

BEATEN BY BISCUITS

Rolling out a unified theory of biscuitry is not so easy.

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

GRAVY COLUMNIST HANNA RASKIN WANTED to find out what happened to Bojangles' biscuits when they slipped the confines of the South. We were curious, too—after all, the question “Where is the South?” guides our programming this year. So curious, in fact, that when her initial reporting trip to Ohio was thwarted by a construction delay, we sent her to Illinois. When we signed off on Hanna's column topic, we weren't planning a biscuit issue. But thanks to some luck and good timing, a biscuit motif emerged. In addition to Hanna's peripatetic fast-food biscuits, you'll also read about two biscuit entrepreneurs, one past and one present. A century ago, Annie Fisher of Columbia, Missouri, parlayed her labor-intensive beaten biscuits into a catering juggernaut, achieving a level of financial success that was practically unheard of for a single woman of her place and time. Mackenzie Martin, an audio reporter and producer who told Fisher's story for a recent episode of *Gravy* podcast, brings it to the pages of this issue. In twenty-first century Atlanta, former software engineer Erika Council's talent for baking tall, fluffy buttermilk biscuits evolved from a hobby to a pop-up business to a storefront. Deputy editor and fellow Atlantan

Rosalind Bentley interviews Council about her new cookbook, *Still We Rise*, which pays tribute to Council's ancestors and to unsung figures of Black culinary history amid recipes and techniques for dozens of biscuits and biscuit fixings.

You don't need me to tell you that Southerners have *feelings* about biscuits. But as this biscuit-laden issue came together, I sought to understand why. Over the course of a week, I polled my colleagues about their biscuit preferences, their biscuit memories, their biscuit philosophies. I poked around on the internet, where there is no shortage of hot biscuit takes. I compared recipes. And—I'm embarrassed to admit this—I made my own buttermilk biscuits from scratch for the first time. They were flat and tough, with no layers to speak of.

I went back to Hanna Raskin, who offered the best theory I've heard: “I feel like the fewer the ingredients, the more room there is for opinions (see: barbecue),” Hanna texted. She's right—and to me, that barbecue analogy is key. Here are two of the most beloved, discussed, and debated Southern foods. With barbecue, it's safe to say that there are two non-negotiables: meat and smoke. That's leaving aside sauce, its own fraught



subject. I've seen biscuit recipes with as few as two ingredients and as many as seven, but flour, a solid fat, a liquid fat, and a leavening agent are basically standard. Salt—usually. Sugar? Sometimes.

In my week or so of biscuit immersion, I came across opinions, theories, and techniques that were contradictory to the point of comical.

Use the best butter you can afford. My father-in-law actually uses margarine. My mom made hers with Crisco.

Self-rising flour is unreliable. Self-rising flour is so much easier.

Fold the dough to make layers. Whatever you do, do not overwork the dough.

Bake at 425°. Bake at 450°. Bake at 475°.

While there were few points of consensus, there was also remarkably little snobbery among the folks I talked to. Most had respect for the fast-food category, detailing the merits of a favorite drive-through or gas-station biscuit. Many even copped to a soft spot for Pillsbury Grands, usually developed in childhood in the absence of a biscuit-making relative. Some regularly bake biscuits from scratch; others have never tried. But no one was mum on the subject. Say “biscuits,” and Southerners start talking. (At least, they should. Pick up a copy of *Still We Rise* and turn to page 10 for a hilarious breakup story precipitated by biscuit indifference.)

Biscuits, like barbecue, are all over the South yet not limited to its historical boundaries. Both are easy to attempt and hard to perfect. No matter how you're making them, someone will tell you you're doing it wrong. I try to avoid referring to any culinary endeavor as magic, because it downplays the human skill at work. But an air of the supernatural does tend to permeate both. Their execution is cloaked in secrecy. Follow the recipe to the letter, and you might fall flat. Try again tomorrow, and the result could be totally different. Whether you're dining out or cooking at home, you're probably chasing an ideal, one that's been run through the sepia filter of nostalgia. You want the pulled pork from that roadside joint that closed down years ago, or the biscuits your grandmother baked when she was alive. You can't have them, but you can talk about them. Or write about them.

I'm planning to make biscuits again this weekend. Unlike last time, my expectations are low, which might set me up for success. But they probably won't live up to my own biscuit ideal, the pastrami biscuit sandwich from Neal's Deli in Carrboro, North Carolina. And if I turn out another batch of hockey pucks, I won't beat myself up. I've got a tube of Grands waiting in the fridge, just in case. 🍴

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