Black-owned newspaper in south Florida, ran a regular section dedicated to “News from the Bahamas” well into the mid-twentieth century. The newspaper itself—an important publication that documented Black resistance and existence in Miami—was founded in 1923 by Henry E.S. Reeves, a native of San Salvador Island, Bahamas.

Bahamians opened restaurants and food stands in segregated Black Miami alongside Florida-born Black folks and those who came from Georgia, the Carolinas and other parts of the US South, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

Enterprising Bahamians set up street conch stations on bustling Northwest Second Avenue in Overtown—or “Colored Town,” as it was called back then. Their food drew such a loyal following, a fight would occasionally break out over the last of the fritters when the conch batter started running low.

Overtown was where Miami’s segregated Black nightlife drew big celebrities. Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, and Josephine Baker could perform in whites-only Miami Beach, but they were not allowed to book rooms in the beach’s hotels.

When they crossed the color line back into

Overtown, also dubbed “the Harlem of the South” for its lively music scene and clubs, a variety of options from multiethnic Black cooks awaited them: barbecue black-eyed peas, Spanish chicken, roast veal, and baked ham were on menus throughout the neighborhood. Holding down many of the kitchens at the places of rest and entertainment were Bahamian chefs like “Nassau Frank,” who ran the Sir John Hotel Restaurant and the Knight Beat Hotel Restaurant. His menu was famous for conch fritters, conch salad, and Bahamian souse—chicken or pork cooked in a lime-and-vinegar-based clear broth with potatoes and served as a soup. That souse is a different preparation than the gelatinous loaf of boiled pig parts flavored with savory spices and vinegar, a version of souse dear and familiar to many Southerners.

Away from Overtown’s nightlife, the inequalities of segregated Black Miami-Dade became regular topics of community meetings. Black schools were under-resourced, as were activities for youth. Where the white-run school board and local government failed them, it was necessary for the Black community to raise money for important causes on its own. One profitable way was by selling food.

Barbecue dinner sales sent Overtown’s children to summer camp. To shore up James E. Scott



An order of conch salad from Miss Tammy’s Conchtime





“I have to see conch in every bite,” says Miss Tammy of the conch fritters she fries in a cast-iron skillet.

Homes Nursery School in the Black neighborhood of Liberty City, just north of Overtown, community members sold conch fritters as their fundraiser. And when Booker T. Washington High, the segregated Black high school, was running short on supplies for students in 1953, two of its students held a Saturday night fundraiser in one of their homes; they sold conch salad.

**MIAMI'S BAHAMIAN PAST IS CERTAINLY** reflected in food—and in the love stories that pour out when the question is asked: Where are your people from?

“My mom’s side of the family is from Mississippi,” Sharony Green tells me. “My dad’s side of the family is from Georgia and the Bahamas.”

Green was born and raised in Miami’s Black section of Coconut Grove, an area now officially designated Little Bahamas for the early Black Bahamian settlers who called it home. In the Grove, there’s also a small area known to locals as Little Georgia.

Her parents’ love story is a Black migration story of Miami.

While movement from the Bahamas to Miami continued into the 1950s, Black Americans from across the South likewise continued to relocate here for better economic opportunities. This

little-recognized route was also part of the Great Migration, a reverse migration deeper South to find work in agriculture, construction, and in the tourism industry, despite the pervasive racism.

Sharony Green’s maternal grandmother, Lillie Mae Earvin, was a sharecropper from Belzoni, Mississippi, a Delta town that calls itself the catfish capital of the world. Like the early Bahamians who migrated to Miami, Earvin experienced working a similar sharecropping system that provided little financial payoff or stability.

“She and my grandfather were sharecroppers. With the mechanization of cotton, they were jobless,” says Green (who is not related to me). “They followed the crops. Peaches to be picked in South Carolina, cabbage in North Carolina, pole beans, tomatoes, and strawberries in Florida.”

Earvin worked the agricultural fields in south Miami-Dade County as a seasonal worker making enough money to care for her family. When the picking season was over, she returned to Mississippi with her husband and dozens of neighbors who, like her, came down from Mississippi to work the fields. By 1958 Earvin decided to make Miami’s Black Coconut Grove community her full-time home. There she raised a daughter who would fall in love with a Miami man with parents from the Bahamas and Georgia.

When families intermingle, so do their recipes.

The Bahamian side of the family taught their Mississippi in-laws the magic of conch making. Earvin, from Mississippi's catfish capital, became a star student of preparing conch meat, so much so, she started her own traveling conch food enterprise.

"All of the Bahamians knew she was from Mississippi. No one cared," says Green. "The Bahamians were buying her food, too."

On weekends, Earvin sold the seasonal produce—tomatoes, pole beans, strawberries—she picked herself in south Miami-Dade along with her homemade conch salad in the neighborhood farmer's market where she meticulously decorated her display with an ocean theme. Nets draped across the table anchored by empty conch shells and showy displays of conch salad in fish bowls.

"Just a beautiful display. She always had an eye," Green says. "Everything she did looked beautiful."

Earvin became a mainstay on the local festival circuit as a conch food vendor. Green says that her grandma's setup always had the longest lines.

"We would be chopping onions and peppers

in grandma's living room in Coconut Grove every Friday night if there was a festival coming," Green tells me. "She sold her conch at the Martin Luther King Jr. parade, Calle Ocho, the Goombay festival. She even prepared food for the *Miami Vice* [television show] crew and actors."

Conch is never hard to find in Miami, fresh caught from the Florida Keys or imported from the Bahamas. The tradition of conch vendors by the roadside, at farmer's markets, and community events continues. Just a few months ago, the track team at Miami Northwestern, the high school I graduated from, held a fish fry fundraiser with conch salad on the menu.

Even as we live in Florida, where Black histories and narratives are being scrubbed by legislative action, our food holds our stories. Memory work is resistance in a state that seeks to wipe out the nourishment of knowing the fullness of the Black experience here. Miami may be a master of marketing and reinvention, but the city's Black Bahamian roots and history remain strong, passed down in recipes filled with conch. 🍷

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*Nadege Green is a writer and community historian based in Miami. She is the founder of Black Miami-Dade, a history and storytelling platform that resists the erasure of Miami's Black past.*




Jeremiah Lamont Swain, who was born and raised in Little Bahamas, stands outside the Queen Supermarket on Grand Avenue. "We all come from Nassau," said Swain of his ancestors.

# “I’ll Let That Be My Last Note”

Closing night at the Bradfordville Blues Club

by *RAVI HOWARD*

Photos by *COLIN HACKLEY*



THE SMALL SIGN THAT MARKS THE WAY TO the Bradfordville Blues Club (BBC) was easy to miss, but the signifiers fit the destination. Drive past the sweet potato house, a cinderblock building with a metal roof. Follow the rutted dirt road to where Sams Lane and Moses Lane meet. Take a left through a narrow canopy of trees that leads to an open field with an equally open sky that frames the wide crowns of the live oaks.

The club is within the Tallahassee city limits but deep in the woods. No neon sign marks the


building. On a Saturday night in spring, the club was lit only by the moon, a bonfire, and the lights strung in the trees.

The BBC manages to look like both newcomers imagine and regulars remember. The metal-roofed building sits beneath live oaks on the Henry family land, Black-owned for more than a century. Since 1964, the little cinderblock club has been a part of the landscape.

The show on the evening of April 1, 2023, would be the last.

Patrons gather outside the Bradfordville Blues Club between sets on the club's last night in business, April 1, 2023.





MOSES HENRY JR. STOOD ON THE GRAVEL path at the end of the road named for his father, Moses Sr. He handed out cigars to clubgoers waiting near the door. He visited with family and patrons, old and new, all eager to hear his own memories and the stories of his ancestors.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Henry Jr. made road trips south for family gatherings, part of the Great Migration of Black Southerners who stayed connected to their Florida roots. He remembered the time before the interstate, turning west on US Highway 90 toward Tallahassee. Meanwhile, cousins from Detroit and Jacksonville journeyed back to the farm for a Henry family tradition each December.

“We would have what they called the Twenty-

Sixth, the day after Christmas, that they’ve been celebrating well over 100 years. And they would beat drums right down here,” he said, motioning toward the bonfire pit under an oak tree easily 150 years old.

“It was about having good food and listening to the drums, listening to the old folks talking a whole lot of noise.”

The Twenty-Sixth celebration outgrew the family’s houses, and Moses Henry Sr. joined siblings Inez Haines and Allen Henry to build the cinderblock country club, nicknamed the CC, in 1964. In the years that followed, Moses Jr. remembers helping his aunt serve soft drinks as guests played pool and hits blared from the jukebox.

Moses Henry Jr. of Jacksonville, FL, returned to the Bradfordville Blues Club for its last night in business. Henry's family owns the land on which the club sits.





EVENTUALLY, THE CC DREW CROWDS BEYOND the extended Henry family.

One of those visitors was Dave Claytor, a transplant to Tallahassee who'd grown up in Pennsylvania and upstate New York. In the 1980s, he migrated south when his father joined the business faculty at Florida A&M University. Claytor found work as a FedEx courier and met Elizabeth, a graduate student in library science at Florida State University, who would become his wife.

Claytor remembered the older dancers who were mainstays on the CC's dance floor a generation ago, showing off the buck-dancing style they'd grown up with. "It would allow you to connect to the blues in its most spiritual way—through dance, where your feet are off the ground and hovering, overcoming gravity and the physical," he said.

During a Twenty-Sixth celebration in the early 1990s, Claytor says, his affinity for the blues evolved into something of a spiritual calling. While he stared



Dancers hop to the blues of Johnnie Marshall, left, during the final night of the Bradfordville Blues Club in Tallahassee, FL.

at the building, which had been shuttered since the early 1980s, a man walked up behind him with a simple question: *What do you see?*

Claytor's answer: *A blues club.* When he asked the man who owned it, Allen Henry said, "I do."

"I said, Mr. Henry, I don't have much money, but I have a lot of heart. You give me a chance. Yes, I'll bring this place back."

Dave and Elizabeth Claytor reopened the club as Dave's CC in 1992 and ran it until 2001. The

financial ups and downs of operating a music venue contributed to their decision to move on. "Sometimes we had enough people coming to pay the band, and sometimes we had to go in our pockets," Elizabeth said.

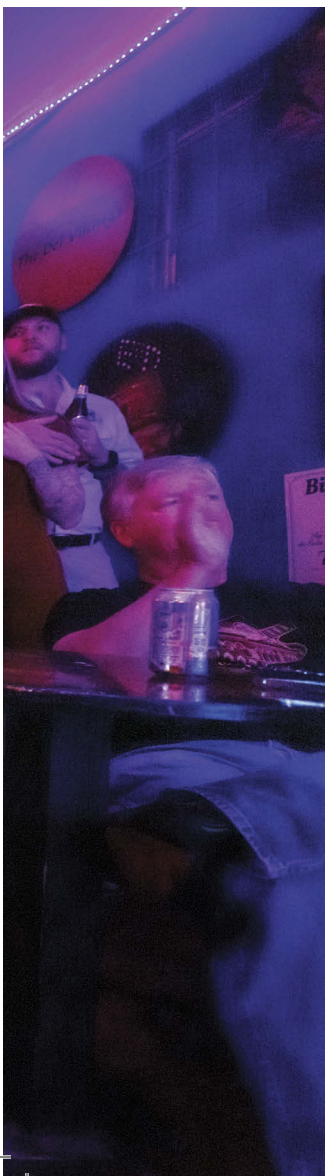
On the night of the last show this spring, the Claytors returned to the club to witness the culture they helped enshrine. "The blues was created, not just to keep to ourselves, but to sustain us and share with the world," Dave said.

*“Sometimes we had enough people coming to pay the band, and sometimes we had to go in our pockets.”*





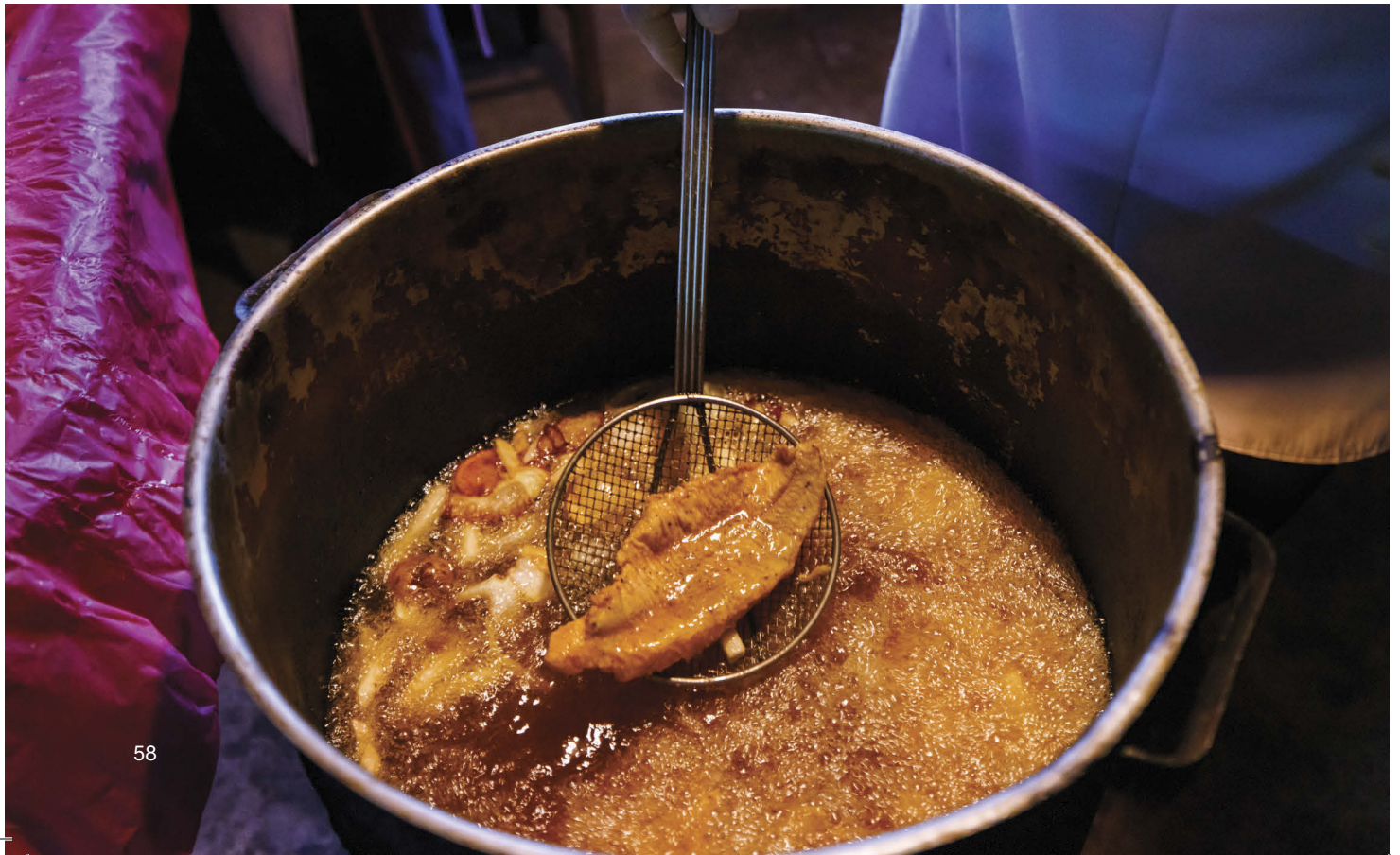
ABOVE: Former club operators Elizabeth Claytor, center in red, and Dave Claytor share a dance during the Bradfordville Blues Club's final show. The Claytors ran the club, then called Dave's CC, from 1992 to 2001. LEFT: The house erupts as the Johnnie Marshall Blues Band performs.



AS A TEENAGER IN SOUTH FLORIDA, GARY Anton found the Mississippi blues through the British Invasion. For him, bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones became a gateway to the artists whose songs they covered—Mississippi Fred McDowell, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon. Anton moved to Tallahassee to study at Florida State University and stayed to practice law. As an adult, he was thrilled to find the music of his youth alive on a local stage.

“I fell in love with the place and never left,” he said. He and his wife, Kim Anton, bought the club in 2002, renaming it the Bradfordville Blues Club. It was under the Antons’ watch that the club was officially named the only Florida stop on the Mississippi Blues Trail in 2010. A sign outside the club marks the achievement. Now, after more than twenty years, the Antons were finally ready to retire.

RIGHT: Kim Anton wraps her arms around husband Gary as they watch the Johnnie Marshall Band perform during the final night of the Bradfordville Blues Club. The Antons have operated the club for 21 years.





SUNSET COVERED THE CLUB IN THE KIND of darkness unspoiled by city light. During breaks in the music, patrons drifted outside, pulling up chairs around the bonfire. Others moved toward the glow of the cooking shed, where Ernestine Fryson prepared orders with her sons Toby and Robert Fryson and her daughter Charlotte Reddick. The shed walls carried photographs of artists who'd performed at the club over the years, and multicolored holiday lights hung from the ceiling. The menu was straightforward: French fries, sausage, mullet, and catfish, all fried in the same pot. Bottles of ketchup, mustard, and hot sauce waited on the ledge of the service window.

“That pot is seasoned,” said Toby Fryson as he and his siblings fixed plates. His mother, known professionally as Miss Ernestine, used the same pot for decades to cook the gameday meals she sold to tailgaters at Florida A&M football games.

After the first set, a long intermission slowed the evening. No one was in a rush for the night to end. The break between sets gave time for food and conversation. Under live oaks strung with lights, around the bonfire, and back inside the club, many of the exchanges were sprinkled with optimism that this night was itself an intermission, not a farewell. Maybe three acts of club ownership—Henry, Claytor, and Anton—would inspire one more.

LEFT: Outside the Bradfordville Blues Club, Toby Fryson pulls catfish and fries from the well-seasoned pot his family has been serving food from for years.

*The BBC manages to look  
like both newcomers imagine  
and regulars remember.*



Moonlight and stars shine down on revelers outside of the Bradfordville Blues Club on its final night.



THE NIGHT'S HEADLINER, JOHNNIE MARSHALL, got his start on the same stage he would close out. As he greeted the audience, he told them the cover charges he used to pay were his music school tuition. Acts like Bobby "Blue" Bland and Percy Sledge had graced that stage over the years.

"The more I got into it, and as the local musicians trained me and taught me, that's when I really understood that—hey, man, you got a gift, a talent, for the blues," Marshall said after the show. "That's when it really hit me that okay, man, I'm not a just observer. I'm a part of this thing."

At the end of his set, Marshall offered a simple benediction: "And I'll let that be my last note."

Then the applause. Then the house lights. Then the end of the road. 🐾

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*Ravi Howard is the author of two novels, Like Trees, Walking and Driving the King. His essay "Black Food on White Pages: Reading the Lupton Collection," appeared in the Gravy winter 2018 issue.*

ABOVE: Johnnie Marshall plays his last set at the Bradfordville Blues Club. RIGHT: Lights out: Gary Anton reaches for the light switch as he leaves the club.



*Many of the exchanges were sprinkled with optimism that this night was itself an intermission, not a farewell.*



C2062....CLEARWATER, FLORIDA'S GOLDEN HARVEST



# SQUEEZED OUT

Florida's storied citrus industry has shrunk as a result of disease and development.

BY CRAIG PITTMAN

NOT LONG AFTER OUR FIRST CHILD WAS born, I drove to a nursery to buy a tree. My dad had planted a tree when I was born, so I was determined to do the same. He went with persimmon, but I picked one that seemed more fitting for a Florida family: a citrus tree.

What could be more Florida than that? Oranges adorn most Florida license plates. Orange blossoms are the official state flower. Orange juice is the official state beverage. There's even a county named "Orange" and another named "Citrus."

I brought home the spindly tree, dug a hole in the backyard, and set the root ball in it. The tree grew well. By the time our second child came along, it had begun producing fruit—juicy little tangerines with a sweet, sharp twang.

From time to time, I'd herd our two toddlers into the backyard to help me pick the little flavor grenades. They liked helping with the retrieval, but only my wife and I ever ate the tangerines. Our kids never enjoyed the tart taste the way we adults did.

As the boys grew older and busier with schoolwork, sports, and other activities, our trips to the backyard to gather fruit dropped to near zero. I'd still pick a batch during the growing season—

September to April, with the peak around the end of October. My wife and I would eat some, but we'd give the rest away.

Then, sometime after 2016, the tree changed. It didn't produce as much fruit, and what it did put out didn't taste very good. Soon it stopped producing anything and eventually toppled over, dead.

It had fallen prey to a bacterial disease called "greening" that began ravaging the Florida citrus industry in earnest in 2005. It was spread by a bug no bigger than a piece of orzo, and since its arrival in Florida it has laid waste to thousands of acres of groves.

By 2023, it had infected more than 1 million trees, driving many longtime growers out of business. It is the most serious of several diseases that can infect a citrus tree. That means not just backyard hobby trees like mine are at risk; the entire Florida citrus industry is in peril. As the groves disappear, so does a major totem that's long been a part of the state's image.

During the glory years of the citrus industry—the 1990s—growers harvested 240 million boxes of fruit a year. Last year's harvest, 41 million boxes, was the lowest since World War II. The most recent crop forecast predicts this year will

bring in a mere 16 million boxes.

Some growers talk confidently of overcoming the greening challenge the way they've overcome others over the years: the hurricanes that have knocked over thousands of trees, the freezes that killed crops planted too far north, the other diseases such as canker that wiped out harvests.

They're also battling an even more insidious foe: Changing American tastes. Younger consumers have stopped drinking orange juice at breakfast—or even eating a traditional breakfast in the morning. The disappearance of demand may be what ultimately thwarts any revival of the industry.

“What could possibly bring it back?” asked Florida historian Gary Mormino, who is skeptical about talk of a comeback. “Will people suddenly start to like orange juice again?”

ABOUT A TWENTY-MINUTE drive from my house, on the other side of the soaring Sunshine Skyway Bridge over Tampa Bay, there's an exit for US 19 that rolls into a stretch of rural Manatee County. On one side of the road is Rosie's Produce Market, with small signs staked out by the road advertising honey, fresh blueberries, and other delights. On the other side is a building that looks like it was zapped via a time machine from an earlier century. Out front, tacked to a power pole, is a big orange disc with a face painted on it. Out back is a grove of gnarled trees.

The Citrus Place is a family-run fruit stand in Terra Ceia, open since 1972. Its founders, Ben and Vera Tillett, had been high school teachers. They set up shop originally as a U-pick grapefruit grove. Eventually, they expanded into retail, selling a wide variety of citrus along with souvenirs, sandwiches, and fresh-squeezed juice.

The Tilletts would unlock their front door on the last Monday in October and close down the last weekend in May. Plenty of tourists always stop by, but most of their business comes from locals who crave their farm-fresh, unpasteurized orange juice.

When the couple first opened The Citrus Place, it was just one of half a dozen similar businesses in Manatee County. Now it's on the verge of becoming the last of its kind, not just in Manatee County but in nearby Sarasota County as well. Their last rival, Mixon Farms, recently announced that it is closing after eighty-five years in business

and selling the property.

“The citrus industry is in a lot of turmoil now,” said Sid Tillett, sixty-five, who started working at his parents' establishment when he was fourteen. He took charge when his father died four years ago at age eighty-seven. Greening has taken a toll on his production, too, and not just with the trees it killed.

“Even the trees that are still alive are not producing the quality or quantity of fruit that they did twenty years ago,” he said. “The virus has weakened the tree. They're not putting out as much fruit, and the fruit is not as good.”

That's the greening at work, sucking out what makes citrus so pleasant to eat. Blame that little bug that's done such a thorough job of spreading the disease.

The *Diaphorina citri*, or citrus psyllid, looks kind of like a cross between a moth and a termite. It feeds on stems and leaves of citrus trees, meanwhile passing on *Huanglongbing*, the bacteria that causes citrus greening. By attacking the tree's vascular system, the disease clogs the flow of sap and drastically reduces the transport of water and nutrients to the fruit, which turn out small and sour.

First identified in China in 1919, greening spread to Africa, Asia, and South America before reaching Florida. According to the USDA, the psyllid first turned up in South Florida in 1998, and the disease it carries was first detected in a pair of homeowners' trees in Miami in 2005. By 2014,

## By 2014, citrus greening had spread to every Florida county with a citrus grove.

greening had spread to every Florida county with a citrus grove, as well as to groves in Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and California.

“This disease effectively reduces the quantity and quality of citrus fruits, eventually rendering infected trees useless,” the USDA reported in 2006.

There is no cure for greening, but scientists have been experimenting with greening-resistant trees, as well as with putting bags or screens over the young trees to keep the bug out. Tillett has heard that some growers are building netted enclosures around their trees to protect them from

810 ORANGES AND ORANGE BLOSSOMS, FLORIDA



the psyllid. The cost: \$40,000 an acre. With six acres to cover, he's not sure he can handle such an expensive solution.

Does that mean the end is nigh? Tillett wouldn't speculate. But he did make one observation focused on his customers' changing tastes.

"When we first opened, the only thing we sold was grapefruit," he said. "Then our juices became the top seller. You know what's our top seller now? Our major seller is ice cream."

DESPITE ITS PERVASIVE presence among the state's symbols, the orange is not a native of Florida. Like two-thirds of the state's residents, oranges came from someplace else—specifically, Spain.

Spanish explorers carried the fruit aboard their ships because their crews could eat them to ward off scurvy. They would plant the seeds in pots on the ship and transplant the saplings wherever they landed, according to Erin Thursby, author of *Florida Oranges: A Colorful History*.

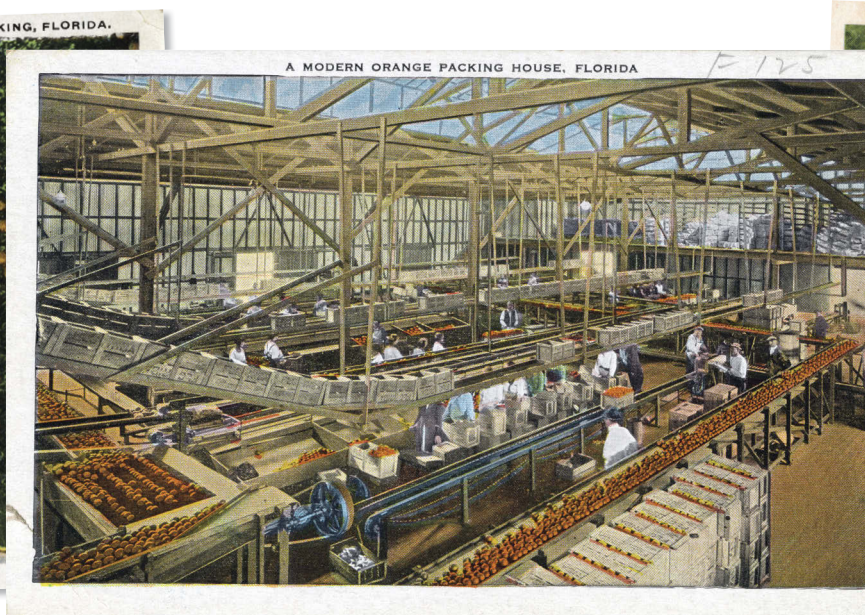
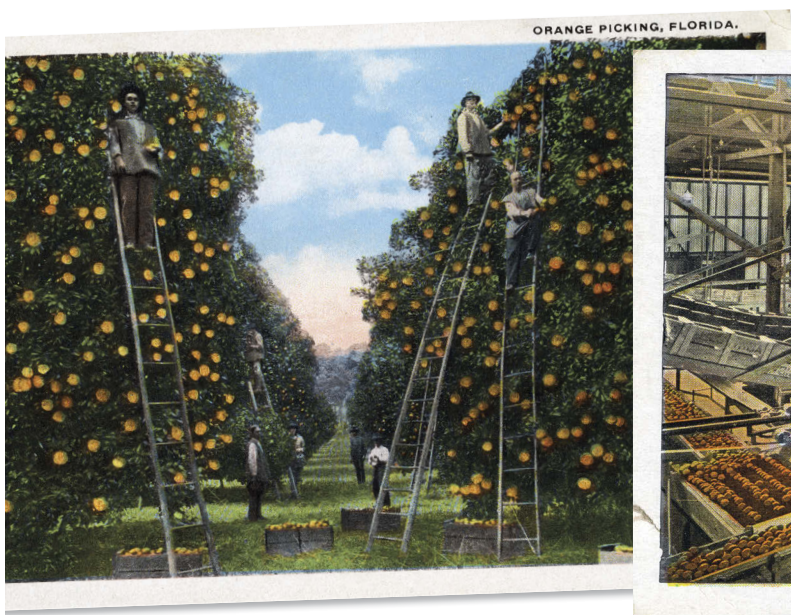
Florida's earliest groves date to 1565, when Spanish explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founded St. Augustine. The groves the Spanish planted around that region were intended strictly for local consumption.

But by the late 1700s, a slippery St. Augustine businessman named Jesse Fish—described by one historian as a "land dealer, slaver, smuggler, usurer, and cunning crook"—had found a way

to send Florida oranges elsewhere. He became the first to export oranges out of state, shipping them to the Carolinas.

After the Civil War, the writer who helped start it, Harriet Beecher Stowe of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fame, bought a house and grove near Jacksonville, in a town called Mandarin, overlooking the St. Johns River. She wrote numerous dispatches to Northern newspapers extolling the balmy breezes and lovely vegetation, calling Florida "The Mediterranean of the South." Stowe, the most popular writer in the nation at the time, urged her readers to visit her new home state to aid its recovery from the economic disaster of the Civil War. She virtually invented Florida's tourism industry—and touted its citrus, too. Local boat captains sold tickets to ride the river past her house in hopes of spotting the famous author. The visitors sometimes invaded her grove and walked off with any fruit they found.

She wasn't the only author to tout Florida citrus. In 1928, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, who won a Pulitzer for *The Yearling*, bought a seventy-two-acre grove near Cross Creek. In her book about her home, she talked of stepping from the impersonal highway to enter into the grove and feeling "out of one world and inside the mysterious heart of another." Present-day visitors to her home, now part of Florida's state park system, are encouraged to pluck oranges from her trees, but I have tried them, and they don't taste very good.



## Every time a freeze, storm, or disease knocks out a grove, developers are waiting to make a lucrative offer to the weary grower.

WORLD WAR II changed everything, both for Florida and for citrus.

Before the war, California led Florida in orange production, but few people drank orange juice as part of their breakfast routine. Once again, though, the fruit's vitamin C content became important to fighting scurvy.

"Part of the war effort was finding ways to ship oranges to the troops overseas," said Mormino, author of *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida*. "Before the war, they had canned orange juice but nobody liked it. Florida became the location of a Sunshine State version of the Manhattan Project."

The result of that concentrated science project: frozen concentrated orange juice, which became a hit with families thanks, in part, to the newfangled freezers sold as part of kitchen refrigerators. In postwar America, no one had time to squeeze enough oranges to make juice for their family. Now, thanks to concentrate, they didn't have to.

"The most functional sentence in the English language is: Mix with three cans of water and stir," Mormino said.

How popular was the new product? "Citrus

production in Florida increased from 43 million boxes in 1945 to 72 million in 1952," the Florida State Archives noted. "About half of all fruit became [frozen concentrate] in the 1950s."

Florida's citrus growers bought national ads pushing the idea of orange juice as the perfect breakfast drink, both tasty and full of health benefits. They hired celebrities such as Bing Crosby, whose endorsement boosted sales for Minute Maid for thirty years. Growers planted groves galore. About thirty minutes from Orlando, in the town of Clermont, a couple of tourism promoters built a 226-foot spire known as the Citrus Tower. When it opened in 1956, the view it offered of the orange-filled countryside was breathtaking.

"From the top of that tower you could once see 12 to 16 billion citrus trees," said Mormino. "Today it's all gone, unless you spot one growing in someone's backyard."

THE INDUSTRY'S SHRINKAGE has been dramatic. As of 2000, Florida groves occupied 832,250 acres, according to the USDA. Twenty years later, that number has dropped by roughly

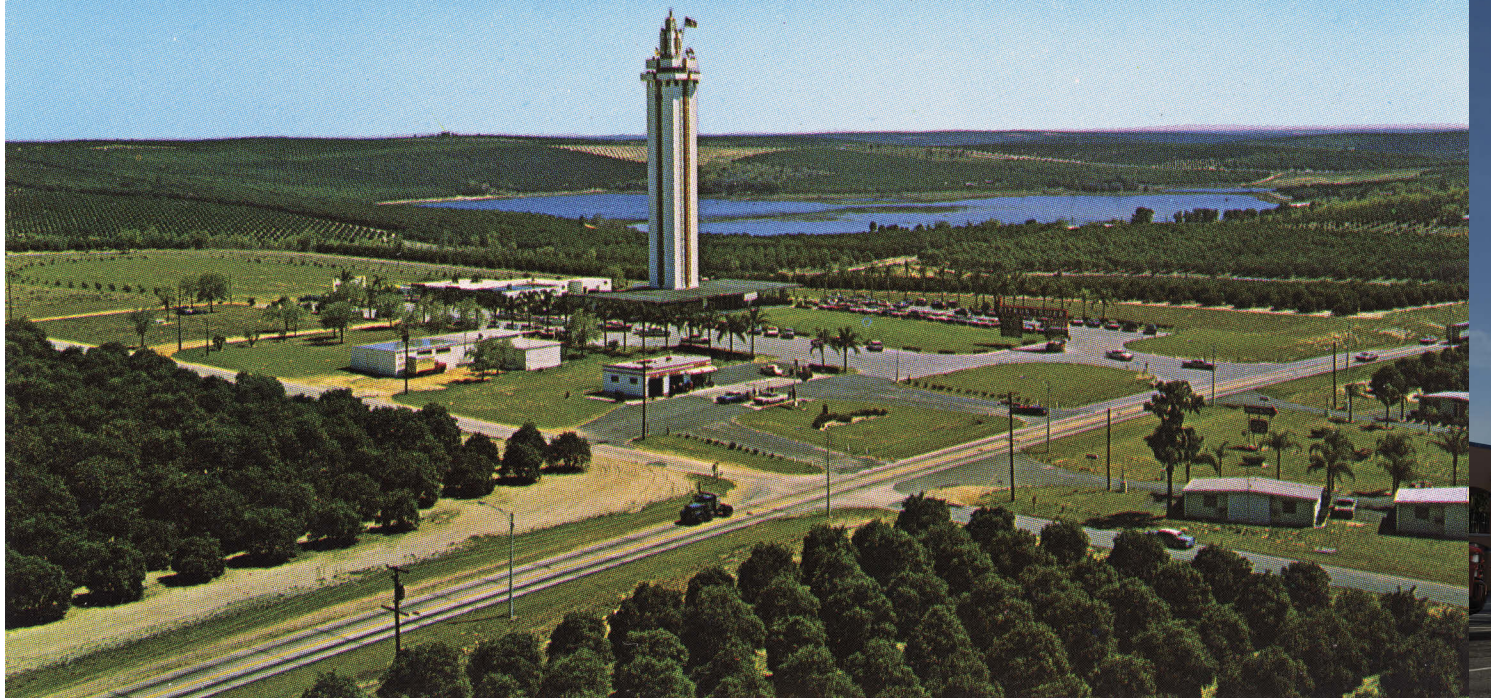
MODERN CITRUS FRUIT DISPLAY ON HIGHWAY U. S. 17, AT U. S. 192, KISSIMMEE, FLA.



A Busy Day in an Orange Grove, Florida.



# *Greetings from* **CITRUS TOWER**



half to just 419,542 acres. Some growers, out of desperation, are trying other crops, such as olives, pomegranates, peaches, avocados, or even hops. Others are just giving up.

Freezes have knocked out some of the groves over the Florida citrus industry's lifetime. For instance, the "Great Freeze" in 1894 destroyed most of the crop. Drought and hurricanes have dealt hard blows too, particularly in recent years. Hurricane Ian's path in 2022 touched roughly 375,000 acres of citrus groves across the state, inflicting an estimated \$675 million in damages.

"Mother Nature's been pretty hard on us the last year or so," said Matt Joyner, executive director of Florida Citrus Mutual, the state's largest association of citrus growers.

Joyner, a seventh-generation Floridian, grew up working in a family-owned grove. He has watched the rise of greening and the decline in groves and production. A decade ago, Florida Citrus Mutual had 8,000 members. Now it's down to 2,000. As the oranges disappeared, a new Florida crop took their place.

"There are a lot of places that historically were nothing but citrus groves, and now you see a lot of rooftops," Joyner said. "The days of raising a family on just 200 acres of citrus are gone."

Oranges like sandy soil, and the trees sprout best in elevated spots atop ancient sand dunes in the state's central and southern peninsula. Those areas are also an ideal place to build subdivisions, shopping centers, office parks, self-storage warehouses, and apartment complexes. Every time a freeze, storm, or disease knocks out a grove, developers are waiting to make a lucrative offer to the weary grower.

When the developers take over, they tend to make a wholesale change to the character of these rural areas. For instance, in a sparsely settled spot near Fort Myers, the 4,000-acre Old Corkscrew Plantation grove used to produce one of out of every 100 oranges grown in Florida. But it went bankrupt, and a Canadian bank foreclosed on the property.

In 2016, a Texas agribusiness giant called King Ranch bought the grove for \$29.5 million and within two years was working with a developer to create a new town there called "Kingston." The plan calls for 10,000 dwelling units, 240 hotel units, and 700,000 square feet of commercial space. That's a big change for a quiet, rural area that was supposed to be kept at a low density because of its value in recharging the region's groundwater supply. Neighbors who treasure



their peace and quiet have done their best to fight the plan, calling it “nuts,” but so far the pro-development forces have won every round.

What remains of Florida’s citrus industry these days tends to fall into one of two categories, according to Joyner. It’s either part of a multinational conglomerate or a multigenerational, family-run farm of 800 to 1,000 acres that may also be involved in cattle ranching or growing other crops to make ends meet. Nevertheless, Joyner said he’s optimistic that this dwindling pack of growers will somehow find a way to bounce back from the current crisis. He’s far from alone in making that prediction.

“Our citrus industry is one of the most resilient agricultural commodities in the world,” insisted former Florida Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried, who served from 2018 to 2022.

But as someone who’s been drinking orange juice with his breakfast for five decades, it’s hard for me to shake the sense that this is whistling past the graveyard. Instead, it feels like, after 500 years, we’re witnessing the slow-motion demise

of Florida citrus. A lot of people now skip breakfast, according to The Food Institute, or they grab something on the go, preferring coffee to orange juice. The supposed health benefits are now regarded as mere marketing hype, with The Food Institute pointing out, “A single 12-ounce glass of O.J. contains an incredible 9 teaspoons of sugar, about the same as a 12-oz. can of Coke.”

Recently the kid whose birth prompted me to plant that long-gone tangerine tree graduated from the University of Florida law school, so my family drove up to Gainesville to cheer him on. As we zoomed along Interstate 75, we passed the usual billboards advertising roadside attractions—strip joints, fireworks stands, and so forth.

There was one in Ocala featuring citrus. I’ve been driving past it for years. Oranges used to be the centerpiece of the billboard’s design, but not anymore. Now, I noticed in passing, the big centerpiece was its live baby gators. The citrus had been shoved to the side—almost like an afterthought. The oranges cling to the edge of the sign, barely hanging on. 🍊

Previous spread and this spread: State Archives of Florida

*Florida native Craig Pittman is a former environmental reporter for the Tampa Bay Times and the author of six books on Florida topics ranging from orchids to panthers. He writes a weekly column on environmental issues for the Florida Phoenix and cohosts the podcast Welcome to Florida.*

A commercial mullet fisherman in Stuart, Florida, in January 1955.



# TRAVELS WITH BUD

Fishing for mullet and Florida history

BY MICHELLE ZACKS

IT IS THE KIND OF FISH THAT WILL SMACK you in the face or thump you on the back. Not intentionally, mind you. But if you happen to be in the way as it jumps up and slaps back into the water, moving in schools for fun or to run from predators, you might get a face full of mullet. That's how I first encountered the species, paddling a canoe across a Georgia inlet and winding up with a boatload of fish. A common adjective attached to this fish is humble, yet it is a confident creature with places to go. Long a staple on many a Southern table, mullet these days more often is labeled as trash.

For a fish little known to Americans outside the southern Atlantic and Gulf coasts, *Mugil cephalus* carries a lot of names: striped, black, gray, flathead, sea, popeye, or—on account of its predilection to leap—jumping mullet. Some folks in Mississippi call it Biloxi bacon, a name that signifies how the species has kept hunger at bay during high tides and low. Nineteenth and early-twentieth century newspapers referred to mullet as “the staff of life” and the Gulf of Mexico as the “people’s meat house” because of its plentiful stocks of the species.

Along with its many names, mullet holds deep meanings for Southerners who catch and eat

this inshore fish. Florida waters are where the fish thrives and where the biggest mullet fisheries have been. Since European colonization, Florida’s beaches and tropical plentitude have fueled fantasies of escape and transformation, personal and collective. The history of mullet reveals an organic essence, a cultural world based not on transformation but on accommodation to Florida’s waterlogged ecology. Ample schools of the fish occupy shallow shorelines, bays, and estuaries, moving between salt and fresh water. Plenty of mullet means plenty of food. Mullet feeds on detritus, and all the saltwater carnivores feed on it: sharks and seatrout, great blue herons and brown pelicans, porpoises and people.

The fish is a significant component of the shallow-water ecosystems of the Gulf of Mexico and the inshore waters of the Atlantic coastline, up through North Carolina, where mullet fisheries are also an important part of the region’s culture. So much mullet was harvested in Florida over the years—an average of 24 million pounds annually between 1950 and 1993—that it was long considered Florida’s “money fish.” That money was earned by virtue of volume, not price.

While I have eaten lots of mullet over the past



several decades, the fish did not feed me as I was growing up. The daughter of a German immigrant mother and Polish on my father's side, I was reared in Connecticut on kielbasa, sauerkraut, and potatoes. Pickled herring and smoked bluefish were on the seafood menu in our house. But somehow, the Indigo Girls' tune "Southland in the Springtime" became my theme song: "When God made me born a Yankee, he was teasing."

Though I'm back in Connecticut now, I spent most of my adult life in the South: North Carolina, Georgia, the mid-Atlantic borderlands of Maryland's Eastern Shore. And Tampa, Florida, where I lived for thirteen years.

It took a while to call Tampa home. Like so many others, I moved there for employment and educational opportunities, part of the demographic boom of the late twentieth century. For the first couple of years, it felt steamy and soulless, a flat expanse of fast-food chains, clogged roadways, and endless construction. When the mom-and-pop fried chicken joint around the corner went out of business, a mortgage brokerage company replaced it. But there were local tastes to be found, and gradually they reeled me in. Café con leche, devil crab, and the Cuban sandwich put Tampa on the map. These foods are clues to Tampa's history as the final step in the growth of the tobacco industry, after Cuba and Key West, to become the leading late-nineteenth century "Cigar City."

Then, in 2003, around a decade after I arrived, I found the city's culinary heart in a trailer on a dirt road about a mile west of Tampa International Airport. At a cluttered kitchen table, I dove into

fried mullet, boiled cabbage, and stewed okra, all doused with Crystal Hot Sauce and hot-pepper vinegar, served up by a septuagenarian by the name of Mr. Grady Albury, Jr.

Bud, as he was known, has since passed on to the tangled mangrove shorelines of the great beyond. Twenty years ago, the snowball nature of oral history work led me to his door. While interviewing Tampa net fishermen, Bud's name came up again and again. A fourth-generation Florida fisherman, Bud was the one to talk to, I was told. Following in his uncles' footsteps, Bud was a commercial mullet fisherman, blue-crabber, net-hanger, and boat-builder—the last of the old-timers of Tampa's fisheries. Born two years before the stock market crash that augured the Great Depression, he came up in the days of push-poles and motorless skiffs, when nets were made of linen or flax and mullet sold for pennies a pound. The great-great-grandson of white Bahamian immigrants to the Keys, he was a child of Florida well before the post-World War II population boom, before Disney, before Tampa and so much of the state turned from country to city and suburban sprawl.

Bud fed me mullet and stories. During the last few years I lived in Tampa, we spoke every week, on the phone or at his kitchen table. We hunkered down on spiderwebbed chairs in front of Big Mama, the wood stove beneath the corrugated tin roof of his barn. He showed me where his uncles had a fish camp at the mouth of Double Branch Creek. While other drivers honked their horns and gave him the finger, he cussed liberally as he drove me around town, very slowly, in his Ford F-150 pickup—battered and blue, the panels covering the inner guts of the doors long gone. The more time I spent with Bud, the more Tampa and Florida came alive.

Long before Bud's ancestors settled there, and before Seminole settlement of the region, the rich estuaries of the Tampa Bay area were home to multiple Indigenous peoples: Manasota and Mocosco, Tocobago and Timucua, Pohoy and Uzita.

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ABOVE: An employee of Lewis and Sons Fish Market ices fresh fish for sale, New Berlin, Florida, 1988.  
 OPPOSITE: A young girl eats fried mullet at the Boggy Bayou Mullet Festival in Niceville, Florida, 1978.

The sparsely populated rural landscape he grew up in was only possible because of the centuries of conquest of native cultures, initiated by the Spanish and drawing to a bloody close with the United States' acquisition of the territory. By the time Bud was born, Tampa's built environment was centered in the tightly drawn boundaries of the city proper. Dirt and shell roads, farmland, and cattle pastures made up a large part of surrounding Hillsborough County. The coastlines were mostly mud and mangrove, dotted with temporary wooden fishing shacks. Sweetwater Creek, a tributary that enters Tampa Bay on the western edge of the county, Bud told me, was "like some river in a foreign land, unmolested. It ran swift and cold and you'd jump in, and it would take your breath away." As we spoke, the section of the creek that ran through Bud's former neighborhood looked like a muddy drainage ditch.

For Bud and his uncles and all the other inshore commercial fishing families of Florida's west coast, there were ample sheepshead and seatrout, blue crabs and oysters to harvest, but mullet was

the bread and butter of the industry. Fundamentally Southern as a fish and a food, mullet is an oily fish and does not keep well, so it rarely travels far from net to plate. Another factor contributing to mullet's regionality is *merrior*—the way particular environmental characteristics shape the taste of marine creatures, like oysters and like mullet. Sandy seagrass beds and higher salinities produce a good-eating fish. Plenty of people consider mullet to be a muddy trash fish, only good for bait. Possibly such folks have only ever tasted it from muddy-bottom habitats. Or maybe they have convinced their taste buds that bottom-feeding creatures are *déclassé*.

With so much of it available so close to shore, mullet has been a staple protein for many Southern communities. The dependability of the fish allowed diverse populations of people to adapt to challenging environments over the course of thousands of years. In southwest Florida, mullet was the base of the rich shallow-water ecosystems that formed the foundation for the mighty Calusa kingdom. Between the first and fifteenth century

Boys gigging for mullet  
in Florida, ca. 1950.



AD, the Calusa grew into the only hierarchical, sedentary North American civilization, and one of few in the world, built through fishery surplus, rather than agriculture. During Spanish colonial rule, ethnically mixed communities of Cubans, Indigenous people, and self-emancipated Black people harvested mullet from fishing ranchos along Florida's southwest coast. After the United States took possession of Florida in 1821, the mullet fisheries continued, eventually dominated by white commercial fishing families who migrated from North Carolina and other Southern states. Some Gulf Coast locations that were home to these successive waves of mullet-dependent communities—such as Pine Island, Cortez, and Cedar Key—continue to be centers for what remains of Florida's fisheries.

Mullet has always been a low-cost species, selling for well under a dollar per pound through much of the twentieth century. For some households in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas, it was on the table at least once a week, and every day for commercial-fishing families. Many mullet-eating folks describe their love of

the fish by explaining how it kept their families fed during times of deprivation. As Bud put it, "They say when there ain't no mullet, your belly's pinching your backbone."

Throughout most of the twentieth century, you could buy fresh, salted, and smoked mullet in the grocery stores of Florida's growing cities. Peddlers drove oxcarts, and later trucks, through the countryside, selling fish in coastal and inland Florida, Alabama, and Georgia. Bud's mother was one such peddler. Her rural customers, Black and white, generally had little cash to spare, so the "Fish Lady" often traded mullet and crabs for farm produce. Riding in a truck with coolers in the back, his mother would ring a brass ship's bell and call out, "Here comes the Fish Lady!" Bud remembered. "She brought home watermelon, cantaloupes, tomatoes, turnip greens, mustard greens," and the rare treat of a chicken or two, if not cash.

At his kitchen table, Bud's fried mullet gave me a visceral taste of the histories he shared. During my visits with other commercial fishing families along Florida's west coast, I likewise was treated



Smoking mullet in Monticello, Florida, 1982.

## While barbecue was king at political events in other Southern states, mullet fish fries reigned in Florida. To prove their Floridian bona fides, candidates for local and state office rolled up their sleeves and tucked in.

to generous platters of mullet fillets, dusted with cornmeal and cooked quickly in a deep fryer. The same oils that make it spoil quickly also impart a rich, nutty flavor. Fresh from the water, crispy and meaty, mullet is a savory meal. I would fight somebody for the last bite.

As Florida's population boomed, eating fried mullet became a symbol of grassroots authenticity. In segregated public gatherings throughout the state, fish fries brought people together for outdoor political rallies, Fourth of July gatherings, bridge openings, and community fundraisers. Swamp cabbage, hushpuppies, grits, coleslaw, and sweet tea were the traditional Florida sides. With the fish often donated by individual commercial harvesters or fish wholesalers, fishermen, most of them white, and seafood processors, many of

them Black, generations of Floridians breaded and deep-fried massive quantities of fillets in large cast-iron kettles.

At a 1963 fundraiser in St. Petersburg for the Pinellas Park Boys Club, the public was invited to eat their fill for the price of one dollar. As "happens every year," a reporter wrote, the organizers quickly ran through their first one-and-a-half tons of mullet and had to send for more. By the end of the event, over five thousand people had been served. While barbecue was king at political events in other Southern states, mullet fish fries reigned in Florida. To prove their Floridian bona fides, candidates for local and state office rolled up their sleeves and tucked in at public fish fries and hosted out-of-state business leaders and politicians as well.

World War II exerted profound influences on

*Smoked Mullet Dip*  
by  
*Doris Delains*

*4 Sides boned fish*  
*2 T minced onions*  
*2 T minced Celery*  
*2 T minced*  
*sweet*  
*Pickles*



*1 Clove garlic*  
*1 T mustard*  
*2 T parsley*  
*1 to 1 1/4 C mayonnaise*  
*Worcestershire*  
*and Tabasco*  
*to taste*  
*Uma*

LEFT: Recipe card for Doris Delains' smoked mullet dip, ca. 1990; RIGHT: A fisherman with mullet from the Saint Johns River in July 1982.

Peters Smoked Fish in South Pasadena helped popularize smoked mullet as part of the middle-class, beach-oriented recreational experience. Smoked mullet became a tasty snack for people flocking to Florida as a Sunshine State playground.

State agencies also promoted smoked mullet as part of Florida's growing suburban culture. Residents could send away for free plans to build backyard smokehouses as well as mullet fishing guides and recipes. Promotional recipes ranged from mullet guacamole to canned mullet casserole to smoked mullet in peanut sauce. Smoked mullet dip or spread took hold most broadly, becoming part of the culinary culture of coastal Florida and remaining popular in home kitchens, restaurants, and fish markets to this day. When I visit Tampa now, I sometimes freeze a few smoked fish to carry home. For a taste of Florida in New England, I thaw out a side of fish to flake off the skin and eat straight up, mix into a dip, or add to a pot of grits. Like the bluefish I grew up with, smoked mullet has an umami flavor that is hard to give up.

If eating mullet is addictive, so is catching the fish. Towards the end of his fishing life, Bud harvested mullet for fun, not money. During our first conversation he explained his postman's holiday retirement: "Some people like to golf, right? Some people like to go hunting. Me? You don't know how much I was thrilled just to go get in the boat.... I'd go catch two or three hundred and give 'em to friends, or we'd smoke a bunch of 'em."

Despite being what my British friends would call "moreish"—the more you eat, the more you want—Florida mullet in any form is harder and harder to come by. Ted Peters smokes about three dozen mullet a day, down from 180 per day five years ago. Mahi-mahi, salmon, and mackerel have become the more common fish for Ted Peters' customers. This is partly because people moving to or visiting Florida are more comfortable with mass market species. Many are accustomed to using mullet as bait, rather than as food—if they have heard of the fish at all. These days, mullet is also far less available in the marketplace. Ted Peters and other erstwhile mullet joints cannot meet the demand of their customers.

The lack of availability of mullet is not due to

the state of Florida as a whole and on its ubiquitous fish. The war itself brought massive development as military bases took hold, while service members and veterans flocked to the state in the aftermath, drawn by the climate, the postwar car culture, and the new interstate highways. As tourism, specifically sport fishing and beachgoing, became the dominant ethos and economy of the region, the value of coastal property soared. At first, Florida mullet held little significance for many new residents and tourists. The limited marketability of mullet was a thorn in the side of Florida fishery managers, state economists, and chambers of commerce. In the 1950s and 1960s, they created marketing schemes to increase the consumption of what they deemed to be an "underutilized species." The popularity of smoked mullet in beachside locales came out of these marketing campaigns. Among Florida newcomers, shoreline restaurants such as the Mullet Inn on Tampa's Courtney Campbell Causeway and Ted

a crash in the stocks. Instead, the decline comes from another kind of marketing campaign: a 1994 citizens' ballot initiative commonly known as the Florida "net ban," which outlawed gill nets per an amendment to the state's constitution. Sold to the public by a well-funded political action committee that was backed by sport fishing and marine tourism organizations, the ballot initiative bypassed state fishery management agencies. Gill nets are the best gear to catch an herbivorous fish like mullet, so this initiative put a lot of fishermen out of business. It also removed huge volumes of Florida mullet from markets within the state and in Georgia and Alabama. Following the ban, mullet landings dropped to an average of 7 million pounds between 2016 and 2021, with lower quantities each year.

The ban on gill nets, Bud told me, "hurt me very bad because it's about like losing one of your family." Afterwards, he kept "walking around in a daze." After his wife died, his retirement plan had been to "go every other night with the mullet boat. Then—bingo." The net ban crushed those dreams. As we spoke at his kitchen table, some eight or ten years after the ban was implemented, out in

his yard a ninety-three-foot stretch of foam cord ran between two trees, in perpetual suspension for a net that never got hung. Rats ate holes into the wad of stiff netting abandoned in the bed of a defunct Chevy pickup. Boxes of donut-shaped corks, used to keep the net suspended in the water, lay scattered about the yard and barn.

The gill net ban was a nail in the coffin of Florida's biggest fishery. Nevertheless, Florida mullet abides. At Marvin's Oriental Fish Company in the predominantly Black neighborhood of East Tampa, for example, smoked mullet is available most Thursdays. With mullet procured from the few men who can make a living throwing a cast net or running a seine, the market's employees use an offset barrel smoker, with a fire made from oak or cherry wood, doused with a squirt bottle of water when it gets too hot. The fish are butterflied open, scales left on, brined, coated with a secret sauce that cannot be divulged, and smoked for about two hours. Customers start calling early in the day: "You got any smoked mullet?!" Some people buy four or five fish at a time, at seven dollars to \$9.50 a piece, depending on the size.

Passing from fishermen's hands through the skilled hands of a cook to the mouths of the people, Florida mullet was and remains a creature of the commons. Bud, who described himself as a Southern "Cracker SOB" and a "Bohemian Key West Conch," told me that the business of commercial mullet fishing taught him to live with all kinds of people: Cubans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, "Yankees, Crackers, hippies, and Black people." The true worth of mullet for him and many Floridians was that it connected "the poor that's living from hand to mouth," no matter their race or nationality.

Traversing Tampa with Bud helped me learn to love the place that had become my home. Bud's memories, along with the fish he served me, gave substance to previous moments in the life of the city and the Gulf Coast. Although the presence of the past might be overshadowed by contemporary developments, its resonance pokes through—like mullet, still to be found swimming and leaping through Florida's Gulf, creeks, and bays. How we choose to live with this fish and what values it embodies is up to us to say. 🐟



State Archives of Florida/Mary Lou Norwood

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VERSE



# *Still Life with Christ, Aromatics*

BY LESLIE SAINZ

The night, good, is a gorgeous clone of itself.  
Thinking of the slick roaches  
defecating in the silverware trays? Three times only.  
In two stacked plastic bags, five sour oranges pecking  
like past selves. The baroque  
garlic. The one and a half small onions.  
I squint at the tip of my nose until it becomes Abuelita's. Gorgeous,  
good night with salt pork, cumin, oregano. Salt in the machacador,  
softening. Poinsettias court the window, court the light.  
Accidentally, inevitably, I leave some skin cells while retrieving four bay leaves.  
*Never, ever, salt the beans* says the father whose  
stiff fingers cannot shatter  
the cooking wine bottle because it is plastic.  
At midnight, the hair on my shoulder is someone else's.

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*Leslie Sainz is the author of Have You Been Long Enough at Table, forthcoming from Tin House in September 2023. The daughter of Cuban exiles, she is the recipient of a 2021 National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship and serves as the managing editor of the New England Review.*



## The Long Haul

THIS IS MY GREAT-AUNT JULIA LESLIE MING. LIKE MANY MIDDLE FLORIDA BLACK folks trying to find jobs during the Great Depression, Aunt Julia left the area with her husband, William—whom the family called “Uncle Honey”—not for the North, but for Miami. Even though it was as segregated as the rest of the Jim Crow South, there was more opportunity down there than on our family’s Jackson County, Florida, farm. And there’d be no snow. The Mings were officially Miamians by 1937, when one of the nation’s first housing projects for African Americans was completed in the Liberty City neighborhood. The Liberty Square complex was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration, created to aid the nation’s recovery from the Great Depression. Aunt Julia and Uncle Honey lived in one of the apartments. She was a housekeeper; he was a porter for Henry Flagler’s Florida East Coast Railway. Back then, Liberty Square was home to other working- and middle-class Black folks. The City of Miami responded by building concrete walls around the complex to separate it from nearby white neighborhoods. Even the city’s beaches were segregated. This photo reminds me that though the power of the law was against her and her people, Aunt Julia was still able to find abundance and joy at least for one day in 1954.

—ROSALIND BENTLEY

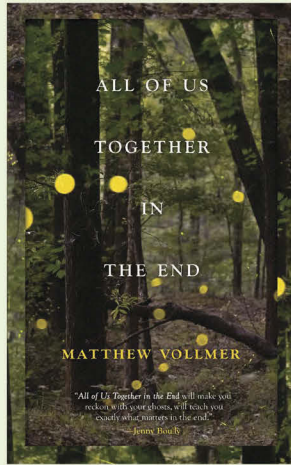
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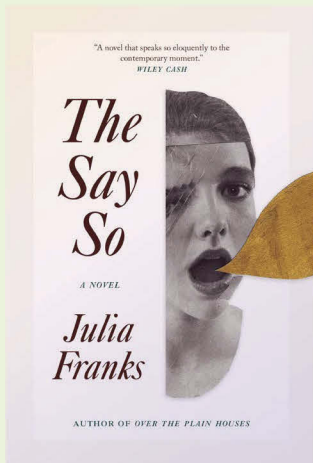
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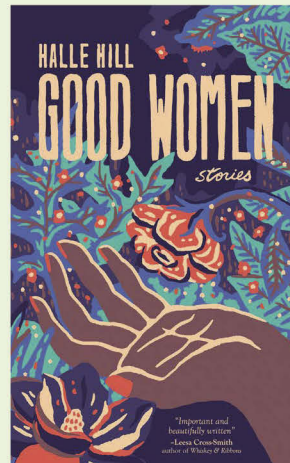
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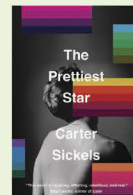
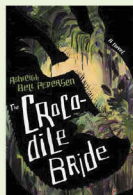
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