Gravy

FALL '10

A FOOD LETTER
FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

ISSUE NUMBER **THIRTY-EIGHT**

PUBLICATION OF GRAVY IS UNDERWRITTEN BY **MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER**

Gravy

ABOUT GRAVY

A publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a member-supported institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Visit www.southernfoodways.org.

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FALL 2010

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MEET CALVIN HEAD:
Agricultural Activist and John Egerton Prize Winner
Enriching a Delta community *"from the inside out"*

by Mary Margaret Miller

CALVIN HEAD, winner of the SFA's 2010 John Egerton Prize, steps into the driver's seat of a white passenger van. Director and founder of the West Holmes Community Development Organization (WHCDO), Head takes me on a tour of Holmes County, in the Delta region of Mississippi, where twelve African American–owned vegetable farms participate in the WHCDO farm initiative.

Yesterday, Head signed off on a federal housing grant. Tomorrow, he will lead a meeting of the community water board. Since 1996, he has been piloting an effort to bring food, jobs, education, housing, and hope to fourteen unincorporated villages here in Holmes County.

"Holmes County has the highest retention of minority-owned land in the country," Head says as he turns the key. But in the late 1990s, new generations of Holmes County residents were not interested in agriculture as their forefathers had been. They began to rent their land to the large landowners in the area as a way to make a profit.

In an effort to reorganize the cooperative, Head took on the task of showing locals that the biggest resource they could leverage for financial stability was their legacy of land stewardship.

"The vegetable-gardening initiative is the nucleus of the process," says Head. "It is how we generate a lot of our resources, and it is where we want to go in the future in terms of wealth creation—to have a place here in the western part of the county that we can bring fresh produce to, and distribute to different entities and industries within and surrounding this county."

WHCDO's biggest market for fresh produce is the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—generally known as WIC—provides food at no cost to low-income mothers and children.

The first year we started, about five or six years ago, they didn't want to eat the greens and squash and sweet potatoes. But now they have come around...

Head explains that Holmes County has the highest voucher-redemption rate in the state for the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. "The first year we started, about five or six years ago, they didn't want to eat the greens and squash and sweet potatoes," remembers Head. "But now they have come around, and I have noticed that they are buying more peas and more greens and more sweet potatoes and more corn and more tomatoes. Even the younger generation is understanding that the fast-food industry is not the way to go all the time."

Demetrus Rowe, a forty-year-old WHCDO vegetable farmer, met Head in 2004. Head encouraged Rowe to register with the Department of Agriculture's WIC program. "Everyone around me was farming and really happy about it," says Rowe. "It was lucrative. And watching other people around you grow things makes you want to grow, too."

"A lot of what people are eating in the community is being raised by us," Rowe explains. "We want to make people more aware of what is good for them and what is harmful. I've seen people changing the way they eat."

The WHCDO has also implemented a youth farming and business program. Over twenty young people, roughly between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, rise early to help the farmers in their fields, or meet after a morning of labor to distribute the day's harvest.

A youth mentor works with the new participants to train them in harvesting, market distribution, and pricing techniques. "The young people provide a labor force for the farmers, who are used to equipment doing all the work," says Head.

The biggest obstacle now facing the WHCDO is getting their storage facility outfitted with a commercial refrigerator. According to Head, such a storage facility will allow the WHCDO to supply larger markets and encourage other farmers to join the vegetable-gardening initiative.

As he drives back to the WHCDO office, Head's cell phone continues to ring, almost incessantly. His optimism remains high despite the challenges he faces: a hot, dry summer harvest with fall planting on the horizon, and keeping the momentum of the program high while seeking ways to pay the youth workers and supplement the farmers.

Head steps out of the van. He looks across the small garden by the WHCDO office and lists the benefits that the vegetable-growing program has already put into action:

"We are able to show people the advantages of eating healthy, locally grown produce versus what we are eating that comes from other places. We are trying to grow the community from the inside out by using the resources we have in the community to benefit the people in the community."

Mary Margaret Miller is a native of Sunflower County, Mississippi, where as a girl she planted a whiskey-barrel garden every spring. Today, she works as Heritage Director for the Mississippi Arts Commission.

WHO'S IN THE KITCHEN?

LAURA MARES AND GUILLERMO RAMIREZ

A husband-and-wife team from Mexico are the "backbone" of a landmark Atlanta-area restaurant.

by Ashley Hall

IF YOU HAVE HEARD OF ONLY ONE DISH put out by Watershed, the Southern culinary institution located in Decatur, Georgia, you know their fried chicken. The recipe was perfected years ago by chef—and Edna Lewis collaborator—Scott Peacock. Now, as then, it's offered only on Tuesday nights. From brine to skillet, it takes five days to craft this fried chicken, and it sells out almost every week.

What you probably don't know is that, if you've been lucky enough to sample this dish in the last decade, Laura Mares has been the woman behind the skillet. Peacock's chicken may be famous, but the woman who produces it is far from a household name.

"At this point, I suspect that Laura has fried more chicken than I have," says Peacock.

Originally from the state of Guerrero in southern Mexico, Laura and her husband, Guillermo Ramirez, have worked in Watershed's kitchen since before the restaurant opened in October 1998. They were hired as dishwashers but quickly graduated to full-time cooks. And today, their employers say the restaurant would not be the same without them.

"They are the absolute heart and soul of the restaurant. So much of [Watershed's] consistency is linked to Laura and Guillermo," Peacock explains. After all, a chef can't be in his kitchen every night, and a restaurant's reputation can be made or broken based on consistency. "People don't understand restaurants. They're factories. It's not a dinner party every night."

Joe Truex, who joined Watershed as partner and executive chef after Peacock's departure, has equally glowing reviews. "They're my backbone," he states simply.

When Laura Mares and Guillermo Ramirez started cooking at Watershed, they didn't know a lima bean from a collard green. They had never laid eyes on an eggplant and were nervous to see that Southerners don't always peel their vegetables before they eat them, as the couple was accustomed to doing in Mexico. Mares remembers the first time she tried a cucumber with the skin left on. "I'm thinking, *maybe my mouth is going to burn!*" she recalls, laughing at herself.

The first time they worked with black-eyed peas, Peacock spent some time showing the couple which peas were "*bueno*," and which were "*no bueno*." He instructed them to toss any that were dented or smashed. When he returned to check their progress, he realized

that they had misunderstood. Mares and Ramirez were methodically excising the eye from each individual pea, thinking they were bruised.

"Someone else would have thrown them in the garbage," Peacock says, still incredulous. "They were doing it for thirty minutes!"

LAURA MARES AND GUILLERMO RAMIREZ are members of the invisible army of immigrant prep cooks who comprise the lifeblood of many of America's restaurants. They chop, slice, and prep the food that will be finished to-order during business hours. Firm statistics on such cooks are hard to find. But if you look behind the doors of America's restaurant kitchens, you will find Guatemalans rolling sushi in New York, Nicaraguans plating foie gras in San Francisco, and Mexicans like Mares and Ramirez whipping up pimento cheese outside of Atlanta. Wherever there is a celebrity chef on the letterhead, there is almost certainly a troop of foreign-born prep and line cooks executing the chef's vision in the kitchen.

Wherever there is a celebrity chef on the letterhead, there is almost certainly a troop of foreign-born prep and line cooks executing the chef's vision in the kitchen.

Seasoned prep cooks can also offer consistency during a potentially challenging transition. Joe Truex found that out a few months back, when Peacock retired from Watershed. "Without Laura and Guillermo, I couldn't work here," Truex says. "They *are* the legacy of Watershed."

Mares, whose English has improved greatly since she moved to Atlanta twelve years ago, has a broad, gentle smile and speaks softly. Ramirez is more reserved than his wife, and seems to take cover behind his tough exterior and the language barrier.

The two met in Acapulco, Mexico. Ramirez was working in his parents' seafood restaurant, and Mares was hired to keep the books. She had no cooking experience, but she had always been "a good taster," she explains. Mares assesses her own mother's cooking with a succinct "no good."

Shortly after the pair met, Mares was invited over to the Ramirez household for dinner, and her taste buds found home. "That food got me hooked," she says warmly.

Today, the couple opens the restaurant at eight in the morning, six days a week. They check in the ingredient deliveries, sending back anything not up to Watershed's exacting quality standards. They prepare all of the house-made condiments. Depending on the menu, Ramirez will take charge of the chicken salad or egg salad. The couple is responsible for such iconic dishes as the pimento cheese and the butter bean hummus. Mares even produces most of Watershed's pastries, like the Georgia pecan tart with a shortbread crust.

Peacock may have been the architect of the cathedral that is Watershed, but by all accounts, Laura Mares and Guillermo Ramirez are its load-bearing walls.

Ashley Hall is a wine professional, freelance writer, former newspaperwoman, and food enthusiast based in Atlanta, Georgia. Photo below by Brian Crumb.

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Valerie Erwin

A Geechee Girl, balancing innovation and familiarity

by Sara Camp Arnold

THOUGH SHE WAS RAISED IN PHILADELPHIA, Valerie Erwin grew up eating and learning to cook hoppin' John and red rice, dishes that spoke of her family's roots in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia. Today she is the chef and owner of Geechee Girl Rice Café in Philadelphia, a culinary love letter to the Lowcountry grain.

Most of Erwin's dishes feature some type of rice, but her menu also provides comfort to homesick Southerners who crave buttermilk biscuits, greens, and black-eyed peas. She cooks with an awareness of the grain's place at the global table, incorporating nods to Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. In the process, Erwin makes all rice-eating peoples welcome.

1. Geechee Girl's menu is largely based on the cuisine of the Lowcountry South, but in what ways do your dishes also feature rice as an international staple?

Having a Chinese roommate in college was the start of my lifelong infatuation with international cooking. I was thinking, "Okay. Somebody else who eats rice every day." When I started telling people the name of my soon-to-open restaurant, I found out how many people eat rice. Serving some of those dishes was a great way to combine a few of my interests: innovation, international cooking, and [paying] tribute to rice.

These days, I do international dishes as mostly specials. I don't want people to be confused about what it is we do. But we have served things like risotto made with Carolina Gold rice, Chinese sticky rice with Chinese sausage, basmati rice with grated lemon (learned from an Indian friend), and Caribbean rice and peas.

2. Could you tell us a little more about the provenance, character, and taste of the varieties of rice you serve at the restaurant?

We serve Thai jasmine rice as the main long-grain white rice at the restaurant. Years ago, my sister and I started eating it at home, because supermarket white rice no longer had any taste. It's a widely available product—even supermarkets carry it now—and it's reasonably priced. Jasmine rice has such a lovely, sweet aroma and taste, and a firm texture that stands up well to sauces and composed rice dishes.

We've served Carolina Gold—the heirloom Lowcountry rice—since we opened. I'd known about this iconic rice for years, but the end of the story was always, "It's not grown anymore." I think that it's

amazing that Carolina Gold became available just around the time that we opened. We get it from Anson Mills.

We buy the middling, or cracked, Carolina Gold because it provides an entirely different texture from whole-grain white rice. Carolina Gold has a delicate flavor. It has a fluffy texture when it's plain, but it also makes a nice, creamy risotto because of the exposed starch in the grains.

We rotate the other rices that we serve. Recently, it's been the "forbidden" black rice.... It has a nutty flavor and a soft texture and has the advantage of being whole grain. Black rice is originally from Thailand, where it was reserved for the elite.

We've tried to balance innovation with familiarity so that everyone—foodie or not—can feel comfortable.

3. In a diverse, cosmopolitan city such as Philadelphia, who makes up the clientele at Geechee Girl?

Most of our customers are people who live near the restaurant, in the Mt. Airy section of Philadelphia. Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods, and we're a neighborhood restaurant. But that being said, I've never seen such a diverse customer base in all my years in the restaurant business.

We get a lot of Southern expatriates—black, white, and occasionally of other ethnicities—who miss Southern food. Most of the places that sell Southern food [in Philadelphia] are takeout restaurants, or they serve from a steam table. We have table service and do à la minute cooking. I think that sets us apart.

There are these two middle-aged white women whose mother was from the South. Even though they grew up in Pennsylvania, they associate Southern food with home. They live in opposite, far-flung suburbs but meet every Sunday at Geechee Girl. Geographically, we're not even in the middle, but I guess that emotionally we are.

This year we had a family of South Asian descent: two twentysomething daughters and their mother. They had recently moved to Philadelphia after living in Alabama for years. One of the daughters complimented me on a dish and then said, "We're Indian. We know flavor."

African Americans from around the city will hear about us and make a special trip to eat at a black-owned restaurant. In general, our customers are well-to-do foodies, but our African-American customers run the gamut as far as income and food sophistication. We've tried to balance innovation with familiarity so that everyone—foodie or not—can feel comfortable. We have young black mother, originally from Charleston, who comes in with her little girl to have shrimp and grits. She'd felt frustrated that she couldn't find "good food" in Philadelphia. She's a professional woman who lives in Mt. Airy, so these categories often overlap.

I find that African Americans feel a special sense of pride in the restaurant. They love the traditional aspects of the menu. (Only the people with Lowcountry roots understand the rice thing, though.)

Then we have customers from the African diaspora. Sometimes they live in the neighborhood. Sometimes they come with friends. Occasionally they see our logo of the turbaned woman fanning rice and think we're from wherever they're from.

I had a server whose parents were Nigerian, and she was typical of a lot of our African customers. No matter what delicious things I made for staff meal, if rice wasn't on the table, Ruby would ask if we could have rice. People from Africa and the Caribbean understand rice. They also understand big flavors—which is how we cook. And they understand the feeling of warmth and of community that I think we all retain from our African forebears.

Sara Camp Arnold is the editor of Gravy. *She is pursuing an MA in folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill. Photo of Chef Erwin by Ricardo Barros.*

HONEYBEE, WON'T YOU BE MY BAKERY

In Oxford, Shannon Adams crafts gourmet sweets and local treats

by Lisa Howorth

OXFORD IS LUCKY to have a number of great locally owned bakeries, including Bottletree, just off the Oxford Square, and Honeybee Bakery, the latest golden baby Jesus in the king cake of good places to eat in our little town. (Also worth your patronage is Lusa, a new Portuguese bakery on North Lamar.)

Late in the morning on a recent Friday, Honeybee was, forgive me, a hive of activity. A cloud of sugar and flour swirled in the shoebox café. There had been a cake drama about an order going to the wrong frat house. "There were two Sigma-somethings!" said proprietor Shannon Adams, who buzzed about the lemon-yellow storefront, set in the back corner of a strip mall.

Honeybee is a family operation. Shannon leads. Her brothers follow: Sean got his culinary training at the Colorado Art Institute; Brian is a student and a photographer; Chris was a walk-on football player at Ole Miss.

"We fight a lot," says Shannon. "Everyone has an opinion about how we should do things, but Big Sister is right."

At Honeybee, the sprouted twelve-grain loaf relies on flax, spelt, buckwheat, corn, sesame, oat, and God knows what-all else. On the sweet side of the case, there are trifles, chess pies, berry cobblers, strawberry layer cakes, vanilla cupcakes, and bread puddings.

Shannon crafts soup specials daily, too, according to what farmers Doug Davis and Daniel Doyle of Yocona Bottom Farms bring to the back door. There's a B.L.T sandwich, and also an A.L.T., built on a base of avocado. Breakfast features some of the best huevos rancheros north of the Rio Grande.

While a ceramics student at Ole Miss, Shannon waited tables at City Grocery. Her first business venture was a booth at the Mid Town Farmers Market, where she sold baked goods to people who wanted bread that wasn't just an envelope for a sandwich and pastry that wasn't just sugar and preservatives.

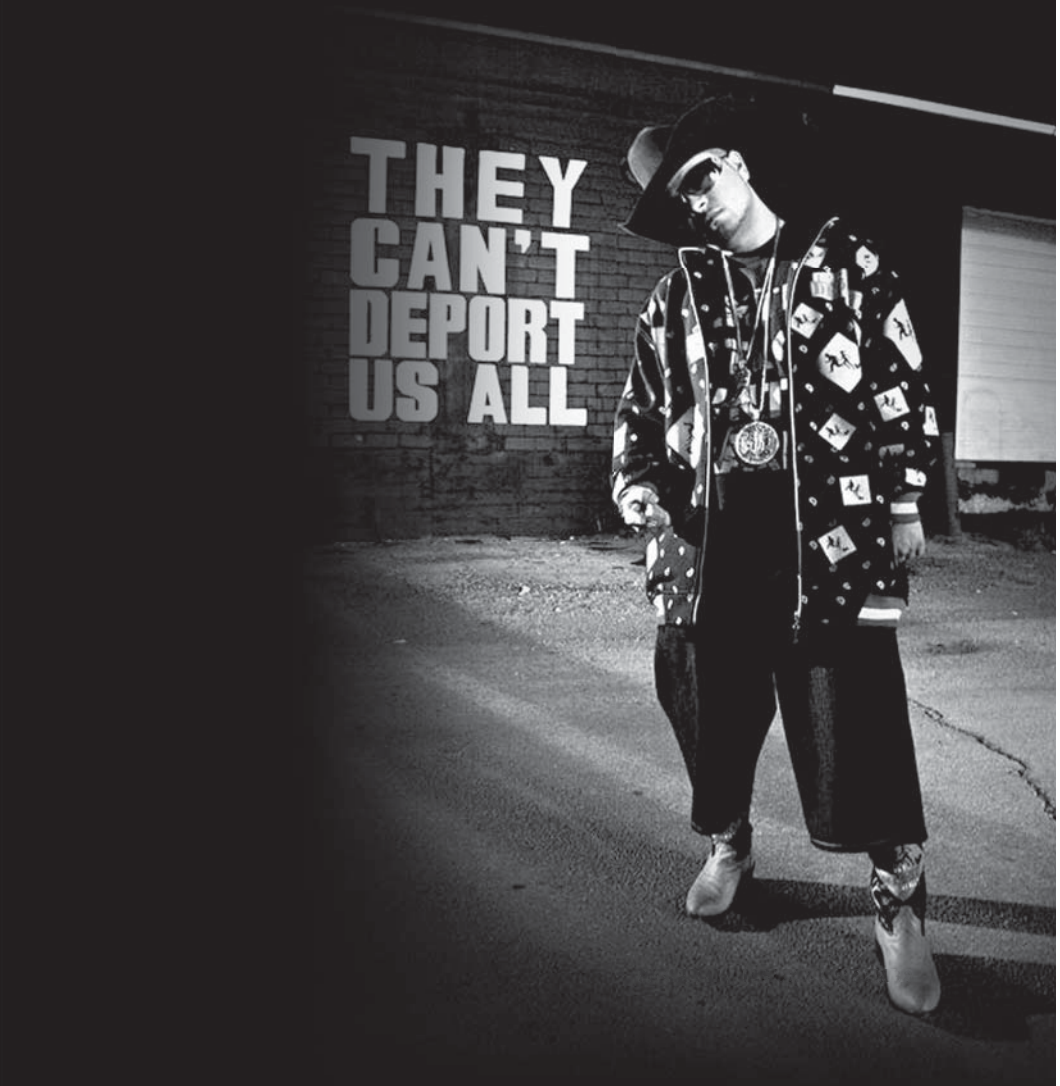
At Honeybee, she has realized her potential and delivered Oxford its next great bakery.

Lisa Howorth is co-owner, with her husband Richard, of Square Books in Oxford, Mississippi. Her writing has appeared in a variety of publications, including Garden & Gun. *Photo above by Brian Adams.*

CHINGO BLING

"THE MASA MESSIAH"

by Robb Walsh



"TEXAS ISN'T ONLY THE BORDER between the United States and Mexico, it's also on the border between the South and the Southwest—and Chingo Bling is a walking manifestation of where Atzalan meets the Dirty South," writes Houston music critic John Nova Lomax.

When I first heard about Chingo Bling in 2002, I assumed he was another dangerous rapper from the Houston barrios like the South Park Mexican, who had just been sent to prison. Dressed in a cowboy hat, aviator sunglasses, and ostrich-skin cowboy boots with oversized Nike swooshes on the sides, Chingo Bling certainly looked like a postmodern *pachuco* thug.

But people kept asking me if I had tried Chingo Bling's tamales and his hot sauce. A rapper who sold tamales? Then came his "Money and Masa" tour and his over-the-top nickname, "The Masa Messiah."(Masa is the corn dough you use to make Mexican tamales.) I was still puzzled when I watched his video titled "Taco Shop" and laughed hysterically at the scene where the semi-clad girlfriend is covered in chopped iceberg, grated cheese, and tomato slices. (Check it out on YouTube.) Finally it dawned on me: It was all a spoof.

The subject matter of gangsta rap was urban violence and dealing drugs. Rappers like 50 Cent had to prove they were the real deal by detailing their vast criminal experience. Chingo Bling was doing a send-up of the drug dealer/musician shtick. In his debut album, *Tamale Kingpin*, he told the story of his rise as the "kingpin of an international tamale cartel." Instead of a pimped-out car, he drives a tamale truck festooned with his album covers. He once complained that a shipment of his piñatas was seized at the border by FDA agents, who smashed them all open looking for masa.

Chingo Bling's given name is Pedro Herrera III. He was born in Houston to Mexican immigrants. His father worked several jobs to put his kids through school. Chingo Bling attended Trinity University in San Antonio, where he studied business administration and marketing. He learned about rap from his older sisters, and he started out in the music business as a DJ at frat parties.

In San Antonio, his comedy-rap antics earned him a Sunday-night show on the college radio station. That got him introductions into the local rap scene. In 2002, Chingo started Big Chile Records and released his first underground tapes. He began showing up at recording sessions and providing feedback to other musicians. He

aspired to become a producer, à la Russell Simmons and Sean Combs. The other rappers begged Chingo Bling to add his comedy routines to their recordings.

But comedy took a backseat in 2007, when Chingo Bling released a national album titled *They Can't Deport Us All*. As the son of immigrants, he wanted to add his voice to the immigration debate. When Chingo plastered the album cover on his tamale truck, the truck started getting vandalized and shot at in Houston.

When Chingo plastered the album cover on his tamale truck, the truck started getting vandalized and shot at in Houston.

Somebody painted out the T in CAN'T and spray-painted GO HOME on the side of his truck. When Chingo Bling restored the cover art on the side of the truck, the vandals struck again—and this time, they broke out the windshield. It's been a tough couple of years. Though he's glad he took on the social justice issue, he has promised fans that it's back to tamales on his next album.

Even if Chingo Bling goes back to his tamale-kingpin persona, *They Can't Deport Us All* has given his humor an edge. While his early raps cast him as the Weird Al Yankovic of Tex-Mex, his foray into politics and social criticism has brought a Chris Rock–like consciousness to his act.

If you walked away from the 2010 SFA Symposium with a Chingo Bling–autographed corn shuck, consider yourself lucky.

Robb Walsh is a founding member of Foodways Texas and the author of Sex, Death, and Oysters: A Half-Shell Lover's World Tour.

THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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PUBLICATION OF GRAVY is underwritten by Mountain Valley Spring Water.

Thank you

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