

# VIRGINIA'S DARE

HOW A COOKING COMPETITION IN OLD DOMINION IN 1948 UNWITTINGLY SET THE TONE FOR MODERN FOOD JOURNALISM

By *Hanna Raskin*

I'M NOT SURE IF THIS still happens in the age of peanut allergies, but when I was in school, class projects involved groceries. We built maps out of pretzels and solar systems out of pistachios. And while I don't remember studying the history of food media with my second-grade newspaper advisor, Mrs. Jackson, I can imagine putting together a gingerbread house to illustrate the topic.

That's pretty consistent with our sense of how the genre developed over the late twentieth century. We started with a basic journalistic structure, meaning we mostly wrote service pieces and editorials about the scarcity of certain duck breeds and the rising price of oysters. And then talented writers adorned the model, embellishing it with adventure, opinion, ethics and diversity. So by the year 2000, food writing had been built into a pretty fantastic form. Good for us.

Except that's not how history works. It's not cumulative. In other words, forget the ginger-

bread house. Instead, picture a fruitcake, all dense and mysterious. It has good parts; it has bad parts and all of them are baked in from the first and bound to last. That's food journalism: An eternally complex mass of achievements and mistakes.

I could cherry-pick examples from the past century, but it's more instructive to focus on one moment smack dab in the middle: The second annual Virginia Chefs' Tournament, held during the last week of March 1948.

The tournament was a cooking competition, designed by the state to showcase Virginia food and its resident ritziest chefs. In many ways, though, it was all about food media. Specifically, it was a study in what food media covered and how they covered it.

To serve as judges, the tournament assembled a panel of the nation's top food writers and broadcasters. Through their daily work, and in their approach to the contest assignment, they displayed a few of the best qualities in food journalism: They were skeptical, aware, connected to their audiences, concerned about the world-at-large, and willing to be wrong. Most important, they appreciated that food is fun: When the eggnog planned for a judges' feast on Monday night didn't materialize until Tuesday morning, they renamed it "bleached tomato juice" and poured it for breakfast.

Yet they were also guilty of the foibles that still trip up well-mean-

ing members of the food media. They exhibited enormous hubris. They were blinded by sentimentality. They were mildly elitist and remarkably egotistical. If members of the all-white judging panel were bothered by the framework of a contest in the Jim Crow South, they didn't publicly mention it.

Virginia had held this tournament once before. But the debut was kind of a dud. Instead of celebrating the state's unique foods, that first contest emphasized generic items from the repertoire of any competent hotel cook. Head judge George Frederick, president of the Gourmet Society of New York, admonished the organizing committee that "the whole United States feels sort of let down."

Still, the driving force for the second edition of the tournament wasn't Americans' gloom. It was Virginians' outrage.

Ted Shane was the son of an immigrant tailor from Hungary. Born in New York City in 1900, he graduated from Columbia University in 1923. He started working for magazines, and became a

popular profile writer, crossword puzzle constructor, and joke editor.

Ted Shane was also a troll. His stories for *Collier's* included pieces like "Women Can't Cook." But the essay that got Shane in real trouble was his 1947 piece, "I Hate Southern Cooking."

The gist was that Southern food is "starchy, monotonous, porcine, heavy and overdone." Shane was especially disgusted by grits during his trip through the South, describing them as "pure white gunk" and "lumpy, greasy, and as delicious as a dish of boiled Daytona Beach sand."

Shane conceded it was possible to get a good meal in Charleston or New Orleans. But in those cities, he wrote, the best food wasn't cooked by Southern cooks or made according to Southern recipes. Elsewhere in the region, bland cornbread, overcooked vegetables, and greasy fried chicken were common denominators in restaurant and home kitchens.

Reprinted in the *Negro Digest*, Shane's essay provoked a torrent of rebuttals, including one published in *Liberty Magazine*, which had run the original piece. Harold Smith chided Shane for neglecting Georgia peaches, rice with gravy, and ambrosia. What galled him was Shane's stance on grits.

He wrote, "Any mashed-potato eater who could stoop so low to malign grits could never find true expression in the Valhalla of cooking—the South! You must



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be shown!”

Showing off Southern cuisine is just what the folks responsible for the second annual Virginia Chefs’ Tournament had in mind: They invited Shane to judge their event, and he accepted.

If we think about food writers in terms of types, we know which role Shane played. He was the provocateur; the one who strides into herds of sacred cows with an AK-47. These days, you find his like on social media: There’s no doubt that “I Hate Southern Cooking” would today be classified as *Thrillist* clickbait.

Shane wasn’t alone on the panel. Fifteen fellow judges joined him. More than half of them were food journalists. They were chosen for their fame. Each represented a different aspect of their craft, as well as the potential and pitfalls associated with it.

Shane was a storyteller. The only judge considered even more of a “get” for the Virginia contingent was a stats guy.

Duncan Hines is sometimes described as a spiritual predecessor to Craig Claiborne, the *New York Times* critic who is credited with making restaurant reviews lively, broad, and relevant. In fact, he doesn’t belong on that branch of the food writing tree. He was a stickler and a list-maker: His genetic material skipped over all of the Reagan-era critics we now read reverentially and reappeared in Yelpers. That is to say: It wasn’t uncommon for Hines to embark on a write-up by entering a



restaurant through its kitchen door, so he could verify whether its dishwasher and garbage disposal were working.

A Kentucky native, Hines didn’t share Shane’s distaste for Southern food. For example, he endorsed Mary Beard’s tearoom, located on North 20<sup>th</sup> Street in Birmingham. In his classic book, *Adventures in Good Eating*, he wrote, “Try the chicken hash with corn cakes. Fried chicken and pecan pie.”

And that’s about all he had to say about that. Hines wasn’t opposed to Southern food, but he feared food as much as he craved it. As he wrote in the first line of the introduction of his book, “My interest in wayside inns is not the expression of a gourmand’s appetite for fine foods.” Instead, he warned, “You may enjoy a delicious tasting meal and yet suffer the aftermath of violent gastrointestinal disturbances.”

Hines’ prose wasn’t lofty: He was as apt to write about light fixtures and strong coffee as “clear green turtle au sherry” and “ring sealed steaks.” For food-fixed folks, his descriptions are sometimes exasperating.

Still, it’s hard to fault Hines’ reportorial instincts. Plus, his ethical standards were unparalleled: At a time when the line

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between advertising and editorial was still porous in places, he refused to sell ads in his guide. Even if he wasn’t swayed by the romance of magnificent meals, he no doubt inspired other people to look for them.

Outside of food writing circles, Duncan Hines today exists in most people’s minds as a brand; he sold his name a few years before he died. It’s still being stamped on cake mix boxes and frosting cans. Before Hines made his debut on boxes, another one of the Virginia Chefs’ Tournament judges was already being recognized as an icon.

According to local press coverage of the event, Betty Crocker was one of the judges. Of course, there is no such person as Betty Crocker. But there was Marjorie Husted, the Minnesota advertising executive who, in 1921, developed the consummate homemaker persona.

A few months after issuing her rulings in Virginia, Husted addressed a gathering of the nation’s food editors. “We have been urging women to come out of the kitchen,” she said, “until we may have convinced them it was a poor place to be.”

If you talked to worried male executives in the 1950s, that was the rap on food editors. The men were terrified that nobody would buy their dish soap, allspice, and oats if women stampeded into the workplace (where, horrors of horrors, they might come after men’s jobs.) Those advertising executives wanted newspapers to

publish food columns packed with challenging recipes to keep housewives in the kitchen. They weren’t keen on shortcuts and time-saving strategies endorsed by female editors of what most newspapers then called the women’s pages.

American newspapers have always covered food in some fashion: It would have been hard to write about the Revolutionary War without referencing tea, sugar, and the appetites for them. Women’s pages, more specifically debuted in the 1890s. They proved central to the story of food writing in the twentieth century. Publishers thought they could lure more advertisers of female tonics, fabric, and feather boas if they had a section of the paper designated for women to read.

They were right. Within half a century, the Thanksgiving food section of the *L.A. Times* ran ninety pages long. Think about that for a second. I work in Charleston, one of the most vibrant food cities in the South. During particularly newsy weeks, we have tense discussions about the possibility of expanding the section from four to six pages.

The women who headed up these sections were, in some ways, incredibly powerful. Yet in significant ways, these women didn’t have power at all. In some newsrooms, they were relegated to tiny offices on a different floor because they weren’t supposed to be exposed to cigar smoke or curse words. Their jobs were so tenuous and demanding that they rarely



asked for time off: A food editor in Atlanta in the 1950s got married on her lunch break. Many of them never married.

Despite their sacrifices, the food editors weren't celebrated as they neared retirement in the 1970s. Younger feminists believed the editors had promoted home cooking over careers. They rejected these women as detrimental to the struggle. After years of being treated badly by men, these food editors had to deal with being treated badly by women.

If only the young women had listened to Betty Crocker. She was right in this case: Many of the food editors made a point of not glamorizing the kitchen, instead depicting it as a site of drudgery. They encouraged culinary exploration and experimentation, but not at the cost of time, money, or mental energy their readers couldn't afford to spend.

There were five current or future food editors on the judging panel for the Virginia Chefs' Tournament. Elinor Lee, soon-to-be food editor of the *Washington Post*, is worth attention.

In the 1950s, home cooks depended on newspaper food editors to explain not just foreign cuisines new to their neighborhoods, but products new to their supermarkets. In 1955, one food editor estimated that one-third of the edible items her readers purchased didn't exist a decade earlier. In 1957, Lee won an award for a series of articles tracing how peaches, turkeys, and tomatoes

were grown, processed, and distributed. This was fifty years before anybody used the expression "farm-to-table."

Education was at the core of Lee's columns. She also devoted countless inches to putting women at ease. For instance, one of her earliest columns was a grocery shopper poll; in 1956, she wanted to know whether shoppers used mixes or cooked from scratch.

Every woman proudly claimed mixes. Nowadays, we tend to rue the advent of mass-produced food, and fret that people don't know how to make scratch biscuits. But for most of American history, people didn't make biscuits. Women made biscuits. And Lee and her contemporaries were instrumental in letting them know that it was OK to trade that chore for work outside the home, if they chose. "I used to think I had to do it the hard way," one woman told Lee. "Now I use all kind of mixes."

Only one shopper spoke up for scratch cooking. Robert Basford told Lee that he wouldn't stand for mixes in his wife's kitchen. In response to a follow-up question, he continued, "Do I help with the cooking? Mercy, no! That's my wife's job." Even in 1956, he came across as a jerk.

Gender issues weren't the only topics broached by female food editors. Because male editors of the paper generally didn't read the food pages, food editors had leeway to discuss subjects that the editorial board might sidestep. Lee's columns often touched on how

meager transportation was undermining nutrition. Other food editors returned to topics including child care and food stamps.

Yet these editors were not just a serious bunch. When friends remember them, one of the first things they invariably mention is a signature drink. Charlotte Walker, the food editor at the paper in Charleston, was partial to Scotch with ginger ale.

Bernice Burns, food editor of *Redbook*, was another judge at the Virginia event. When she died in 2014 at the age of 102, a colleague said, "I met her in the jungles of Peru in 1966 at a Shipibo Indian Village near Pucalpa. She arrived in a dugout canoe while I was filming the making of local beer by village women. She liked adventure."

But which chef's Sally Lunn bread did she like best? That's what the Virginia contest of 1948 was supposed to reveal.

The event had an inauspicious start: At the opening session, the

Virginia apples set aside for juicing had been inadvertently locked up. So the day started with Florida orange juice. Breakfast featured roe herring and batter bread, which initially confounded the judges. As the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported, "Three had to be briefed in the art... how to tell the roe from the meat."

Lunch featured clams on the half shell, Brunswick stew, buttermilk biscuits, corn sticks, watercress-and-tomato salad, and ice cream with Virginia raspberries and gingerbread. The writers on the panel weren't sure what to do with the cornsticks. Troubled by the amount of sugar and flour included, one said to another: "It's good. But is it really Virginian?"

Hines and Shane didn't care about authenticity. But over Brunswick stew, they traded theories over the declining quality of venison. Hines blamed rushed processing; Shane thought too many hunters were bad shots who hit deer in the pancreas.

Once the luncheon menu was publicized, *The New York Times'* editorial board agonized about authenticity, too. Whether the food was delicious or genuinely Virginian was immaterial, they argued. They doubted whether a sumptuous banquet was appropriate when most Americans were subsisting on soda pop, and chicken salad sandwiches: "There are those who are willing to risk a little of this decadence, if only it would filter down from places like Fredericksburg to those places at which most



of us perforce must eat.” The plate was political long before Americans were thinking about GMOs and sweetened beverage taxes.

Dinner in Fredericksburg included crab flake cocktail, green tomato pickles, baked ham with wine sauce, candied yams, corn pone, black-eyed peas, and pippin salad. Actually, that was the first dinner: Another dinner was served at 11 p.m., featuring smoked turkey, fried chicken, corn pudding, and spoon bread. It’s not clear whether the *New York Times* reporter was on hand to cover that snack.

The judges declared Woodrow Lee’s fried chicken to be best of the bunch. The head chef at the Beverly Hotel in Staunton, Lee had learned how to cook from his grandmother, Ida Lee, the head cook at Mary Baldwin College. Ida Lee had died about a year before the contest. She wasn’t around when her grandson received a letter from the Childs Company, one of the country’s first restaurant chains.

In the 1880s, when New Yorkers were despairing over swill milk and Typhoid Mary, Samuel and William Childs opened a restaurant clad in white marble. It looked clean, and the prices were reasonable. By the 1920s, there were more than 120 Childs locations. In 1925, William Childs made a disastrous business

decision: Inspired by his concern for customers’ health, he removed all meat products from the Childs menu. The company was still in a tailspin by the late 1940s, when Childs wrote to Woodrow Lee for his recipe. That is all to say: the saga that began when a New York humorist poked fun at Southern cooking ended when the Childs Company began serving Virginia-style fried chicken in Brooklyn.

Even though Southern food was making inroads up North, Shane wouldn’t give his hosts the satisfaction of shifting his culinary allegiances. As the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* put it, “he didn’t exactly break out a Confederate flag and sing Dixie.” But the fastidious George Frederick was moved by a watermelon pickle.

At the close of the event, a reporter caught up with him over dessert. He wrote, “Frederick fingered a bit of moist fruitcake and added reflectively, ‘It is a highly commendable enterprise to hold these tournaments. So many states are content with bragging about themselves rather than improving.’” The reporter politely refrained from pointing out that the event wasn’t entirely Virginia’s doing. It was jump-started by a food writer, judged by food writers, and covered by food writers, who gently nudged American food forward. 🍷

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## REBEL RECIPE

A POTLUCK DINNER LESSON

by Erika Council

“YOU CAN MAKE THE potato salad. I bet you make that really well.” At least that’s what I think the woman said, while handing me a sign-up sheet for our neighborhood potluck dinner. Surely she did not just say that. I looked around the room. I was the only black person. She assumed because I am black, I could cook anything. Including potato salad.

I ignored her, hoping she would recognize her error. Instead, she tried again.” We’re hoping you would make potato salad for the dinner,” she said. “That’s like, a soul

food specialty, right?” She leaned in closer, whispering, “soul food,” as if saying it out loud might cause her to lose standing with Jesus.

At this point, three other women joined the conversation and waited for my response. Mentally counting to 600, I tried to temper my patience. This didn’t work.

“Soul food?” I repeated, making a grand gesture of looking over my shoulder as I whispered the word. “You know, I’ve never made potato salad. Is that like tuna salad?” This was, of course, a lie, but I said it with a straight face. The four women looked at me in disbelief.



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