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Contents

FEATURES

- | | |
|---|--|
| 22 TEACH A MAN TO FISH
Kayla Stewart | 35 WE DANCE
B. Brian Foster |
| 28 MORE THAN ENOUGH
John Simpkins | 41 RECIPE BOX |

- | | |
|--|---|
| 2 Editor's Note
<i>Sara Camp Milam</i> | 18 Finding Halo-Halo in Memphis
<i>Aimee Nezhukumatathil</i> |
| 4 Featured Contributors | 20 Thresh & Hold
<i>Marlanda Dekine</i> |
| 6 SFA MVPs: Atlanta
<i>Ron Hsu</i> | 51 Vittles: A Love Story
<i>Faron Levesque</i> |
| 12 Good Ol' Chico
<i>Gustavo Arellano</i> | 56 Last Course
<i>Jai Williams</i> |

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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AIN'T NOTHING LIKE THE REAL THING

I missed out on a lot in 2021, but I'm grateful
for one gathering in particular.

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

A COUPLE OF WEEKS INTO THE COVID lockdown of spring 2020, I saw a social media post that read, "I'm a homebody, but DAMN...I liked going one or two places." Which, same. Some twenty-one months later, as I write this, I still struggle with a similar frustration. And if anything, I'm *more* eager to be out in the world, in the company of people who are not my dearly beloved immediate family.

I'm fully vaccinated and boosted, as is my husband, but our young children are not. (And actually, I'm counting the hours until my newly five-year-old daughter gets her first shot next week.) We've got a moderately mask-compliant preschooler and a mask-ripping toddler, which leaves us performing a tedious risk calculus in advance of most indoor activities. Are we willing to chance an hour at church, or a grocery-shopping trip, or dinner at restaurant for the possibility of illness or quarantine? This calculus is different for everyone, and depends on so many factors, not to mention privileges. But for us, most of the time, the answer is "no." We've balanced "no" with lots of valuable family time spent outdoors—and, as my husband reminded me the other day, we've lived in and utilized every square inch of

our home (and porch, and yard, and driveway) in ways we never anticipated. But we've also declined invitations we would have loved to accept. We've canceled plans to see extended family and out-of-town friends. We've stayed home instead of toasting our favorite bartender on his last night at Snackbar. (We miss you already, Ivy!)

I didn't expect to close out 2021 or ring in 2022 with yet another COVID-tinged editor's note. But I bring up the missed opportunities and the *wish we could join y'all's* to contrast them with one gathering that I am so very, very grateful *did* happen this year: the SFA Fall Symposium.

In hindsight, we could not have been luckier to have hosted this event—our twenty-fourth Fall Symposium, and our twenty-third in-person—how we did and when we did. We safely served a congregation of some two hundred fully vaccinated attendees, presenters, and chefs in what now feels like a vanishingly small window between the ebb of the Delta variant in Mississippi and the arrival of Omicron to the United States.

Counting the years that I volunteered for SFA before joining the staff as a full-time employee, this was my twelfth in-person Fall Symposium. If I'm honest, there were moments—lots of them—in



Derek Baker, beverage director at Snackbar in Oxford, serves lunch at the 2021 SFA Fall Symposium.

the weeks and months leading up to that October weekend when I wondered whether we should move ahead with our plans. I worried about someone getting sick. I worried about bringing the virus home to my children. On the other hand, I worried that my children could be exposed to COVID at school, and that the resulting quarantine would leave my colleagues short-staffed on the weekend every hand was needed.

Guess what? None of these scenarios happened. (And guess what else? This isn't the first time my worst-case fears have *not* come true.) What *did* happen was beautiful. Our guests were overjoyed to reconnect with old friends and meet new ones. They gave in, appreciatively and generously and unapologetically, to all of the feels that accompany Symposium weekend. They laughed with fellow diners over a lunch of fried catfish. They shared the fear and frustration of speakers who talked about land loss and climate change; and the hope of speakers who detailed their visions for a more inclusive, equitable future South. They toasted and applauded our annual award winners, oyster farmer Earnest McIntosh Sr. and chef-activist

Jai Williams

Bill Smith. And they marveled, as I did, at the beauty and grace and strength of Wideman Davis Dance, who performed my favorite Symposium arts commission to date.

The events of that October weekend seem barely possible just two months later: showing off my children at an outdoor breakfast, hugging *Gravy* writers and longtime SFA members who have become dear friends, dipping one of chef Ron Hsu's perfect potatoes fondant into a pot of béarnaise sauce in the service tent (and then doing it again, and again) after ferrying dinner plates to guests. As with any in-person experience, and as with so many events in the COVID era, I can't deliver exactly what we heard and felt and tasted. But I'm delighted to share with you, *Gravy* readers, a bit of the magic of that weekend in the pages that follow.

Our 2021 Symposium examined Southern environments—natural, built, and imagined. And for a fleeting thirty-six hours, it was its own environment. For that, I'm grateful. And I'm hopeful that 2022 will bring more moments of true connection. After all, there's nothing like the real thing. And I do like going one or two places. 🍷

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS

Lindsey Bailey is an artist and illustrator based in Olive Branch, Mississippi. She graduated from Mississippi State University with a BFA in graphic design and has worked on editorial illustration, character design, book covers, children's books, and portraits. Her clients include Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, Bleacher Report, Rebel Girls, *The Georgia Review*, and ESPN. Her work centers on the representation of people of color, specifically Black women and children. In a moment when ideas and cultures are being shared and blended, reworked and assimilated, she hopes that her work shows what the South has to offer—that Southerners can contribute positive and thoughtful ideas around the world.



Vishwesh Bhatt is the chef at Snackbar in Oxford, Mississippi. A native of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, he is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and Johnson and Wales University. He moved to Oxford for graduate school, abandoned academia for restaurant kitchens, and never looked back. His favorite ingredients are at home in India and the American South: rice, field peas, okra, peanuts, eggplant, tomatoes, and seafood. Learning the history of food, then teaching it, keeps him motivated. He believes that the South is and has always been a fluid place, and that people like him are just the next paragraph in a story still unfolding.



Zaire Love is SFA's Pihakis Foodways Documentary Filmmaker. An award-winning filmmaker, music maker, and writer, her mission is to honor, amplify, and archive the stories and voices of the Black South. Though she has worked all over the region, much of her work is set in her hometown of Memphis or in Mississippi. She is a graduate of Spelman College (BA), Houston Baptist University (M.Ed), and the University of Mississippi (MFA). In addition to her work with SFA, Love continues to produce work for her own studio, Creative Cornbread. She loves building relationships with people and is humbled by how folks trust her with their stories.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Courtesy of Lindsey Bailey; Jai Williams; Zaire Love

Aimee Nezhukumatathil is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, & Other Astonishments*, which was a finalist for the Kirkus Prize in non-fiction, and the 2020 Barnes and Noble Book of the Year. She is also the author of four books of poetry and serves as poetry editor for *Sierra* magazine. Nezhukumatathil has received fellowships from the Mississippi Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. She teaches English and creative writing at the University of Mississippi. A ravenous student of Mississippi's plants and animals, she believes Mother Nature is the best poet.



Disha Sharma is a freelance illustrator who loves to paint nature and food. Depending on the project, she aims to create art that is mouthwatering, informative, and impactful. She has worked with *Baltimore Magazine*, *Gravy*, and other publications and creative agencies. Before starting her freelance illustration career in 2016, she worked as a senior graphic designer. When she is not working on client projects, she goes out in nature to gather inspiration and to the public library to collect books for her personal projects. She enjoys learning about different plant-based foods from around the world and dreams of writing an illustrated cookbook.

TOP TO BOTTOM: Cheyenne Alford; Courtesy of Disha Sharma; Jai Williams

John Simpkins is the president and CEO of MDC, a Durham, North Carolina-based nonprofit that equips Southern leaders, institutions, and communities to improve economic mobility and advance equity. A constitutional law scholar who teaches at Duke Law School, he formerly served as counsel for the Obama administration and as the vice president of the Aspen Global Leadership Network. Seeing deep societal change happen in South Africa in the early 1990s inspired him to take on changing systems as his life's work. He believes that by confronting our past and working together, Southerners can imagine, then build, a new future for us all.





RON HSU WAS BORN AND RAISED IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA, WHERE HIS mother and father owned a chain of five Chinese restaurants. He studied business at the University of Georgia and dropped out in his third year to attend culinary school in Australia. After cooking at New York City’s Le Bernardin for a decade, he was finally ready to open a restaurant of his own—and he knew Atlanta was the right place. “Because of the fast pace of New York, dining seemed more business-oriented,” he says. “In Atlanta, you take the time to get to know people.” In 2019, Hsu and his siblings, Howard and Anita, opened Lazy Betty, a tasting menu restaurant named after their mother, Betty, who was known for making people feel at home.

Lazy Betty, Atlanta

I spend more time at the restaurant than I do at home, so my employees are like family, too. We have a counter that oversees the kitchen, which offers guests the opportunity to interact with our kitchen staff. They love to shoot the breeze with people. I love reading our reviews because people really talk about how friendly and personable our staff is. That means you’re making a connection of some sort, as opposed to just being served. To provide something where it’s memorable and you can make an emotional impression—that’s hospitality.



Kimball House, Decatur, GA

They have set the bar for how cocktails should be made. I’ve been there many times to order food and drinks, and the food comes out way before the cocktails. That’s not a knock on them—it shows how much time and care and effort they put into the cocktails. Also, they’re friendly and down-to-earth. I’ll talk to the servers and tell them what I’m in the mood for, and they recommend this cocktail or that cocktail. I let them decide what they think I’ll like. Whenever someone is looking for a good cocktail, nice scene, and good service, I recommend Kimball House.



Lanzhou Ramen, Doraville, GA

I have to choose something on Buford Highway, and I love noodles and pastas. This is no-frills, not fancy, and there’s a great selection of dumplings. You can see the chef hand-pulling noodles, which is a very cool process. If I go when it’s cold, I’ll get a noodle soup, which is warm and filling. If it’s hot, I’ll get stir-fry noodles with beef or pork or shrimp or everything. I haven’t been since before COVID, since there’s no patio, but I recommend anything with the hand-pulled noodles.

Talat Market, Atlanta

Talat Market is only a year and a half old now. They make Thai food, and I love their spin on it, with local ingredients and everything made in house. They juice their own coconuts to make coconut curries, which shows the integrity and craftsmanship they put behind the food. The staff are all people that work and live in the neighborhood, so it’s very community-centric. I usually get the rice salad, which has crispy rice tossed with a bunch of herbs and citrus. The supporting ingredients change depending on the time of year.



Illustrations by Bridgette Blanton / Tiny Pencil Studio

“Most Visited Places” is an ongoing digital and print series, underwritten by The Mountain Valley Spring Water.

JULIO DREAMS OF TORTILLAS

I'm convinced that Maíz de la Vida makes the best tortilla I've never tasted.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

IT WAS MARCH 2020, JUST AS THE REALITIES of the COVID-19 pandemic began to set in, and Julio Hernandez was fretting about the future. The Bronx native moved to Nashville in 2011 to live near a brother who was stationed at Fort Campbell in Kentucky and to “run away from all the nighttime craziness” that came with working at restaurants in Manhattan.

He spent most of the 2010s working his way through Nashville's kitchens—at country clubs and at Mexican restaurants, where fellow cooks advised him to use sour cream instead of chile peppers because white people supposedly didn't like the latter and would prefer the former.

Like so many restaurant workers whose careers were interrupted by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hernandez felt a mixture of frustration, excitement, and fear about what to do next. Then one day, lying in his bed, his mind turned to comfort. He thought of tortillas.

Specifically, he went back to the thick, fresh tortillas of Tlaxcala, the Mexican state where his father was born and where Julio lived from his infancy until he moved back to the Bronx as a teen.

“Why am I overdressing tacos,” Hernandez thought, “when all I have to do is use a good corn tortilla?”

The question might sound rhetorical to most eaters. Isn't a corn tortilla a corn tortilla—just a flattened disc made of water, mashed-up corn made into masa, and maybe salt? Technically yes, but what matters more than anything is the corn that becomes the masa. Just as there are heirloom varieties of beans and tomatoes, the same exists for corn—especially in Mexico, the birthplace of the crop. But for decades, tortilla makers eschewed such types in favor of Maseca, a dehydrated corn masa. It has little flavor but makes tortilla production far easier.

Hernandez quit his job at a Tex-Mex restaurant soon after his Proustian moment. He used his life savings to buy a ton—literally, 2,000 pounds—of heirloom Oaxacan corn and a *molino*, a corn grinder. His wife “lost her mind,” he now jokes, but they, along with Julio's mother, got to work.

He ordered his corn through Masienda, a Los Angeles-based company that works with organic farmers in Mexico. A delivery driver dropped off

Photos by Danielle Atkins

A quesadilla, churros, and tacos from Maíz de la Vida





LEFT: Julio Hernandez at work;
RIGHT: A molino stone caked with
freshly ground nixtamalized corn



the corn and the 600-pound *molino* in his front yard. Hernandez stored the corn in his daughters' bedroom because it had an air conditioner. Neighbors helped him lug the *molino* to his garage.

There, Hernandez first soaked the corn in slaked lime. This a process, called nixtamalization, softens the kernels and releases niacin, an essential nutrient. He then ground the softened corn into masa, which he used to hand-press eighty dozen tortillas, and put them, uncooked, in plastic bags.

The following day, Hernandez set up a table and tent at the East Nashville Farmer's Market.

"If we failed," said the self-deprecating Hernandez, "well, at least we'd have a lot of tortillas and a lot of leftover masa to make tamales."

They sold out within an hour.

Hernandez had already begun to make tacos and quesadillas with his tortillas under the name Maíz de la Vida—Corn of Life. (He held his first pop-up a few weeks before that farmer's market sell-out.) Its quick success allowed him to buy a short bus, which he transformed into a mobile kitchen. He'd set up at night outside Chopper, an East Nashville tiki bar. Maíz de la Vida earned laudatory reviews from the local press and a

following from Mexican and non-Mexican eaters alike. Besides tacos, Hernandez's menu includes tamales; thin, foot-long quesadillas nicknamed machetes; and tetelas, a triangle-shaped burrito of sorts from the state of Oaxaca.

Hernandez is preparing to open a brick-and-mortar version of Maíz de La Vida this April, nearly two years after his masa odyssey began. It will stand just across the way from Arnold's Country Kitchen, the beloved meat-and-three stalwart.

"It's unreal, man," the thirty-one-year-old Hernandez told me over the phone. "When you think of tacos, you never thought of Nashville. Never. Never. Now, tacos are becoming barbecue here. It's moving in our direction."

MEXICAN RESTAURANTS ACROSS the South have made fresh corn tortillas for decades now, and industrial tortillerias—tortilla factories—dot the region. The largest is probably La Banderita Tortillas, a division of Norcross, Georgia-based Olé Foods. You may have seen them at Walmart or Kroger. They're even on the shelves of my local Whole Foods here in Southern California.

But many corn tortillas on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, whether handmade or from a machine, contain a secret: They're cut with Maseca because it lengthens the life of tortillas (fresh masa has a short shelf life) even as it imparts a sour flavor. The product is so ubiquitous in kitchens on both sides of the border that sour and relatively tasteless is now the default flavor for mass-produced corn tortillas.

As Hernandez sees it, that's a shame for a food-stuff that Mexicans have eaten for millennia. Ask older Mexicans like my dad, and they'll plainly tell you that tortillas don't taste like tortillas anymore—and Maseca is to blame.

That's why I'm excited by what Hernandez is doing. Out here in Southern California, we've seen a tortilla renaissance for almost a decade, driven by Mexican and Mexican-American chefs who see using heirloom corns as a form of cultural resistance to the Maseca-fication of tortillas and returning to roots. I run a tortilla tournament for a Southern California NPR station, so I'm privy to the best of the best out here: Taco Maria's emerald-blue tortillas, Kernel of Truth's pink ones, or

the pinky-thick marvels of Miramar Tortilleria in Boyle Heights. The end result is always revelatory—softer, chewier, earthier. Like tortillas once tasted, and should always taste.

This masa movement is spreading across the United States—restaurants boast of freshly nixtamalized tortillas in New York, in Houston, even in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. The trend gave Hernandez the confidence to pour his life savings into Maíz de la Vida. He now makes 250 pounds of masa a week, which he presses into tortillas for his own operation and for other restaurants. While I've yet to taste them, I've admired his trajectory from afar and ogled the vibrant hues of the heirloom corn tortillas he makes—pink, red, blue, dark yellow—on Instagram. He transforms a cranberry-hued maiz rojo from Oaxaca into a tortilla the color of raspberry sherbet, which he then fills with carne asada.

Hernandez says he's open to sourcing corn from the South, and he knows he could get much cheaper corn closer to home. But his focus is on the quality and flavor of heirloom varieties. "I'm not trying to feed cattle, güey.¹ I'm trying to feed people."

¹ Literally, "ox"; figuratively, "dummy." A slight profanity in Mexican Spanish as a synonym for "dude."



Hernandez with a batch of freshly made masa ready to be pressed it into tortillas

He quickly adapted to life in the South but wondered why more Mexicans weren't prominent in Nashville's food scene. "Every restaurant has *mexicanos*, so why *chingado*² are we not showcased more?"

It's true. Mexican American chefs are slowly gaining name recognition across the South—I'm thinking of Oscar Diaz of The Cortez in Raleigh and Paco Garcia of FOKO in Louisville, among others. But too many Mexicans remain the back-of-house workers, quietly cooking most of the food we eat across the country. It reminds me of what Anthony Bourdain once said about this dichotomy: "As any chef will tell you, our entire service economy—the restaurant business as we know it—in most American cities, would collapse overnight without Mexican workers."

And Hernandez remembered being bothered by Mexican and white colleagues who told him to dial back the spice. "Everyone talks about Nashville hot chicken, so how can the tacos *not* be spicy?" That's why he trusted that Nashvillians of all backgrounds would embrace his tortillas.

"People get shocked at first—they're just not

used to such a strong corn flavor!" Hernandez said with a laugh. I know what he means: A tortilla made from heirloom corn has a funky, earthy flavor that almost reminds me of mushrooms. "But we're talking about food that Southerners are familiar with, just like Mexicans. After another bite, it's like the ancients are talking to them and saying, *We got you, just keep chewing!*"

Hernandez is no purist, though. "I'm trying to find a balance; trying to make everyone happy. I want to make *los compas mexicanos*³ happy but also explain to the *gúeros*⁴ how good this shit is." He has no qualms about selling Tex-Mex classics like cheeseburger tacos or fried tacos, entrées nowadays frowned upon by Mexican-American food critics as too whitewashed. The point for him is the tortilla.

"I can't expect Southerners to understand [the flavors of] Oaxaca or Tlaxcala right off the bat," he said. "I need to sell a taco to Joe down the street, to Alan." But they'll understand a good tortilla.

At the same time, he needs to ensure that Maíz de la Vida's Mexican customers are satisfied. He remembers one Mexican woman who ordered a quesadilla and cracked that Hernandez was *medio blanquito*.⁵

Hernandez remembered, "She took a bite and said, '*No mames!*⁶ I forgot what this tasted like. I've been here for twenty-two years, and I keep thinking about what tortillas tasted like, and now that I'm tasting it again, I can't describe how I feel."

She's now a regular.

He expects more chefs around the South to adopt small-batch tortillas and is already seeing it happen in Nashville. Sean Brock is a customer, for instance.

"Ten years ago when I moved here, it was about pecan-crusting pork loin," he said. "We wouldn't have had a chance. Now, it's going in our direction. And that's just *chido*."

He's right. That's just great. 🐦

Gustavo Arellano is Gravy's columnist and host of the podcast The Times: Daily News from the L.A. Times.

2 Why the f@#%?
 3 The good ol' Mexican boys. (*Compas* is short for *compadres*.)
 4 White people
 5 Literally "half white," but here meaning "kind of a white boy."
 6 A vulgar way of saying "You're kidding me."

COMING THIS SPRING



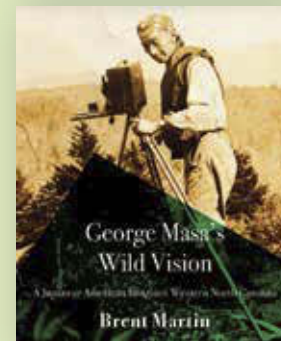
APRIL 19
THE CROCODILE BRIDE
 ASHLEIGH BELL PEDERSEN

"Ashleigh Bell Pedersen writes in a style all her own. The Crocodile Bride is a generous, tender novel with unforgettable characters and a perfect, transcendent ending." —Carter Sickels



MARCH 29
THRESH & HOLD
 MARLANDA DEKINE

"This book is a prayer and a fist, a history and the hope that comes only from true reckoning, the listening that makes light." —Ashley M. Jones



MAY 17
**GEORGE MASA'S WILD VISION:
 A JAPANESE IMMIGRANT IMAGINES WESTERN
 NORTH CAROLINA**
 GEORGE MASA

"Brent's book transcends time with creative insights and reflections on the natural world that honor George Masa's 'Wild Vision.'" —Paul Bonesteel

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OUR KIND OF PEOPLE

Filming Bill Smith

BY ZAIRE LOVE

AS WE GROW OLDER, MAKING FRIENDS CAN be challenging and a bit awkward. It's not as easy as in elementary school, when you could connect with someone on the playground over how cool your dirt drawing was and return to the classroom as besties within an hour. Friendship while adulting is not for the faint of heart. Throughout the years, we've consciously and subconsciously made up our minds about who we are and the company we want to keep. Then, *boom!* You're on the adult playground of life. You meet someone who's the opposite of you in so many ways, yet within a couple of days, you've made a friend for life. I am Zaire Love, and let me tell you how Bill Smith became my bestie over the course of three days this past summer.

In his own words, Bill is "a gay, troublemaking, retired chef from eastern North Carolina." Bill's kind of troublemaking is what the late John Lewis called *good trouble*. This good trouble is why I boarded a 6 A.M. flight from Memphis to Atlanta to board a connecting flight to Raleigh-Durham to drive to Chapel Hill. Bill received the 2021 Craig Claiborne Lifetime Achievement Award from the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I was

on assignment to tell Bill's story, focusing on why and how social justice became part of his life's work. We had talked on Zoom a few times before I visited. He told me about his proud hippie days, getting arrested for causes, co-owning the Carboro music venue Cat's Cradle, and being the head chef at Crook's Corner for twenty-plus years. But I had no idea what I was going to experience once we met in person.

When I got to Chapel Hill, I dropped my things off at the hotel, put Bill's address in my rental-car GPS, and made my way over to his place. I pulled into the steep gravel driveway and took one look at his lavender and yellow cottage. Right away, I knew that this assignment was going to be my kind of interesting.

Bill greeted me on the porch wearing a worn blue t-shirt bearing the logo of the UNC college radio station, low-slung Levis, and navy high-top Chuck Taylors. Inside Bill's home, every room was painted a different color. Souvenirs from his travels and his friends covered shelves and walls. He was proud of them, too. Beside the piano in his living room was a pink watering can shaped like a pig. I thought it was a mini-replica of the

Photos by Zaire Love

Crook's Corner pig, but Bill told me it was a gift from his "crazy" sisters. He laughed and told me how much fun they were. I felt like I had walked into an eclectic museum filled with artifacts of Bill's life, interests, and worldview, and I was *here* for it.

I sat on the couch in the living room and looked up at the chandelier, which was draped with Mardi Gras beads and other trinkets. I love unapologetic interior design. It tells me so much about a person. Standing to take a closer look, I whispered to myself, "This is dope. This guy is my kind of people."

As I looked up, turning my body in a circle with my eyes fixed on the chandelier, I knew this trip would be special. I knew by the pink walls in the living room, the orange walls in the hallway, and the eccentric artwork everywhere that I could be completely weird, strange, out of the ordinary—all of those labels the world slaps on free thinkers—and Bill would welcome it because we were *our* kind of people.

Bill walked back into the living room as I was completing my third spin beneath the chandelier, trying to make sure I didn't lose my balance. He offered me whatever he had in his refrigerator and apologized for not having much to serve—he hadn't been to the grocery store. I complimented him on his beautiful house and his taste in interior design, and he began to tell different stories about how it all came to be. He didn't know it yet, but I was locking him in as a friend in my mind.

We got set up for our first interview in the middle of his living room. Bill poured himself a drink and we talked. And when I say we talked, we *talked*. He talked about so much: his transformation from child in eastern North Carolina to self-described hippie who fought for social justice as a student at UNC-Chapel Hill to music club owner to chef. He told me about his friends from Mexico and Guatemala. And he told me that

In his own words, Bill is "a gay, troublemaking, retired chef from eastern North Carolina." Bill's kind of troublemaking is what the late John Lewis called *good trouble*.

discovering he was gay was the "best thing to ever happen" to him. He went on to say that his life was his luck. He described himself as lucky to have lived several lives, making lots of friends and memories along the way.

He spoke about traveling to Washington, DC, in May 1971 to protest against the Vietnam War, part of a series of protests that later became known as May Day. He and other protestors were tear-gassed, and the gas soaked into their clothes.

LEFT: Bill Smith adds "equestrian" to his CV, August 2021; BELOW: Mardi Gras beads drape the light fixture in Smith's living room.



With every move they made, the tear gas seemed to react again, making it stronger and stronger.

I asked him how he transitioned from being a self-proclaimed hippie to co-owning a music club as successful and beloved as Cat's Cradle. He leaned on his luck again. But he noted that being lucky did not make him immune to burn-out. This burnout led him to the kitchen at La Residence in Chapel Hill, where he began to cook at age twenty-seven, and then to Crook's Corner, which would be his professional home until he retired in 2019.

I asked him about his deep love for Mexico and Latin America, and he explained that's where most of his closest friends were from. They had met at work and formed friendships that transcended the kitchen. Before COVID, Bill would travel to Mexico once a year or more, often staying with his friends' relatives.

I kept asking, and he kept telling. Chile, by the time we looked up, it was time to go to a birthday party for his friend's daughter.

Sebastian worked with Bill at Crook's Corner for more than fifteen years. When we got to his home, it was beautifully decorated with Disney

Our story illustrates my core values as a storyteller and filmmaker: I center the person first and let the story follow. I've learned that being genuinely interested in folks and their lives establishes trust with them.

Frozen decor. His daughter, the birthday girl, was dressed as Elsa from the movie. On the television was a Mexican station that played ranchera music. It was loud, upbeat, and perfect for the celebration. We stepped outside as Bill was called to the grill, and I turned my lens to little Elsa. I snapped a few photos and filmed for a few moments, and we all went back into the house for our meal. It was some of the best Mexican food I had ever eaten. There were homemade salsas, their spice levels ranging from hot to extremely hot. Cuts of steak, pork, and chorizo came off the grill. Sebastian's wife placed a pan of homemade tortillas on the table as she served her rice and beans. Sebastian offered us food, drinks, and sweets until Bill and I were full as ticks and couldn't accept any more (and that was after I had seconds on the rice). After the meal, Sebastian wrapped his arms around Bill and began dancing, playfully kissing him on the head. Even as Bill jokingly shooed his friend away, I could see the true kinship between them.

The next morning, I asked Bill to ride his bike back and forth on a street with a fairly steep hill. After seeing him sweat, I felt kind of bad for how many times I asked, but he was down for getting the shot that we needed. When we wrapped for the day, I asked him if he was ready for the next day of filming—our third and last. He laughed nervously and said he was looking forward to it. We had planned three scenes that would push us both out of our comfort zones, but I wanted to get each of them on film for folks to understand how Bill became Bill.

When I arrived at his house the next morning, Bill had the ingredients for his Atlantic Beach Pie—saltine crackers, sweetened condensed milk, egg yolks, lemon juice, sugar, and butter—ready on the kitchen counter. Step by step, he talked me through how he made the pie and how a 2012 SFA dinner in his hometown of New Bern, North Carolina, unwittingly turned a simple dessert into a sensation. He baked the crust first, and it smelled like buttery heaven. Then, he poured in the filling and popped it back into the oven. Once

it was done, we let it cool as we hopped into the car to get to the Crook's Corner kitchen.

Bill retired as the chef at Crook's Corner in 2019, and the restaurant closed permanently in June 2021, but the women running the operations were still there sorting through paperwork and welcomed us in. There, we blew up balloons and batted them about as Bill danced to bachata music. Disco lights cascaded across his every move. In the 1970s, Bill had a short run as a chorus boy in an off-Broadway musical in New York, and I wanted him to step back into that time. My goal was to highlight the fact that his freedom and creativity didn't die out after New York. That spirit followed him into the kitchen at Crook's Corner, where we stood filming.

After a break for lunch, we packed my film gear in the car. Our destination was a horseback riding venue in north Raleigh called Dead Broke Farm. Whew, chile! The name—and the gravel road that led to the farm—had us on edge, but we had come too far to abandon our mission: to film Bill on a white stallion.

According to family legend, his great-grandmother's grandmother, Czarnia Inez Angell, was an abolitionist who rode through the streets of Philadelphia in 1858 on a white stallion drenched



in blood to protest Bleeding Kansas. He draws a connection between this piece of family lore and his own calling to social justice.

When we got out of the car, neither of us said anything, but I could tell we were both saying, *Oh, Lord* in our hearts. Bill's low-slung jeans made it difficult to mount the horse, and as he struggled in the August heat, there was a moment where I second-guessed my directorial decision. Getting the scene we wanted required two horses, two instructors, and a golf cart. The white stallion, for his part, was more interested in grazing than cooperating for the camera. But we did it. By the time Bill got off the horse, he was sweating through his shirt but happy, and my guilt dissipated. Yes, this was still dangerous and probably ridiculous, but we are our kind of people and those two realities make our worlds go 'round. We drove back to Chapel Hill and recorded our last interview and voiceovers. We had done so much that day, and neither of us had complained—at least not out loud. That night, we took a photo in Bill's kitchen to seal our friendship and the wrapping of our film. We were all smiles.

I'm telling you all of this in hopes that you'll see how a few days of genuinely connecting with a person for a film can transform into many life lessons and a pretty unimaginable friendship that Bill and I believe will last a lifetime. Our shared values and beliefs transcend our many differences. In short, we are our kind of people.

Learning about Bill's life and being welcomed into his colorful home, I felt reassured about my own path, living life to the fullest in my quirky and authentic way. I didn't know I needed that reminder until I spent time with Bill, who, at seventy-two, is fun, quirky, caring, and unapologetically himself. He reminded me how much I appreciate folks who know that life isn't about the opinions of others. I like to call it being free. And when I see free people, I call them "my kind of people."

Our story illustrates my core values as a storyteller and filmmaker: I center the person first and let the story follow. I've learned that being

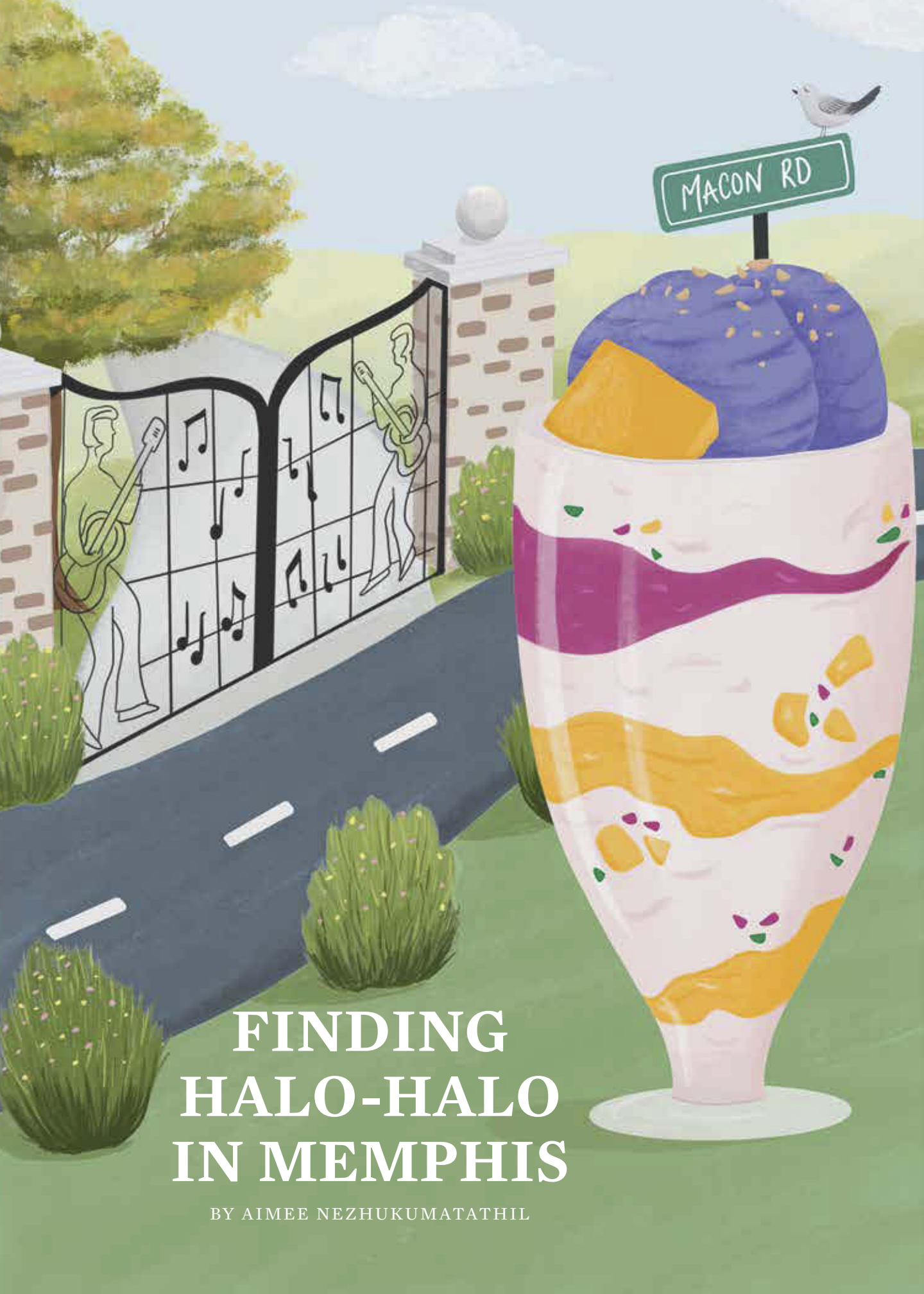


ABOVE: Bill Smith strikes a pose in the Crook's Corner kitchen; LEFT: Newly minted besties Smith and Love

genuinely interested in folks and their lives establishes trust with them. In turn, I'm motivated to uphold that trust by any means necessary. Because I truly care about the person and not just my film, I make the process collaborative and warm. I look at filmmaking as a way to capture the spirit of a person and their legacy. It was that trust that got Bill on a horse, that allowed him to dance uninhibited while I filmed. His belief and commitment to me and the film motivated me to honor him in the best way I could as he took home his 2021 Craig Claiborne Lifetime Achievement Award from the Fall Symposium. Storytelling is much more to me than beautiful images, powerful words, and dynamic sound. My mission is to always make you feel it in your soul and feel it in your chest. After all, that's how we know that we are our kind of people. 🍷

Zaire Love, a graduate of the MFA program in documentary expression at the University of Mississippi, is SFA's Pihakis Documentary Filmmaker. She is currently working on SLICE, a short doc about Memphis' Black swim culture, which was awarded a grant through a collaboration with IF/THEN and HULU.

Visit southernfoodways.org to watch *Look After*, Zaire Love's film about Bill Smith.



FINDING HALO-HALO IN MEMPHIS

BY AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL

THE DOUBLE-DOUBLE ON YOUR LIPS WHEN YOU SAY IT promises you will never be in a bad mood when you order. I miss my mom so I head to Memphis—

home of her favorite singer—whose motto, Taking Care of Business, she learned soon after she arrived in this country. Those

wrought iron gates, custom inlaid with guitars and musical notes meant to signal a superstar. We've since learned his favorite food

from his mama was nothing fancy—bananas, bread, and peanut butter—even when he became a millionaire. So of course I brake when I spy

a picture of my mom's favorite dessert on Macon Road, drag my whole family inside for some ice cold joy first concocted

on the other side of the planet. Maybe because in Tagalog, halo halo means *mix-mix*, I carry a special fondness for it because my mom married a man

from India who also loved Elvis, even shaped his sideburns like his, so I am mix-mix too. And because I married the sweetest white man from Kansas, our boys

are *mix-mix, mix-mix!* You never know what you are going to discover and when. Each spoonful promises a richness of delights: shaved ice, nata de coco, diced jackfruit, sweet beans,

sweet corn. The signature pop of purple from ube ice cream shouts *Yes*, and if you're lucky, they'll put leche flan on top. Go ahead, mix it all up: mix-mix. Once when we visited a frozen Niagara Falls

in the middle of an ice storm, a man told me he wanted to live with me forever after knowing me just weeks. How are you so sure, I asked him, how do you know so *soon*? And the man who is now—

you guessed correct—my husband, simply said, I just do. I had no idea what our cups would hold, what our future would be. But I knew it would be sweet. 🍷

Aimee Nezhukumatathil is the author of World of Wonders, Barnes and Noble's 2020 Book of the Year, and four books of poetry. She is a professor of English and creative writing in the University of Mississippi's MFA program.

Disha Sharma

THRESH & HOLD

BY MARLANDA DEKINE

Flooding in now, I rest
so I can harvest new worlds,
a ready net so still.

Without rest, I cannot hear
my Grandma Lizzie and my Grandma Thelma. Without rest,
I cannot hear my Aunt Carolyn composing for her Lord.
I cannot hear my Aunt Angie cussin'
angels while guiding me across memoried waters.

I am learning what *real* power is.

A year ago, I wouldn't have
felt our bright red, black, green chords of spirit calling.
Women in my family have dropped dead one day
and the family kept right on working.

I rest like I have tomorrows
growing on a vine outside. I rest
like a horned owl.

My ancestors turned into machines
by *rice is booming in Georgetown, sale extravaganza*.
I rest beneath my Grandma Lizzie's oil-dressed magnolia
painted white and green at the trunk. I risk surrender to her dark
sashay.

West Africa caught my granddaddy Silas by the brain.

Here's a cosmos I picked
from his field of grasses. Women in my family
have dropped dead one day, purple-gowned
and waiting for us on the next. 🐦

Marlanda Dekine is a poet and author obsessed with ancestry, memory, and the process of staying within one's own body. Their poems have been published or are forthcoming in the Poetry Out Loud Anthology, POETRY Magazine, Emergence Magazine, Southern Humanities Review, and Oxford American. This poem appears in their collection Thresh & Hold, forthcoming from Hub City Press on March 29, 2022.



Lindsey Bailey



TEACH A MAN TO FISH

by
KAYLA
STEWART

Photos by
ETHAN PAYNE

CAPTAIN FRED AND THE POWER OF WATER

Captain Frederick Douglas McBride IV

is probably the only Black commercial fisherman who works along the Texas Gulf Coast. If you know about another one, please tell me. I'd love to meet him, too. ¶ Captain Fred is one of more than half a million Black people in Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city. If you know my hometown, and Captain Fred's, you know about the imprint of Black people on our city. You'll see that imprint in the jazz shows that fill up clubs downtown, in the Creole and Cajun seafood joints that line the city's strip malls, and in the soul food restaurants that bring you close to the feeling of eating in your aunt's kitchen. What you may not know is that Black folks govern our city, from school boards to our mayor. This legacy stretches back through Houston's history—the city simply wouldn't be what it is without generations of Black residents leaving their mark.

Today, Captain Fred is one of a community of Black Houstonians shaping what the city eats. And in the years to come, his vision is to cultivate the next generation of men and women who catch our fish.

Captain Fred remembers learning to fish at age four, alongside his brother, Jesse. Their grandfather would take the boys out to the 61st Street Fishing Pier on Galveston Bay, about an hour's drive from their home. Young Fred's first catch was a piggy perch.

From the beginning, fishing with his grandfather shifted something in Fred's soul. The water felt like a natural home, and as he cast he imagined the world that existed beneath the surface. As he grew up and spent more time on the Bay, he learned about discipline, about the environment, and about the man he wanted to become. Years would pass before he would dream of calling this love his profession.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 35,000 Americans work as commercial fishermen and -women. Of those, we don't know how many are Black. But we do know they are few. In 2017, commercial fishermen harvested almost 10 billion pounds of seafood from U.S. waters, realizing some five billion dollars in profit. Today, the commercial fishing industry is overwhelmingly white. But this was not always a white vocation.

I asked Captain Fred why he believed he was the only Black fisherman in the region. Thoughtfully he paused, rummaged through his mind, and then looked directly at me. He told me, "I believe I'm the only Black one because of the access, and because of the fact that people don't know that this opportunity exists." For him, learning how to fish as a child, and later learning to navigate the complicated (and expensive) roads to boat ownership and business ownership, allowed him to become who he is today. Like all of us, his path was shaped by environments both built and natural, and by the people who moved through those environments with him. But Fred acknowledges that his story is not common for many people who look like him.

Captain Fred's maternal grandfather, Jesse Lundy, worked as a sharecropper in Bailey's Prairie, south of Houston. He told his grandsons harrowing stories about long, hot days, his hands pricked from cotton bolls. Lundy was able to leave the fields and went to college at Houston College for

BLACK FISHERMEN HELPED SHAPE AND DEFINE FISHING CULTURE IN THE SOUTH, YET THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS ARE RARELY ACKNOWLEDGED. STILL, THEIR WORK IS EVIDENT IN OUR REGIONAL CUISINE.

Negroes (now Texas Southern University). He earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree and eventually became a school principal. His career as an educator helped him achieve the financial stability that allowed for activities outside of work. He could afford to fish recreationally, and it became his great love.

Fred's mother, Jessica McBride, didn't fish, but she became an educator like her father, and she shared her family's other great passion—music. Mrs. McBride directed the band at B.C. Elmore Middle School in Houston for twenty-seven years. For the McBride family, music and fishing have long intersected. For at least the last three generations, both have provided joy, a sense of freedom,

and at times a source of income.

When Jesse Lundy died, Fred was thirteen years old and his brother was eleven. His last words to his grandsons were "I love you boys," and "Now remember, we're going fishing on Saturday." Lundy didn't make it to that next fishing trip, but the McBride brothers' time on the water would continue.

Jessica McBride could've easily allowed the hobby to drift away, but she saw how integral fishing had become to the boys' lives. Early on weekend mornings, they'd leave their home in Houston to fish along Galveston Bay while their mother would wait in the car, reading or taking a nap.

Both Fred and his brother studied for careers in music education. Jesse, a jazz pianist, teaches in the Black American Music program at Tulane University. He often comes back home to fish. A classically trained musician, Fred played weddings as part of a string quartet during graduate school. The money from those gigs supported his fishing habit. Fred taught music in downtown Houston for eighteen years, primarily at MacGregor Elementary School.

Though Fred has left the school district to fish full-time, I met him one rainy afternoon in the classroom where he used to teach his young students about classical composers, jazz artists, and reading and playing music. He told me how he views fishing, too, through the lens of education. He wants other Black people, especially youth, to

know that fishing can be a hobby. Or it can be a career. Black knowledge is at the root of his quest.

WHILE CAPTAIN FRED HAS CARVED OUT an unusual niche for himself as a Black Texan commercial fisherman, his journey points to universal truths about the Black experience in the American South. And that story, of course, goes back to the West African coast.

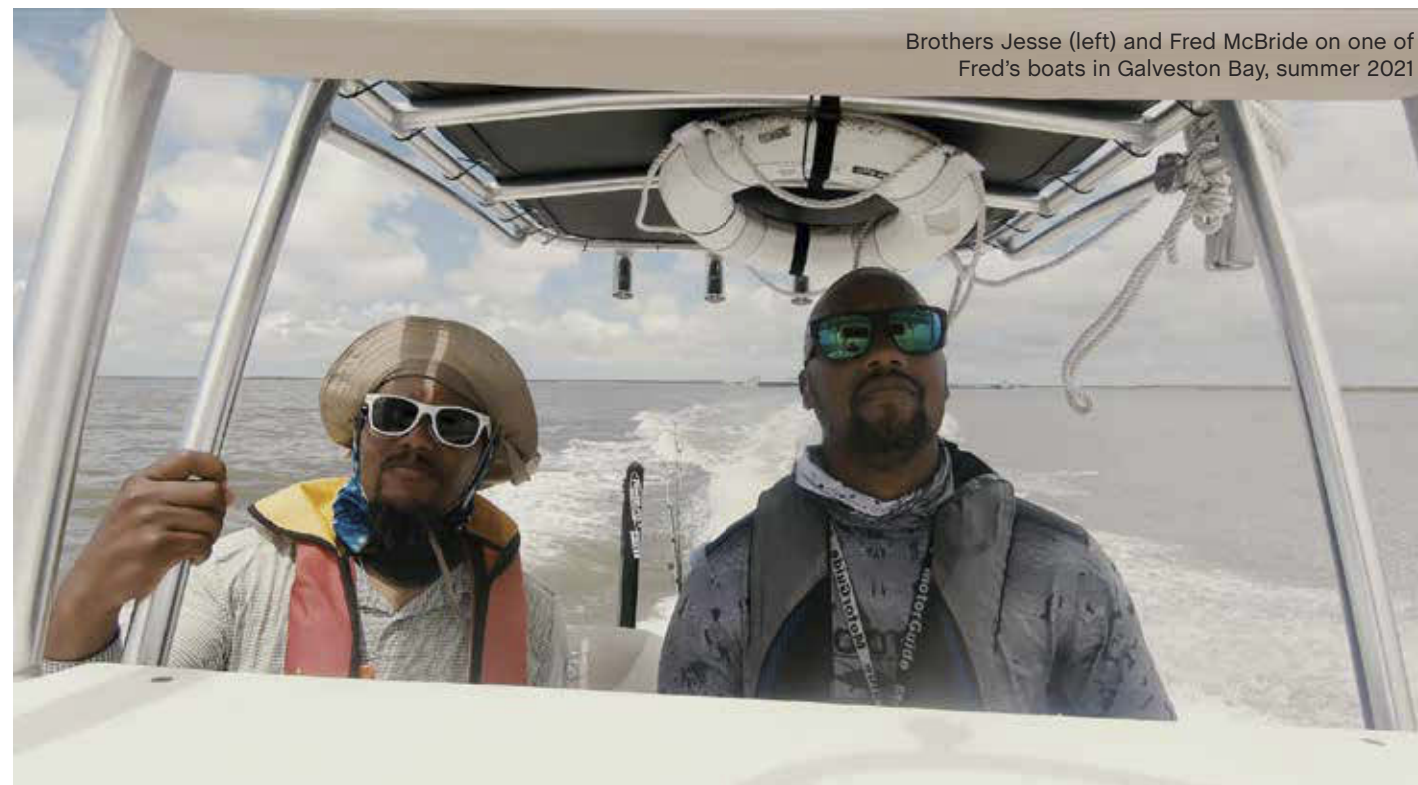
Centuries ago, along Ghana's Gold Coast, fishermen were revered. European voyagers recognized the skills of the Fanti and Mina of the Gold Coast and the Kru of what is now Liberia. Harvard researcher Emmanuel Akyeampong found that European ship captains regularly recruited Mina and Kru fishermen to work canoes and load and offload goods. The ingenuity of Black fishermen reportedly baffled many of the newly arrived Europeans.

Male Akro was one such fisherman. Recalled in Teshi and Labadi accounts, he introduced several new kinds of nets to the Ga people during the nineteenth century, including the *tengiraf*, a bottom net that "stretched along the coast in the sea as the telegraph wires on the land," and could catch an astounding number of fish. Other Africans, particularly the Fanti, introduced Europeans to their particular styles of nets and canoe-like boats.

Many Africans enslaved in the South originated from that coast. While the specifics have mostly been lost to history, we do know that Africans were much more likely than English colonizers to have hunting and fishing experience. During the plantation period, African Americans were virtually the only marine fishermen.

In a case study focused on coastal Georgia, researcher Ben G. Blount found that slave owners encouraged enslaved people to fish to supplement their food supplies. Using dugout canoes and later, wooden boats, enslaved people on the Georgia Sea Islands obtained half of their meat from fishing. Post-enslavement, small-scale fishing provided an economic opportunity for Blacks. Whether hauling in a cast net full of fish or pulling a waterlogged crab trap, this was physically demanding work. But it was a source of income, and of independence.

Into the twentieth century, Black Americans dominated the oyster, shrimp, and blue crab industries in South Carolina and Georgia. They



Brothers Jesse (left) and Fred McBride on one of Fred's boats in Galveston Bay, summer 2021

profited from fish and other seafood along the Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana. But as national demand for seafood increased, newly arrived European immigrants began to take an interest in the industry. They brought in larger, more expensive boats and equipment, taking advantage of costly new technology. They opened canneries to process their catch on a larger scale. Their practices tended to be less sustainable, often leading to overfishing and environmental degradation. By and large, Black commercial fisherman could no longer afford to compete, often because they lacked access to the bank loans necessary to finance a commercial boat with up-to-date equipment. Some went to work for larger operations, earning wages instead of the profits of ownership. One study found that, as of 1999, only five Black shrimpers on the Georgia coast owned and operated their own boats.

Black fishermen helped shape and define fishing culture in the South, yet their contributions are rarely acknowledged. Today, few have access to the financial capital necessary to continue this legacy. Still, their work is evident in our regional cuisine. Shrimp and grits was born of enslaved Africans augmenting their rations with shrimp they caught themselves. Frogmore Stew, full of heavily seasoned shrimp and crabs, takes its name from the Gullah-Geechee community on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, where it likely originated.

Today, along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, many Gullah-Geechee people work to maintain the fishing traditions of their communities. They work in harvesting, cast-net making, and boat-building; and they continue to catch shad, crabs, oysters, shrimp, and more. Queen Quet, a conservationist and Chieftess of the Gullah-Geechee nation, has participated in oyster replanting efforts across the Sea Islands. The community does this work in spite of external challenges like gentrification and climate change.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BLACK AMERICANS and the water has been fraught since the beginning of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. A brutal, horrific journey across the Atlantic Ocean that included drownings and suicides marked a new relationship to the water.

Water became racialized in the United States. In the Jim Crow South, Black Americans were blocked from public beaches and pools. Later,

the desegregation of public swimming spaces was sometimes marked by violence. Other times, venues were closed altogether.

In 1959, Gilbert R. Mason Sr. began leading a series of “wade-ins” on the beach in Biloxi, Mississippi, facing down assault and arrest. During one wade-in in 1960, a white mob attacked 125 Black men, women, and children as police officers watched.

In 1964, civil rights activists orchestrated by Martin Luther King Jr. conducted a swim-in at the Monson Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Florida. Black protestors, disgusted with ongoing segregation, jumped into the hotel’s whites-only pool. The motel’s owner, James Brock, retaliated by pouring acid in the water.

Research shows that the relationship between Black Americans and the water is still fraught. In 2010, a USA Swimming survey found that 70 percent of Black children had low or no swimming ability. Yet to work on the water, it’s imperative to know how to swim.

Today, groups like Brown Folks Fishing, Ebony Anglers, and the International Federation of Black Bass Anglers work as a corrective to some of the more traumatic aspects of Black history with the water. They use recreational fishing as a tool to repair the fraught relationship between Black Americans and the water.

For Captain Fred, recreational fishing tournaments were the bridge between fishing as a hobby and fishing as a business. In the mid-2000s, he placed fourth in the Gulf Coast Trout Masters and competed successfully in redfish tournaments, too. But his wife was concerned. He was spending a lot of money to enter competitions, but he wasn’t bringing anything in. That’s when he got the idea for Captain Fred’s Seafood. Hoping to leave a legacy for his son and to make a career out of a lifelong love, Captain Fred began to invest in commercial fishing.

The investments are *big*. For fishermen like Captain Fred, one boat isn’t enough. Today he owns three, including a twenty-five-foot NauticStar. It’s a rod-and-reel trot line fishing boat that’s good for sheepshead and black drum, Fred’s main catches. A boat like this can cost as much as \$80,000. And that is for a bay boat. An offshore boat—required to fish in deep waters—can cost \$1,000,000 if purchased new. Add to that another \$10,000 to \$15,000 in equipment—and that’s on the low end. And you’re legally required to have



Fred McBride plays his viola in the classroom where he used to teach at MacGregor Elementary School in Houston, TX.

a commercial fishing license. A Texas Finfish Permit will run you \$25,000 to \$30,000. We’re close to \$300,000 now.

Access to money is a burden all commercial fishermen shoulder. But Black fishermen often face higher barriers, grounded in historic and contemporary restrictions of capital. They also confront racism and ignorance, on and off the water.

Captain Fred tells a story about a white fisherman who suggested to him that having such a nice boat meant that he was a drug dealer. Another time, he had a white mechanic working on his boat. A white fisherman whose boat was docked nearby spoke to the mechanic and refused to acknowledge Fred, assuming the white man must be the boat’s owner. These incidents may seem slight, but when small aggressions accumulate, they feel like something big.

In the world of farming and agriculture, we’ve seen a huge resurgence of Black youth returning to the farmlands many of their ancestors left. From the 1950s onward, there was a dispossession of 98 percent of Black-owned land in America. Yet in recent years, many Black youth, knowledgeable to the legacy of farming pre-enslavement, have taken up farming. In doing so, they seek to heal the trauma of slavery and build ethical connections between Black communities and the land. Could it be that fishing has a place in this movement? Captain Fred hopes so. After all, as he sees it,

the barriers to becoming a Black commercial fisherman are rooted in many of the same challenges—inequality, lack of access to capital, and lack of knowledge.

For Captain Fred, these challenges pale in comparison to the love he feels for the water. Over the last decade, he’s built a successful business largely catching sheepshead for acclaimed Houston chefs. Chris Williams of Lucille’s, Chris Shepherd of Underbelly Hospitality, and Jonny Rhodes of Broham Fine Soul Food and Groceries are all customers.

Captain Fred wants his business to provide opportunities for commercial fishermen who look like him, to help them open their own businesses and find peace along the water, just like his grandfather taught him. The effort is gaining strength.

Captain Fred has hopes to take kids out on his boat, similar to what his grandfather did with him. He plans to kick mentorship programs into gear in the coming years. Next year, Captain Fred plans to return to the school building. This time, not as a music teacher, but as a club leader, to build fishing clubs throughout the city. These clubs will teach fishing, lead field trips on the water, and offer true exposure to a new environment.

Fred McBride’s life demonstrates the power of the water. And of Black people working the water. His story raises questions about who has access to the water and who profits from it. Stay tuned as he writes the answers. ♡

Kayla Stewart is an independent food and travel writer with roots in Houston, Texas. She is the cowriter, with Emily Meggett, of Gullah Geechee Home Cooking: Recipes from the Matriarch of Edisto Island, forthcoming from Abrams in April 2022. She first reported on Captain Fred McBride for Life & Thyme in spring 2021.



MORE THAN *Enough*

The promise and challenge
of today's Southern cities

by JOHN SIMPKINS

Illustrations by DELPHINE LEE

A CITY BOY FOUND HIMSELF IN THE COUNTRY.

“We’d be walking on these dark country roads at night,” he said, “and all of a sudden this music would seem to come out of nowhere, out of them spooky-looking trees that everybody said ghosts lived in. [...] That *kind* of sound in music, that blues, church, back-road funk kind of thing, that southern, midwestern, rural sound and rhythm. I think it started getting into my blood on them spook-filled Arkansas back-roads after dark when the owls came out hooting.” Sound marked the place. And the place marked Miles Davis. Got into his blood so bad that he left his comfortable, bougie East St. Louis life for New York City. He was ostensibly going to study at Julliard, but he really was on a quest to find another creation of back-road funk: Yardbird, a fellow Midwesterner, with that Bama-sounding nickname that would be shortened to just Bird. Charlie “Bird” Parker had elevated “that *kind* of sound.” And Miles set about chasing that high, too. What the ghost-filled trees of the country first revealed, The City would polish, burnishing Miles’ ethereal instrumental voice into legend.

That’s what The City can do. That’s what it has done since it first came to be. The City has always been the ultimate destination. Miles might have *found* himself in the country, but he *became* himself in The City. Back then, it was New York. Or Chicago. Maybe Philadelphia. Washington, DC. Each one was imperfect, possessing its own geographic peril, a special terroir of racism that served as a civic identifier. Still, cities were places of possibility. You could get as high as you wanted, as long as you didn’t get too close, a kind of tacit separation agreement, an American apartheid intended to delineate appropriate spheres of racial activity. Nevertheless, opportunity was opportunity. Better to play a club on Lenox Avenue or U Street than some funky-ass backwater juke joint.

As it was with Miles and his music, so it is with Rodney and his food. Rodney Scott—the rarely identified species known as James Beard Award-winning pitmaster—found himself in the drudgery of hog-tending that transformed into a drug. From the rhythm of the dripping fat to the separation of meat from skin, he found himself—and perhaps his purpose—in the wood, the wire frame for the flayed body, and his own “*kind* of sound” in Hemingway, South Carolina, a place in the middle of nowhere. But to Rodney, it was in the

middle of everywhere. Watching airplane contrails overhead, perhaps he dreamed of getting out someday.

He had to go to The City to *become* himself. Or at least to find another version of himself. While Miles left St. Louis for New York, Rodney took his talents from Hemingway to Charleston. And Birmingham. And Atlanta. His destinations are popular these days. Others like him are making the journey to a new version of The City in search of food and beverage fame. Members of the Black professional class, specifically, are reversing the Great Migration and leaving New York, Chicago, and Philly in the hopes of becoming themselves in places like Greenville, South Carolina; Nashville, Tennessee; and Charlotte, North Carolina. One-eyed outsiders enter as kings in The City of the Blind South, where low wages, low or no taxes, and poor education make for easy pickings. The places where, once, you could get as close as you wanted as long as you didn’t get too high, have now become modern repositories of hope. New places of possibility.

For some, these possibilities aren’t new. Greenwood Avenue in Tulsa, Farish Street in Jackson, Morris Street in Charleston, and Parrish Street in Durham have long nurtured their share of dreams.

Hat shops, juke joints, banks, restaurants. FUBU before FUBU. “Black Main Streets” displaying the hidden half of W.E.B. Du Bois’ double consciousness. Here, Black people could just *be*. They could dress up, get to’ down, and live in every shade along the spectrum of sacred to profane.

Those places no longer exist as they were. They’ve been cleaned up, sanitized to protect the sanity—and safety—of some. To retain too much of what they were would only put into sharper relief what they are not. And to explain why they no longer are what they once were requires passage to dark places, occupying a sharp edge of truth on which we prefer not to exist. The behavior that led to the extermination of Black Main Street is so inhumane that no one would claim to have done it or even to have been related to people who would have done it. But somebody must have spit on those students integrating the school. Somebody must have shouted, “Nigger, go home” to the young, trained stoics who were just looking for opportunity. Somebody must have decided that a highway needed to go in that precise location. And those Somebodies are not all dead. In fact, some are still town fathers, community

leaders, shapers of our political, social, cultural, and built environments.

Miles Davis talked about ghosts in the country, but there are just as many in The City. The absence of community is felt in urban areas across the country, but intensely so in The Southern City. What was this neighborhood before the apartment building went up? Who attended classes in this old school building, now a coworking space for start-ups? Urban space holds secrets it won’t tell. The ghosts remain among us, silently reminding us of their presence. Tapping us on the shoulder to say that they were once here.

Modern ruins don’t lie buried in the dust of centuries. They sit, uneasily—perhaps even unbelievably—in the minds of aunties and uncles, granddaddies and Big Mamas.

Did they really do that to that boy?

She just left town and never came back.

THE COLD SHADOWS IN THE SOUTHERN City have become the Southern version of a similar phenomenon in the American West, where for some, spending only a few minutes in the expansive vistas only highlights the fact that someone else once roamed the land. Other than the occasional bastardized Native American name or

What was this neighborhood before the apartment building went up? *Who attended classes in this old school building, now a coworking space for start-ups?* Urban space holds secrets it won’t tell.

faux-symbolic gesture, the stewards of the land, the people who worked to maintain the stunning physical beauty of the place, are ignored, erased, best forgotten. Strolling along the streets of downtown Greenville, South Carolina, one gets a similar feeling. The river wasn’t always a focal point. Like the Lowcountry marshland, it once did work. People didn’t hike in the mountains. They hid in them. Lived in them. Built stills in them before moonshine was available downtown. The physical evidence of historical memory—the statues, street names, and other features of the built environment—only tell a partial story. Main Street statues celebrate the sons of Greenville, all white. The only statues of Black people portray two solemn, nameless students, one female and one male, silently asking for equality. Which surely was given to them...right? Meanwhile, just a few steps away from the serious Negroes, visitors intently search

for darling small brass mice carefully hidden along the sidewalk. Main Street has more sculptures of mice than statues of Black people.

While the physical past is papered over, the pull of The City persists. Whether people are coming from the country or the stunted promise of the North, Southern cities have become a chance for reinvention, beginning a new life at a fraction of the costs associated with remaining in Harlem or Chicago or DC or anywhere else where freedom turned out to be freedom to be put in a cage.

For others, it’s a chance to reclaim a legacy, to be rooted in the soil your people once farmed. To go back down there and show those backward-ass crackers that we *been* knowing a thing or two, from a past when we designed and dug the rice canals to a present in which we chart new courses in the worlds of food, culture,



business, and beyond. So the migrants travel, to Atlanta, to Charleston, to Durham, to the opportunity to become themselves.

Parents, siblings, and cousins gleefully greet the returned exiles. The landscape tells a different story. Just like those mice. The physical space still serves as a reminder that you can get close, as long as you don't get too high. It's sliced, diced, and sanitized for sanity in ways both subtle and not so much. In some neighborhoods, you can get thrown in jail for drinking with your boys on the corner or in front of the local spot. In another part of the City, they close off the streets, bring in food trucks, and sell tickets for craft brews and artisanal brown liquor. White girl wasted is cute. Hood drunk might cause you to catch a case. The dope that smart-ass white frat boys used to buy from cats on the corner is now being sold to those same cats on the corner by smart-ass white frat boys. Cannabis entrepreneurs are far more respectable than dope slingers. The times, they are a-changing.

Any newcomer or returnee to the modern urban South is immediately confronted by the Principle of Enough. To be clear, this idea is at work across the country, but like so many things, the Southern flavor is piquant, with pig-meat depth that goes back to 1619. According to the Principle of Enough, all anyone really needs to enjoy life is enough of the things that matter.

Where the notion runs aground, however, is that different people have different notions of

heights of thriving and opportunity. Folk living below the poverty line would do more than aspire to be poor if enough meant a chance to do meaningful work that paid a decent wage. A job that fostered dignity. But the Principle of Enough currently says that would be too much. For them.

Instead, the Principle of Enough creates the gaps in wages, health care, education, and reality that persist in Southern cities. The dazzling public amenities—rails-to-trails conversions, urban reclamation projects—end just before they reach the areas where they're really needed. The built environment now does the work of the color line. Going downtown to see and be seen is great until it becomes clear that some things aren't meant for you. Durham Central Park is a place where you can spend time and you don't have to spend a dime. And that's a rarity among a lot of the spaces we've created for ourselves. Whether we're talking about bars, coffee shops, or restaurants, often the expectation is, you pay for the privilege of using the space. And if you pay for the privilege of using the space, it also means that people who can't afford that opportunity aren't going to show up. Exclusionary signs are no longer necessary, only requirements of payment by credit card, inaccessibility by public transit, and prices that assume more than even a \$15-an-hour wage. You know, enough.

One of the problems of the Principle of Enough is that it presumes that opportunity is equally accessible in The City. Talent is indeed equally

In some neighborhoods, you can get thrown in jail for drinking with your boys on the corner or in front of the local spot. In another part of The City, they close off the streets, bring in food trucks, and sell tickets for craft brews and artisanal brown liquor.

what is enough. When some can determine what should be enough for others, the principle becomes systemically corrosive.

Like when some people get to determine what constitutes enough affordable housing. Or enough public transportation. Or enough grocery stores or medical clinics. If "enough" meant as much as others have, then the Principle of Enough might see us through. Indeed, it might send us to higher

distributed throughout the population. Opportunity is not. Much that is new and shiny in revitalized urban cores results from legacy developers and construction companies, many family-owned, and some tracing their origins back to the post-WWII boom in America, when government subsidies made economic and educational mobility a reality for so many white Americans. The resulting accumulation of wealth



and its subsequent generational transfer have caused "enough" for some to be measured in multiple homes, regular new car purchases, frequent vacations, and college football season tickets passed down from parents to children to grandchildren. For others, it's endless labor just to capture the residue of enough: a place to live, food to eat, clothes, maybe a way to get around. As then-President George W. Bush famously said to a divorced mother of three, "You work three jobs? Uniquely American, isn't it? I mean, that is fantastic that you're doing that." Fantastic.

The Principle of Enough also has a close cousin: The Principle of Talent. According to the Principle of Talent, people in America rise to the level of their ability. Work hard, play by the rules, and you can go as far as your gifts will carry you. It's American Dream stuff, the promise that draws people from all over the world to come to this country. A different country. One in which all skills will be rewarded. The Principle of Talent is the basis of the shadow truth of meritocracy that seems like—because it is—too neat an explanation of the secret to American success.

Just ask the people who built Black Wall Street in Tulsa, or any other center of commerce, entertainment, artistry, and learning for Black people in segregated America. They had talent, as did others who simply lacked the opportunity to express that talent. Systemic barriers, identified explicitly in the Kerner Commission Report of 1968, add an extra set of often insurmountable obstacles to the expression of Black talent. Like any effective barrier, those constraining talent remain largely in place today. Raj Chetty, a Harvard economist who studies social mobility, has described this phenomenon as "lost Einsteins." What the data show is that we have missed out on the talents of millions of Americans, just because they never had enough.

"American society proclaims the worth of every human being...Yet, at the same time, our institutions say 'find a job or go hungry,' 'succeed or suffer.' They prod us to get ahead of our neighbors economically after telling us to stay in line socially. They award prizes that allow the big winners to feed their pets better than the losers can feed their children." The words of economist

Arthur Okun continue to ring true in the contemporary description of the The City, and, by extension, in the ongoing project of building a market-economy-based representative democracy.

The City values efficiency, not equity. As a result, agency—the right to choose—only belongs to those who determine what is enough for themselves and others and who have the platform to have their talent recognized and nurtured. Control over the direction of your life is based on where you sit. The winners can decide if they’ll take the day off, if they’ll have that extra glass of wine, if investing in cannabis is a smart strategy to diversify their portfolio. The losers are just not smart enough to make those decisions for themselves. Besides, with all this welfare, don’t they get enough already?

Implicit in the Dream of America is that the individual is in control. Hard work is the magic key to unlock the wealth of this nation of gold. So now people head to The City in the South, prospecting for a bigger future than their present. A few flecks show up, but only for those who enter with the armor of money, education, and good health. For the undereducated and poorly paid, The City is just another place where invisible hands shape lives over which individuals have little control. Four of the top five cities with the largest racial pay disparities—Jackson, Baton Rouge, Charleston, and Augusta—are in the South. A woman in Louisiana makes about 68 cents for every dollar paid to men. Alabama and Mississippi aren’t much better. Charlotte notoriously ranked last among major American cities in Chetty’s study examining life prospects for poor children. A poor child in Charlotte only has a 4.4 percent chance of moving into the top 20 percent of income earners. No matter how hard she works.

Frederick Douglass damned America for being “false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly bind[ing] herself to be false to the future.” A century and a half later, the Principle of Enough and the Principle of Talent stand as bulwarks of that falsehood. A shim-sham of shifting goalposts, unwritten rules, and raw power have conspired to create two false choices for what The City can be: one, a return to the days of Black excellence,

but only in cordoned-off areas; or the other, a post-segregation faux paradise built on the lie that the only Black people capable of achieving success are the few who’ve been let in the door. Even DuBois got that part wrong. Talent resides in more than 10 percent of Black bodies. Neither of these choices is acceptable.

Douglass’ condemnation should be taken up as a challenge, especially in the creation or reinvention of new urban spaces in the South. What would it look like for the South to be true to her past, true to her present, and to solemnly bind herself to be true to her future? Y’all might not be ready for that. But it’s time.

The Southern City can be a place of true becoming, but only through acknowledging what built it and who built it. So many of the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts—and indeed so much of the food on our plates—comes from people who have always had talent. They ingeniously stretched what wasn’t enough to magical sufficiency. And they are still there, ghosts in plain sight miraculously capable of being embodied, truly seen for perhaps the first time. In downtown Durham, where I now live, there is a mural of the twentieth-century activist, lawyer, and Episcopal priest Pauli Murray, who spent her formative years in the city. The mural bears her words, “True Community is based upon equality, mutuality, and reciprocity. It affirms the richness of individual diversity as well as the common human ties that bind us together.” In True Community, we become ourselves. Together.

“Every ghetto, every city, and suburban place I’ve been, make me recall my days in the New Jerusalem.” The sanitized, soulless spaces now called The City cry out for the beauty, meaning, and truth that Lauryn Hill sang about. A Thriving South means thriving cities. Thriving cities are equitable cities. Thinking differently about what is enough is one place to start. Seeing talent rather than ghosts is another. Miles Davis found himself in The City by finding music in the spaces between the notes. Sound marked the space. Rodney Scott became himself in The City, bringing the barbecue pit downtown. The now-empty, once-thriving spaces of The City may well be our greatest opportunity to feed our body and soul. ♡

John Simpkins is the president and chief executive officer of MDC, a Durham, North Carolina-based nonprofit that equips Southern leaders, institutions, and communities to improve economic mobility and advance equity. He presented this piece at the 2021 Southern Foodways Alliance Fall Symposium.



WE DANCE

Spin. Rise. Hold. Together.

BY **B. BRIAN FOSTER** PHOTOS BY *Ethan Payne*

WE DANCE IS A LOVE STORY, DECONSTRUCTED. Bridging the genres of ethnopoetry and as-told-to biography, the piece follows Tanya Wideman-Davis and her partner Thaddeus Davis—both professional dancers—as they make a shared life from their love of each other and as they yearn to live it as lively and lightly as they move. The Wideman Davis Dance story is also a food story, as so much of their love was crystallized while searching for, preparing, eating, not liking, loving, turning away from, and remembering this dish or that dessert. A pound cake. A sweet potato pie. A savory dinner with salmon and rice.



Margean Williams, grandmother of Tanya Wideman-Davis

Many of the words you read belong to Tanya and Thaddeus (or their family members). They were recorded over several conversations spanning about two months in the summer of 2021. The words that do not belong to Tanya and Thaddeus are sampled from and inspired by Black art makers like Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Zandria Robinson, and Lorna Simpson. In this way, *We Dance* is also a meditation on the immensity of Black culture and the places, histories, memories, moves, and musics that make Black life.

In food preparation, “deconstruction” is a method wherein some whole is broken down into its component parts, and those component parts are presented as their own, self-contained dish. *We Dance* moves like that. Chapter one tells the singular story of Tanya Wideman-Davis, from a Black girl who spent her days rehearsing and rehearsing and rehearsing in Chicago to a Black woman spinning and spinning and spinning around the world. Chapter two tells the singular story of Thaddeus Davis, of his roots in Montgomery, Alabama, of his ceaseless desire to rise to meet opportunities at Tuskegee and Butler University, of his family and his father, of the point where his path crossed Tanya’s. That is where chapter three comes in: It is the collective Wideman Davis Dance story, the whole that the singular parts make when they come together. How Tanya and Thaddeus have learned to bend their bodies (and lives). How they hold each other. How they are so often moving in two ways at once, both up toward their dreams and back to their memories. How they have loved, laughed, and experienced so much together. How they dance.

How do you read this? Chapter one is written from Tanya’s perspective. Chapter two is written from Thaddeus’ perspective. Chapter three brings their voices together and is rendered here in different type treatment to make it easier to follow. The Roman text is Thaddeus, the Italic text is Tanya, and the bold text represents their combined voices.

I. Spin

From
West—of no return
South—of now and ever
East—of freedom and the Mississippi

I remember the two-flat red brick on North Lotus in Chicago, its front yard for staying, its backyard for growing, its kitchen for my granny, and my granny for me. I remember watching.

Her dance, from South and Mississippi to North and factory line, I’ll never forget. Her spin, from countertop to stove, a time machine. I watched. Her hands wash sweet potatoes from the country, keep a pistol in her purse for the city, hold me for now and ever.

On Saturdays, her hands would touch, lift, and place her best—3 cups of flour that I helped sift, 6 eggs, 1 pound of butter, 2 cups of sugar, a spoonful of pure vanilla—into her best, big bowl, and—

Spin.

Then, Wait. Butter will become soft, eggs will become warm, Granny does not have to become. She is: elegant woman, soft glitz, something precious around her neck and golden around her feet, her body wrapped in rainbows, her walk, a switch that would make the world stop and spin, backwards.

Or, pour into something big enough to hold—a cup, a drawer, a sidewalk on the West Side, a Bundt pan—and bake.

Then wait and watch, but know, like me, before I was tall enough to see Granny’s tabletop, I dreamed enough to move West and South—to dance—underneath,

to tell her, “I will move North and East to dance,” underneath the lights of many worlds.

I was 8. She was afraid. Her life was a mixture of one kind, her warmth from suns, of one kind.

I was dreaming of others,

Of something round and deep-brown or middle-brown or high-brown—and bright, and soft, like her but other.

To dance like her—firm and elegant—Black Girl spinning around her Black castle—the Arie Crown Theater—planted at the edge of a Chocolate City—

not waiting, but watching—something both still and vast, an ocean. Or a dream, a raisin in the sun(s) but covered

By Granny, her daughter my mother, our family, the Danceys,

pushing, her waves from West to East, I pushed myself from South to North, rise up, then down and seiche, and

Dance—under the tabletops, to dance at the Academy of Movement and Music, I Danced—like water, real and cool and far away, but close enough to touch. Our bodies were singing
And dancing—a theater in Harlem, a loading dock, a stage, a dream is an environment too, spun into the shape of all the places I’ve been, dancing across the ones I hadn’t—

And when I got there—

“Tanya, what did you eat today?”

“You will need to lose twenty pounds.”

“You have muscles in your arms like a man.”

“Eleven raisins is too many.”

“A woman has curves and big shapely legs.”

“It is Monday, where is your food journal?”

“Always have your own.”

“Tanya, you know you can always come home.”

II. Rise

And-One-And-Two-And-Three-And—at the count of four you will remember.

The Bottom is a place, on the Black Side of a city with the First White House. Theirs had more room than people. Ours had the opposite, but love and what could be made by hands—

Let water simmer and rise
Let sweet potatoes touch and agree
Let family do what it does. Mine taught lessons worth holding:

My grandmother: take what the water gives, add that with the other things—butter, cinnamon, milk and sugar, maybe nutmeg—and that with 3 eggs and remember: bitter makes the sweet sweeter.

My grandfather: I will push souse meat or



Juanita Owes, mother of Thaddeus Davis



bologna and cheese together between two Nilla wafers. I will not give you what I can teach you to get; and remember: don't take what is where you are going.

My mother: I will go where I need to and work how I have to, to help you do what you dream to, and remember: if you leave, come back, and

I wonder if my father knew it was half-past three would it have still been so quiet in there—

But for what he had left, my body, moving, down on the off-beat into a hole under the ground, at the end of a rope with no knot.

My dance, like the bodiless heads found only in dark places, or the current that courses through the jagged edges of distorted glass—

Why are they laughing? Why don't they see what I do, that even death looks beautiful in the right light, that there is a glow

to those things that can be strung up to whatever is the opposite of what can be imagined to whatever a dream that doesn't end is called,

Nightmares in hibernation. It is over. I must rise up. What is that stench in the air, I hope spring or to see three golden brown pie crusts on top of a stove still warm.

I see rows flat and open, 100 yards, and people toiling
I feel the rush of adrenaline, the pull of muscles and people working
I hear the cry of flesh and cowhide, and human suffering
I know the fear of not being on time—

Of having the same blood and eyes and echo, but knowing he and I can only be strangers, speaking a different language, moving in two different worlds—

His, away.
Mine, below until I rose above. I flexed my muscle. I fathered my son. I forgot

And danced—from fields and fruit cups, to Tuskegee, where I learned to dance—sometimes too ahead, sometimes too behind, but always right to keep me
Dancing—a theater in Harlem, a stage, a bus, a memory is an environment too, mashed into the shape of all of the time I wish I had, dancing in between the time I didn't—

And when I got there—

“Thaddeus, what tribe are you from?”

“Where are you going?”

“You talk country.”

“Your thighs are big.”

“It's press, not mash.”

“Why are you working so hard?”

“Go wash yo' face.”

“Thaddeus, if you leave, come back.”

III. Hold

Note: The Roman text is Thaddeus; the Italic text is Tanya; and the bold text represents their combined voices.

And she was where she had come from—North and West of me
And he was like he had always been—arriving late, but leaving quickly

Through the time it took for us to meet—

A package of minutes
A soft garment, not returned how it was left
A funny walk, too early for her feet to turn back right
A night together—

When we were young enough to believe that whatever we needed would come to us if we chased it.

Under lights always on, in a city that never slept, we danced, holding each other and all of the places we'd known between us.

He was Bama and Harlem. She was Chicago and Manhattan, and fine. The city was everything and everything—our bustling kitchen, a rippling dream, a white-hot possibility, a place for us to make whatever we wanted as long as we knew how to move—from sidewalk to sidewalk and table to table, from countertop to time machine—as long as we remembered:

Take what the water gives—about ¼ pound with salt and pepper, make hard and deep-brown on one side, keep soft and middle-brown at the bottom, watch what will rise.

Let disparate things mix—ginger and garlic, salt and raisins, curry powder and coconut, cashews, and onion, in a bed of something soft and so high-brown it is yellow, and spin.

And Hands were made to hold—

And we will always keep each other—

And a clock cannot tell you where you are headed.

And a compass cannot tell you when you've gotten there.

And neither one of them can know, like us,





that every way our feet would go, that every count our lives would see pass, **that every memory creeping and coming could conspire to get us here, to gather together here**, all of our environments on us and around us and in us, here.

South and North Lotus
Sweet and Potato Pie
Round and Pound Cake
Montgomery and Harlem
Mash and Press
Chicago and the Bottom
City and Country
Her and Him, and Us

Wherever we go from now to ever, those places are on, around, and in—

We know, the distance between leave and come back is remember/dream—

We knew we could build something great

apart but better together, as vast as the city when night peeks and spins with pockets of flashing gold, as deep as the country when night things rise and frolic, holding pockets of flashing gold, and we dance, like them, the heavens we've known,

Believing we'll soon see the ones we haven't,

And when we get there—

“We made the choice to change together.”

“We spin and rise and hold each other together.”

“We eat this way together.”

“We have made home here, together.”

“We dance.” 🍷

Dr. B. Brian Foster is a writer, visual storyteller, and sociologist from Mississippi. He works as Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, co-edits the academic journal Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, and writes for regional and national outlets like Esquire, Ford Foundation, Veranda, and The Washington Post. For a version of this piece with links to referenced literary works, visit southernfoodways.org.

Wideman Davis Dance performed “We Dance” at the 2021 Southern Foodways Alliance Fall Symposium thanks to the support of the Cockayne Fund.

A film version of “We Dance,” directed by Ethan Payne, will screen at film festivals around the country in 2022. Visit southernfoodways.org for more details.





RECIPE BOX

Cook, pour, and be transported

AT SFA’S 2021 FALL SYMPOSIUM, CHEFS AND bartenders shared dishes and drinks inspired by the environments that have shaped their work and our region. Fresh beets and deep-fried grits update a traditional family recipe. Hand-held pastries marry ingredients across continents and cultures. Classic cookies transcend with techniques learned from a mentor. Here, creators share recipes to bring back to your own environment—where, no doubt, they will be adapted anew.

RECIPE
BOX



BETWEEN LAND AND SEA

by Erin Ashford

A dirty martini meets a gin and tonic. An ode to Georgia oystermen Earnest McIntosh Sr., SFA's 2021 Keeper of the Flame honoree, and his son, Earnest McIntosh Jr. With earthy, dry, and citrus notes, the flavors evoke oysters on the half shell, mignonette sauce, and fresh lemon zest.

Makes 6 cocktails

- 5 ounces Bristow gin
- 6½ ounces Cocchi Americano Bianco
- 2 ounces Salers Aperitif gentian liqueur
- ¼ ounce fino sherry, such as Lustau Jarana
- 3½ ounces lemon cordial*
- 12 dashes orange bitters, such as Regan's
- 1 750-ml. bottle Mountain Valley sparkling water
- Extra-virgin olive oil, for finishing
- Pickled okra to garnish, such as Talk O' Texas

Pour the first six ingredients into a small serving pitcher (at least 24 ounces) and gently stir to combine. Set out Collins or highball glasses, and pour 2 to 3 ounces of the mixture into each glass. Fill glasses with cubed ice, then top each with sparkling water and gently stir once, using a bar spoon. Using a pipette, drop 3 to 5 drops of olive oil on top of the ice, then garnish each drink with one piece of pickled okra.

***FOR THE LEMON CORDIAL:** Make a simple syrup by combining 1 cup sugar with 8 ounces water in a small saucepan. Cook on medium-high heat and stir until sugar is completely dissolved and mixture is smooth. Remove from heat and let cool to room temperature. In a separate container, combine 15 ounces of the simple syrup with 15 ounces fresh lemon juice. Stir or shake the mixture to combine fully. Store in a lidded container in the refrigerator for up to 30 days.

Jai Williams

UNDER THE NEON MOON

by Erin Ashford

A toast to 2021 Lifetime Achievement Award winner Bill Smith of Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, meant to be enjoyed with friends and colleagues under the warm, buzzing lights of neon bar signs. A whiskey sour at its core, it's packed with warm flavors, balancing fruity, sweet, dark, and brooding.

Makes 6 cocktails

- 12 ounces Maker's Mark bourbon
- 1½ ounces Nux Alpina walnut liqueur
- 3 ounces dry Curaçao, such as Pierre Ferrand
- 3 ounces lime juice
- 3 ounces pomegranate grenadine*
- 1½ ounces demerara syrup*
- 6 dashes Angostura bitters
- 6 ml. 2% salt solution*
- Eggplant chips, for garnish*



Pour the first eight ingredients, plus 3 ounces water, into a medium-sized pitcher or jar (at least 32 ounces) and gently stir with a bar spoon. Fill rocks glasses with cubed ice. Pour 3 to 4 ounces of the mixture in each glass. Garnish each drink with an eggplant chip.

***FOR THE POMEGRANATE GRENADINE:** Combine 16 ounces pomegranate juice (such as POM), 16 ounces caster sugar, 4 ounces pomegranate molasses, and 10 ml. orange blossom water into a quart container or lidded jar. Shake vigorously until ingredients are combined and mixture is smooth. Store in the refrigerator for up to 30 days.

***FOR THE DEMERARA SYRUP:** Combine 20 ounces demerara sugar and 10 ounces water into a small saucepan. Cook on medium-high heat until sugar is completely dissolved and mixture is smooth. Let cool to room temperature and store in a lidded container in the refrigerator for up to 30 days.

***FOR THE 2% SALT SOLUTION:** With a scale, measure 4 grams kosher salt and top with 200 grams boiling water. Stir until salt is fully dissolved, let cool to room temperature, and store in an airtight container.

***FOR THE EGGPLANT CHIPS:** Cut one large eggplant into slices about ¼-inch thick. Lay slices, spaced out, on a large sheet pan covered with parchment paper. Sprinkle kosher salt and demerara sugar over the slices and cook in a 350°F oven for 16 to 18 minutes, checking for when they begin to brown. Once golden and crisp, remove from the oven, let cool, and store in an airtight container.

Jai Williams

Erin Ashford directs the beverage program at Olamaie in Austin, Texas. Look for more of her recipes in *The Southern Foodways Alliance Guide to Cocktails* (UGA Press, 2017).



SWEET POTATO TURNOVERS WITH CARDAMOM AND BLACK PEPPER

by Vishwesh Bhatt

I love the way this savory dough plays off the sweet, spicy, and peppery filling. At the SFA Fall Symposium, these turnovers accompanied a pre-dinner cocktail, but they work just as well for dessert. If you don't want to deep-fry, place the turnovers on a parchment-lined sheet pan and bake in a 375°F oven for about 15 minutes, or until golden.

Makes 12 turnovers; serves 6 for dessert or as a cocktail snack

FOR THE SWEET POTATO FILLING:

- 3 large sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes
- ¼ cup ghee
- ¾ cup seedless raisins
- 1½ tablespoons cracked black pepper (pieces should be fairly large—crack peppercorns with a mortar and pestle or with the back of a spoon)
- ¾ teaspoon cardamom seeds, crushed (from 4 to 5 pods; crush seeds with a mortar and pestle)
- 2 tablespoons cane sugar crystals (or coarse sugar, sanding sugar, or turbinado sugar)

FOR THE DOUGH:

- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3½ to 4 cups (680 grams) all-purpose flour, sifted, plus more for dusting
- 1 teaspoon cracked black pepper
- 1 teaspoon fennel seeds, crushed
- 4 cups plus 6 tablespoons neutral oil, such as peanut or canola, divided
- 2 tablespoons cane sugar crystals (or coarse sugar, sanding sugar, or turbinado sugar)

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a sheet pan with parchment paper.

To make the filling, in a medium bowl, toss the sweet potatoes with ghee. Spread them in a single layer on the prepared sheet pan and bake for 20 minutes, or until cooked through.

Meanwhile, put the raisins in a small bowl and add enough water to cover. Soak for 20 minutes to plump, then drain.

When potatoes are done, return them to the bowl. Toss immediately with black pepper, cardamom, raisins, and 2 tablespoons sugar. Mash the mixture lightly with the back of a spoon. Allow to cool to room temperature. The filling can be made up to a day ahead; let cool completely before storing in a covered container in the refrigerator.

To make the dough, dissolve the salt in 7 ounces warm water; set aside. Combine the flour, pepper, and fennel seeds in the bowl of food processor and pulse until well blended. Continue to pulse the flour mixture while slowly adding 6 tablespoons oil through the feed tube. Remove the lid and scrape down the sides of the food processor. Cover again and, with the motor running, slowly add the salt water through the feed tube until the dough comes together. Scrape the dough onto a lightly floured work surface. Knead the dough (moisten your hands if necessary) until smooth. Shape into a ball or disk, wrap in plastic wrap, and chill for 10 to 15 minutes or up to overnight in the refrigerator.

Divide the chilled dough into 12 equal portions, each slightly smaller than a golf ball. Roll out one portion at a time on a lightly floured surface into a 5-inch circle. Spoon 2 to 3 tablespoons filling in the middle of the circle. Fold the dough in half over the filling to make a semicircle and crimp the edges with a fork to seal. Repeat the process with the remaining portions of dough, until you have 12 turnovers.

Heat 4 cups oil to 350°F in a cast-iron skillet, Dutch oven, or electric fryer. If you don't have a deep-fry thermometer, drop in a scrap of dough to test the temperature. When it sizzles and floats to the top, your oil is ready.

While the oil is heating, line a sheet pan with paper towels and place it near the stove or fryer.

Once the oil is ready, carefully add 3 to 4 turnovers, depending on the size of your pot or fryer. (If the pot is too crowded, it will bring down the temperature of the oil, resulting in soggy, undercooked turnovers. If you see the crust burning, your oil is too hot.) Watch the turnovers, carefully turning them with a slotted spoon until they are golden brown on both sides. Carefully remove the turnovers and place on the prepared sheet pan. Sprinkle with the remaining sugar. Let the oil temperature return to 350°F before adding the next batch. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Vishwesh Bhatt is the chef at *Snackbar* in Oxford, Mississippi. A native of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, he moved to Oxford for graduate school, abandoned academia for restaurant kitchens, and never looked back. This recipe appears in his first cookbook, *I Am From Here*, forthcoming from W.W. Norton in August 2022.

Jai Williams





**RECIPE
BOX**

CANNED BEETS, REVISITED

by Todd Richards

My mother, the late Valoria Viola “V.V.” Richards, made a canned beet salad topped with canned cranberry relish when I was a kid. She strained the liquid from the beets and combined it with vinegar, oil, spices, and honey to make a dressing. My father, Willis Richards Jr., would eat sharp cheddar on crackers, topped with a beet and pickled onions. I love beets myself, and this recipe honors both of my parents’ approaches.

Serves 8 to 10.

FOR THE BEETS:

- 4 large red beets
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- ½ cup apple cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt

To cook the beets, preheat the oven to 350°F. Wash beets in cold water and pat dry. Toss beets in vegetable oil and wrap in foil (like a baked potato). Bake beets for 30 minutes, or until a knife easily inserts, and remove from oven. Let stand for 30 minutes, then unwrap the beets and refrigerate for 4 hours. Using a paper towel (and wearing gloves), peel away the outer skin of beets and dice into ½-inch squares. Combine olive oil, apple cider vinegar, honey, and salt. Toss beets in mixture and let stand 15 minutes.

To make the leek custard, preheat the oven to 325°F. Place a heavy-bottomed pot on the stove and bring to medium heat. Add oil and leeks and cook for 5 minutes, until just starting to soften, stirring occasionally. Once soft, add wine, salt, pepper, and thyme and continue to cook. Add heavy

FOR THE LEEK CUSTARD:

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 3 leeks, roots removed, washed, and cut into ¼-inch rounds
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- 2 sprigs thyme, stems removed and chopped
- 1 quart heavy cream
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- 8 eggs, beaten
- 1 ounce goat cheese

FOR THE CRANBERRY ORANGE RELISH:

- 1 cup dried cranberries
- ½ cup cranberry juice
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- Zest and juice from one orange
- ¼ teaspoon dried ginger
- 2 sprigs thyme, stems removed and chopped

FOR THE FRIED GRIT CROUTONS:

- ½ teaspoon plus 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- ½ cup coarse yellow grits, soaked in water for 1 hour
- 1 cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 cup cornmeal
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon granulated onion
- 1 tablespoon granulated garlic
- 1 tablespoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon curry powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 cups vegetable oil
- 1 cup crumbled feta cheese

cream and nutmeg, and cook until cream is reduced by half. Turn off the stove. Add in eggs and goat cheese and stir until incorporated. Spray a baking dish with cooking spray and add leek mixture. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until the custard is set.

To make the cranberry orange relish, add all ingredients in a heavy-bottomed pot on the stove. Bring to a simmer for 10 minutes, then cover and remove from heat.

To make the fried grit croutons, place a heavy-bottomed stock pot on the stove, add 3 cups water and salt, and bring to a simmer. While stirring, strain the grits into the pot. Cover grits and simmer for 30 minutes, until cooked, stirring occasionally. Once grits are cooked, stir in heavy cream and cheese and remove from heat. Spray dish with cooking spray and pour grits into dish. Let stand for 15 minutes and refrigerate overnight.

To fry the grits, combine cornmeal, flour, and seasonings in a shallow bowl or dish. Remove grits from refrigerator and cut into 1-inch squares. Toss grits in flour mixture. Place skillet on the stove, fill with oil, and bring to medium heat. Place squares of grits into the pan and fry until golden brown, turning if needed, being careful not to overcrowd the pan. Repeat until all croutons are cooked. Place croutons on a paper towel to drain.

To assemble the salad, top leek custard with beet salad. Add grit croutons on top of and around the beets, and top the complete dish with cranberry orange relish and crumbled feta cheese.

Todd Richards is co-owner of the Soulful Company Restaurant Group in Atlanta, where he directs Lake & Oak Neighborhood BBQ. His cookbook, *Soul: A Chef’s Culinary Evolution in 150 Recipes*, won the 2018 IACP award for Best American Cookbook.

Jai Williams

RECIPE
BOX

DOUBLE-ROASTED SPAGHETTI SQUASH WITH BURRATA AND MARINARA SAUCE

by Sarah Grueneberg

When I learned that cooks in Mississippi often serve fried catfish with a side of spaghetti with meat sauce, I knew I had to make this twice-roasted squash to accompany a lunch of Simmons Farm-Raised Catfish. The version here calls for marinara sauce; use your favorite, with or without meat.

Serves 4 to 6

- 2 small spaghetti squash, about 2 to 2½ lbs. each
- Kosher salt and freshly cracked black pepper
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 cup plus 2 tablespoons Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 1 cup whole milk cottage cheese
- 2 tablespoons thyme leaves, plus more for garnish
- 4 ounces fresh burrata or fresh mozzarella, torn into small pieces
- 2 cups marinara or meaty marinara sauce, warmed

Preheat oven to 425°F. Nestle the spaghetti squash in a folded kitchen towel on a cutting board to help keep it sturdy while cutting. Using a heavy, sharp chef's knife or serrated knife, cut the spaghetti squash in half lengthwise. (I find that gentle rocking motions of the knife, first cutting the skin around the squash, make it easier to cut in half.) Using a spoon, scoop out the seeds from the squash and discard.

Line a baking sheet with foil and spray lightly with oil. Generously season the squash halves with salt and pepper and drizzle with the olive oil. Set the squash halves cut side down on the baking sheet. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, until the squash skin is tender to the touch. Let rest for 10 minutes, then flip; I like to let the squash steam as it slowly cooks. Using a fork, gently pull and shred the squash from the skin — this squash naturally shreds into its namesake spaghetti-like texture. Spread the shredded spaghetti squash on the baking sheet. Set aside the two squash skins for later.

Place the shredded squash back in the oven and roast for 30 minutes, or until slightly caramelized and drier.

Place the double-roasted squash in a medium bowl and mix in 1 cup of the Parmigiano-Reggiano, cottage cheese, thyme, and lots of black pepper. Divide the squash mixture back into the two reserved squash skins. Top the spaghetti squash with the burrata and the remaining Parmigiano-Reggiano.

When ready to serve, set a broiler to high. (Make sure your squash has enough clearance, which is about 3 to 4 inches from the heat source.) Broil the squash for 5 to 6 minutes, or until golden, bubbly, and the skins of the squash are slightly charred. Remove from the oven, garnish with more thyme, and serve with the marinara or meaty marinara sauce on the side.

Sarah Grueneberg is chef and partner at Monteverde Restaurant and Pastificio in Chicago. A Houston native, she moved to Illinois in 2005 to cook at Spiaggia. She has competed on Top Chef and Iron Chef and hosts the PBS Chicago show Dishalicious. Her first cookbook is forthcoming in fall 2022.



ALMOND CHOCOLATE CHUNK COOKIES

by Caitlin Schumacher

This recipe is adapted from the version I learned from my friend Michelle Polzine of 20th Century Café in San Francisco. The shaping process can seem tedious, but it's necessary to create the layers of melted chocolate and dough. My personal touch is using half almond paste and half butter—I enjoy the flavor and puff that the almond paste lends these cookies.

Makes 20 cookies

- 17 ounces all-purpose flour
- 1 ¼ teaspoons baking soda
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 ½ teaspoons kosher salt*
- 5 ounces butter, at room temperature
- 5 ounces almond paste, at room temperature*
- 16 ounces muscovado sugar*
- 1 teaspoon vanilla paste*
- 2 eggs, at room temperature
- 12 ounces 70% chocolate pistoles*
- Coarse sea salt, for sprinkling

Sift the flour, baking soda, and baking powder into a large bowl. Add the salt and set aside.

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, paddle the butter and almond paste until well combined. Add the muscovado sugar and vanilla paste. Paddle on medium speed for at least 5 minutes, scraping down around the sides and bottom of the bowl at least once. The mixture should be light and fluffy.

Scrape down the sides of the bowl. With the mixer running on medium-low speed, add the eggs, one at a time.

Stop the mixer and scrape down. Add the flour mixture to the mixing bowl. Paddle on low speed until almost incorporated. Stop mixing when there are still streaks of flour around the edges of the bowl.

Jai Williams

***INGREDIENT NOTES:** I use King Arthur all-purpose flour for most of my baking — it has a higher protein content than most other all-purpose flours. I only use Diamond Crystal salt, as other brands vary in salinity and coarseness. My preferred brand of almond paste is Mandelin; I also like American Almond. Muscovado sugar is worth seeking out for its deep, complex flavor, but dark brown sugar will do. If you cannot find vanilla paste, you may scrape the seeds from a vanilla bean or use vanilla extract. My favorite baking chocolate is Valrhona Guanaja 70%. Whatever brand you use, the chocolate should be in a pistole (disk) shape to achieve the layers and giant chocolate chunks in this cookie.

Add the chocolate to the mixing bowl. Paddle on low speed for about 5 seconds—you will hear the (super satisfying) crunch, crunch, crunch of the chocolate pistoles breaking apart. Do not overmix! The pistoles should mostly be broken in half, and you want some to stay whole.

On a parchment-lined quarter sheet pan, scrape and pat the dough into an even layer. It should fully fill the pan to the corners and all the way up to the top edges. Wrap in plastic, and chill for several hours or until very firm.

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Using a metal bench scraper, cut the cold dough (still in the pan) into 20 even pieces. If you like, you can then weigh each piece and adjust to reach a 3-ounce portion. Use the bench scraper to pop the dough blocks out of the pan. Using both hands, and without flattening the dough block (it should stay the same height as it was in the pan), press around the sides of the block to create a hockey puck shape. (It's OK to have a whole pistole on the top of your cookie.) Continue with the remaining dough.

Place pucks on a parchment-lined sheet pan, leaving plenty of space for spreading (I bake 8 cookies at a time on a half-sheet pan). Sprinkle the tops generously with sea salt.

Bake for about 15 minutes, or until the tops of the cookies look matte and are just starting to pick up golden brown color around the edges. (If using a convection oven, start checking at 11 minutes.)

Let cool completely on the pan. (They will be very fragile for at least an hour—it's mostly melted chocolate, after all!) 🍪

Caitlin Schumacher



Caitlin Schumacher operates *Girl Nextdough*, a small-batch baking food truck in Charleston, South Carolina. A Chapel Hill native, she first cooked under Karen Barker at Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina, and was SFA's inaugural Karen Barker Baker at the 2021 Fall Symposium.



Photos by Andrea Morales

VITTLES: A LOVE STORY

In Memphis, Cash and Jess Hewlette provision for queer pleasure and Black liberation.

BY FARON LEVESQUE



Cash Hewlette in the flower tunnel at Alpha Omega Veterans Services (AOVS) Urban Farm and Kitchen

“POWER, POWER LORD, POWER, POWER Lord...”

Nina Simone’s voice echoes through the squash patch.

Sweat is flowing like rivers and it’s not even 9 A.M. Cash Hewlette wears beekeeper gloves to protect her arms from the furry-sharp pokes of the cucurbit vines—zucchini, cucumbers, squash. Simone’s freedom song “Sinnerman” plays on Cash’s phone, the singer’s deep, eternal wail coming through loud and clear.

At this time of year—late June—Fridays are market-harvest days at the urban farm in Memphis where Cash and I work, part of a larger organization that serves military veterans who have experienced homelessness.

Cash and our farmrades bring crates of veggies into the wash-pack station where I’m rinsing the harvest. “Did you see the four-leaf clover I left for you?” she asks. I didn’t. Quickly I scan the metal sinks and wire-topped drying tables, but I don’t find the lucky clover.

“It’s OK,” Cash says. “I find them all the time.”

She opens a brown leather wallet and shows me her archive of clovers pressed between the faded green of a two-dollar bill. “If I have this, I’ll never be all the way broke.”

Working together, Cash and I have learned that we share a country-queer sensibility. Born in the Mississippi Delta town of Marks and raised in Memphis, Cash is a self-described Memphissippian. “It’s being true country,” she explains, “loving the backwoods, fishing, maintaining and creating your own, whilst being slicker than a can of grease and embracing the progressions, the power, and diversity of the city of Memphis.”

Cash joined the Navy right after graduating from high school. She was a ship’s serviceperson. Aircraft carriers are like self-contained cities, and it was Cash’s job to stock provisions—from the clippers in the barbershop, to the airplane parts in the hangars, to the vending machines in the galleys.

Aboard the *USS Kitty Hawk* and the *USS George Washington*, she saw Chile, Brazil, and Guam. Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore,

and Hong Kong, too. Thailand was her favorite—it reminded her of New Orleans, Las Vegas, Detroit, and Memphis all at once.

Traveling was great, but the complex, often traumatic experience of serving in the military forced Cash to reckon with ideas of home and belonging. By 2011, Cash was done with sailor life and trying to find her sea legs on dry land. This moment had a haziness to it, she told me. But there was also a rising clarity. “I can have a purposeful job and it does not have to be servicing my country or policing at all.” Growing and cooking food became an anchor for Cash’s vision of Black liberation. And then she met Jess.

Chef Jess Hewlette has spent years learning and laboring in some of Memphis’ most unique kitchens. Once upon a time, though, she was working at American Eagle at Oak Court Mall when a stud named Cash came rolling in. “It was my first day on the sales floor as a manager. She had on these crazy Japanese pants. And I felt drawn to her. We walked around the store for an hour, matching her outfit.... I wrote my number on her receipt and told her to call me,” Jess remembers. They’ve been together ever since.

AFTER WE FINISH harvest, I drop Cash at the restaurant where Jess works. I don’t plan on staying long, but Chef Jess’ magnetic pull has me plopped down at the bar, muddy overalls and all. I watch as she swirls through the dining room, saying hi to everyone, her big, gorgeous laugh the soundtrack for an unexpected lunch of blackened catfish and succotash. The gift of queer joy shared freely nourishes a hunger I had forgotten about since the beginning of the pandemic.

Chef Jess’ mom, Yetta Stevenson-Reid, didn’t want her daughter to become a cook. “I think she wanted to spare me from trying something that would possibly let me down. And that made me want it even more,” Jess says. Reid was the cafeteria manager at Memphis’ Kingsbury High for most of Jess’ life, even staying on when Jess was a student there herself. Witnessing her mom feed the throngs of young eaters was its own education. “I watched my mother cook in the kitchen at home and at work. Watching her enjoy food and the feeling it gave people made me want to do the same.”

Jess says she’s wanted to pursue cooking as a career since she was seventeen. “But I was a



LEFT: Cash Hewlette checks kale seedlings at AOVs, September 2021. RIGHT: Jess Hewlette

says. In 2014, they gave their shared food project a name: Vittles.

VITTLES IS CASH and Jess handing out plates of tacos for guests at catered events, canning jams and jellies at craft wine and food festivals, advising chefs, home cooks, and food-justice nonprofits on menus and kitchen possibilities, and building coalitions with Memphis-area farmers. Their farm operation, Cash's Crops, is also growing out of

straight-A student and was thus directed to go to college, which just didn't work for me at all. So I spent a lot of time trying to figure that out."

From the time they began dating in 2013, Cash was steady support for Jess. "She's not rose petals and mushy, but she walked with me when my self-esteem was nonexistent and helped me build myself up," Jess says. Cash provided the space for Jess to start envisioning a life that didn't have to follow preordained paths; to help her realize that there are so many alternate routes to living in community and in love. "I wouldn't have had the guts to go against the conventional college direction if it wasn't for Cash empowering me to trust in myself and my ability to do anything that I want, if I want it bad enough."

In the early days of working in restaurant kitchens, Jess felt that she was finally doing the work she was meant to do. Still, that work had its ups and downs. She experienced the deep lows of misogyny and the tyrannies of the salad station, as well as the highs of rallying her line to a near-perfect dinner service.

Cash and Jess remember early dates at Jasmine, a beloved Thai restaurant in Memphis. (It has since closed.) "Food," Jess says, "has always been a part of our love affair." Cash and Jess held down separate jobs but soon began cooking and serving food side by side. It was the experience of doing so on their own terms, in their own kitchen, and always right next to each other, that revealed the revolutionary possibilities of their collaborations. "One of my favorite things to do is cook with Cash on a sunny day with Zydeco music playing," Jess

Vittles. Becoming landowners is next on their to-do list. They're saving up.

Vittles belongs to a long Black radical tradition of agricultural resistance, community knowledge, and food justice. "We take food our ancestors survived on and take it to the next level," Cash and Jess explain. They chose the name because it conjures that Memphissippi country warmth and conveys an invitation to be fed by way of the belly and the soul.

Cash believes that her agricultural expertise and work as a farmer would delight ancestors long gone. In Marks, Cash's people were sharecroppers and kept hogs. More than once, I've heard her say in the field, "If only my grandma could see me now." Her name was Lee Verna Braxton. Vittles is a love letter to Lee, and to Yetta.

Beyond the best-known personalities of the Memphis food scene, there are other vital, vibrant worlds. To understand the queer foodways of Memphis you have to go deep into the soils and muddy waters, the pleasures and the pains, the walk-in coolers, the hunger, the dirty dirty terroir of it all. There you'll find Jess. There you'll find Cash.

Together they have shown me—and they are showing our city—that there are so many ways of reimagining the world. Their work embodies the notion that healing is a daily practice of joy, of pleasure. And that pleasure is as essential a resource as food, shelter, or water. "Pleasure is the point," the activist and writer adrienne maree brown writes: "Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom." Infinite in possibility and rooted in a long history of struggle, queer pleasure is irrepressible

desire, ecstatic appetites. The long Black queer and trans liberation history of mutual aid, collective care, and chosen kin is a usable past, one that makes the practice of queer and trans pleasure in the historical present lush and powerful.

Chef Jess wields a radical hospitality that blurs the traditional binary of front of house, back of house. It rejects the status quo of food work—the entrenched hierarchies, the incentivizing of over-work, and the competitive careerism. It's this energy of collectivity that gives Vittles life.

Vittles is a reckoning. Jess explained to me that it's a chance "to invest in more than a career that is ever changing. I'd rather invest in people who will give me rooted meaning to life. I just want to create change that affects more than just my four walls." Vittles is about owning your own labor and time. Cash puts it another way: "boss shit."

Queer BIPOC food folx like Jess and Cash are building new worlds. Jess glides through kitchens, embodying queer radical hospitality, exuding

joy and resistance. Cash stewards the land—tending the city's soil, honing sustainable farming techniques, and getting food where it's needed most. For now, they are in a state of becoming, building relationships across the food and farm networks of the Mid-South. But eventually, they believe, the work of Vittles will become more visible and more accessible. "We're growing and perfecting so that when the sun shines just right, we'll burst through the dirt and sprout a strong stem bearing a beautiful flower," Jess says.

"You've got to learn to leave the table when love's no longer being served," Nina Simone sang, with an invitation to the welcome table of liberation. Chef Jess and Farmer Cash are setting that welcome table in Memphis. They are seizing the means of food on their own terms and, in turn, creating the conditions for Memphians on the margins to build power and pleasure—one four-leaf clover, one two-dollar bill, one sunny Zydeco day in the kitchen at a time. ♡

Faron Levesque is a writer, host, and historian based in Memphis, Tennessee, their hometown. Faron runs a community kitchen for a small, hilltop farm by the airport, on the stolen land of the Chickasaw Nation. They research, teach, and write about the politics of memory, queer and trans ecologies, revolutionary imagination, and the radical history of food.





Keeper of the Flame

VALERIE BOYD (LEFT), A WRITER, SFA BOARD MEMBER, AND known oyster fan, awaits brunch at the 2021 SFA Fall Symposium with the McIntosh family of Julinton, Georgia: Earnest McIntosh Jr., Earnest McIntosh Sr., Lasonia Davis, and Shederian Davis. Later that day, SFA awarded Earnest McIntosh Sr. the 2021 Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame Award for his work as an oyster farmer. Visit southernfoodways.org to watch *Sky and Water*, a film about E.L. McIntosh & Son Seafood by Joe York.

JAI WILLIAMS, *Photographer*

BARBECUE

2022

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