Gravy

Oh when our joints refuse to function / When we stand in need of unction /
Bring us two pork chops apiece / A skillet, lots of room, and grease.
– "Song to Grease" from *Soupsongs* by Roy Blount

NUMBER 24, SPRING 2007 NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Bowen's Island Oral History Project

by Amy Evans, *SFA Oral Historian*

To the uninitiated, the oyster joint on Bowen's Island was a curiosity of sorts—an aging pile of cinderblocks and boards plastered with layers of graffiti. Inside the bivalves were cooked on a flattop that resembled a sacrificial altar. To legions of loyal customers, the place could hardly be called a restaurant. It was a state of mind.

In 2006, as Bowen's Island Restaurant celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, Robert Barber accepted a James Beard America's Classic Award. Five months later the restaurant – started by his late grandmother, May Bowen—burned to the ground. What remained were the stories.

May Bowen, a hairdresser, and her husband, Jimmy, a printer, wanted to start a business of their own near their home in Charleston, South Carolina. In the early 1940s they opened a Folly Beach restaurant, Bob's Lunch, named after May's son from her first marriage, Bob Barber. They served seafood, meat-and-threes, and May's homemade pies.

In 1946 the Bowens purchased a small fourteen-acre inlet island at the end of James Island, just north of Folly Beach. They built a road to the island and, near the end of the road, a house. As fishermen began docking on their shore, the island became known as Bowen's Island. When fishermen started asking May Bowen to cook their catch, a restaurant was born.

Bowen's Island Restaurant began as a simple cinderblock building, where oysters were roasted and shrimp were fried. Word spread quickly. Oysterpickers brought their catch to sell, and Citadel cadets filled the small dining room on Friday nights. As the place became more popular, the Bowens added rooms and built decks. Customers added contributions, too. In time, sixty years of graffiti covered the walls—and the chairs, and the jukebox, and May's vintage hair-curling machine over in the corner.

Sixty years of stories have now been collected as part of the SFA's Bowen's Island Oral History Project. Oysterpicker Victor "Goat" Lafayette started bringing oysters to May Bowen when he was a kid. De facto manager Jack London found respite on Bowen's Island after years in the shrimping business. Longtime customer Paula Byers celebrated her daughter's wedding at Bowen's Island; Robert Barber, an ordained minister, performed the ceremony.

After three months of rebuilding, Bowen's Island Restaurant has reopened. Fresh oysters are being brought in from the marshes, new walls are ready to receive their marks, and new memories are being made.

Fall into the Bowen's Island state of mind when we visit this legendary haunt as part of our June Field Trip. Visit the oral history project online at www.southernfoodways.com.

Hot off the Griddle

Three books—and two journals—just came across the SFA transom. We thought you would like to know about the texts *Texas Cowboy Cookbook: A History in Recipes and Photos* by Robb Walsh and *Moonshine!: Recipes, Tall Tales, Drinking Songs, Historical Stuff, Knee-Slappers, Recoverin' the Next Day, Pleasin' the Law, How to Make it, and How to Drink it* by Matthew Rowley.

As for those journals, the winter 2007 edition of the *Southern Quarterly* is chockablock with foodstuffs, including essays by Jessica Harris, Gerald Patout, and Amy Evans. Order your copy at www.usm.edu/soq. And be on the lookout for *Mixologist: The Journal of the American Cocktail*. Volume Two includes a meditation on ice by Audrey Saunders. Email mixellany@mac.com for copies.

GRAVY

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Editor: **Thomas Head**
thomashead@thomashead.com

Associate Editor: Angie Mosier
food@angiemosier.com

Associate Editor: Timothy C. Davis
timothycdavis1@gmail.com

Director: **John T Edge**
johnt@olemiss.edu

Brains of the Operation:
Mary Beth Lasseter
sfamail@olemiss.edu

SFA Member Reid Mizell Continues the Discussion

by Angie Mosier, *SFA Board Vice-President*

"Surfing the internet; that's how I found the SFA," says Reid Mizell, longtime member and CEO of Tula, a hip marketing firm in Atlanta, Georgia. "I was researching something for a client and stumbled upon the SFA website. I guess I have attended about seven symposia so far."

It's fun to find out how folks happen upon our group. Some are led by a friend, some attended Ole Miss, some find it through their jobs in the food business, and then there are those, like Mizell, who see a blurb on the Web or a snippet in a magazine. The draw was instant. "My family has been in the South for three hundred years. We can literally visit grave sites of relatives that have been here that long. I always wanted my children to feel a connection to their home land and so we have taken the trips, told them stories and they know their relatives and how the food I grew up eating in Athens, Alabama, tastes. It is important to me."

When she first joined the group she knew that, beyond the eating, there would be some heady talk about tradition and history. Reid also knew that the group's mission statement promised to explore the diverse food cultures of the American South. "I was excited about that prospect because my experience with gatherings in the South has been that the race talk was in that big bucket of things that you don't talk about," says Mizell. "I always hated that about most Southern gatherings, so when it started coming up at SFA meetings, I really tuned in and it made me fall in love with the group."

A few years back when the SFA declared that an entire year's programming would be "Southern Food in Black and White," Mizell was ready: "Ever since I was a teenager I have been trying to reach for a level of conversation regarding race relations that will help me move forward and become more aware of the struggle and how to make that struggle easier. It's about personal reconciliation as well as the state of a culture that you love.

"Talking about it allows you to move forward. We have a shared history and it makes us understand our own story better to hear what others have experienced. We shouldn't just assume that someone has a certain story because they grew up white in the South or whether they grew up black in the South. We should hear the stories to get the picture."

Following the "Black and White" symposium, program chair, Adrian Miller, challenged attendees to return home and gather friends, black and white, around a table to continue the discussion. Mizell took the lead: "I decided to invite friends, black and white—an even number of both—and young as well as mature," she says. We had twenty-somethings and forty and fifty-somethings there. We chose to make the theme 'Sunday Supper' and asked folks to bring something they might eat after church on Sunday.

"We enjoyed fried chicken, ribs, tomato casserole, pound cake, sweet tea, Cokes in little bottles, things like that. Everyone loved it and it proved that we eat the same and share the fun and fellowship that comes from gathering together in the same way. We spoke about the past and found that our children (the twenty-somethings) were interested to hear that each of us (the older folks) all had some kind of link to a farm or a garden in their past. They don't have that memory at all and it sort of shocked us to find that we are losing that link to the land so quickly. We hope to host another dinner soon."

Asked whether the Southern Foodways Alliance should continue to engage dialogue about racial reconciliation, Mizell enthusiastically says, "Yes! You know there was a level of emotional resonance at the "Black and White" symposium. We came away feeling full spiritually and I think we need to revisit the subject in some way every time. I believe that continuing the talk will anchor our ideas that 'food as culture' is more than sharing stories and recipes. While those things are important, there is more; there is rich ground to explore out there."

Letter from the President

The year 2007 began with a productive Atlanta SFA board of directors retreat on January 6 and 7, organized by vice president, Angie Mosier, and hosted by Linton and Gina Hopkins, chef and owners of the stylish and delicious, Restaurant Eugene. We worked hard, folks, but amazing meals of home-made scones and biscuits, a citrus-laden trifle, Benton's bacon (only two pieces each, please—hold back, Brett Anderson!), and a scrumptious lunch of shrimp and grits kept us sustained as we reviewed long-range plans and discussed goals and programs for the coming year.

A highlight of the weekend included the first SFA Potlikker Film Festival at Atlanta's Sweetwater Brewery, featuring three films by SFA filmmaker, Joe York. The sold-out event brought us many new Atlanta members, who were introduced to us by way of mouth-watering movie concessions, including pig on a stick and potlikker shots.

Our plates are full in the coming months: The first annual gathering of the Fellowship of Southern Artisans and Chefs was celebrated at Blackberry Farm on February 24. And we recently completed work Willie Mae Seaton's New Orleans home and restaurant and toasted the work of John Currence at an April 1 dinner at Rio Mar in New Orleans.

Two SFA day camps are coming up—Camp Shoals, April 20-21, in and around Florence and Tuscumbia, Alabama, and Camp Carolina, September 7-8, in and around Chapel Hill. And then there's the June 22-24 Field Trip to Charleston, South Carolina. And a July 21 Potlikker Film Festival in Houston, Texas.

Meanwhile, long-term planning is underway for foodways lectureships, classes, and seminars at the University of Mississippi. And Melissa Hall will join the SFA staff as a full-time Communications staffer this year. Last, Adrian Miller and his committee members are hard at work organizing an extra special fall SFA symposium which will mark the tenth anniversary centerpiece of our programs.

As you can see, the "state" of the SFA is great, and we count on your financial support to make our work possible. Thank you for your loyal friendship and enthusiasm. Please contact me if you'd like to learn more about the SFA or share a suggestion. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Marcie Cohen Ferris
ferrism@email.unc.edu

Spotlight on Charleston: SFA Founder Louis Osteen

by Timothy C. Davis, Myrtle Beach Food Maven

Louis Osteen of Louis's at Pawleys in Pawleys Island, South Carolina, has been called many things over the years: the father of Lowcountry cuisine, a groundbreaker in popularizing regional foodstuffs, and a James Beard Best Chef Southeast 2004, to name but a few.

But Osteen, a founding member of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a recent inductee into the Fellowship of Southern Chefs, Artisans, and Farmers at the Blackberry Farm 2007 Taste of the South Gala, and a towering figure in American cuisine no matter the region, doesn't suffer foodies—or better put, food snobs—gladly.

"I always realized that there was good food and not-so-good food, depending on who made it," Osteen says. "I began worrying about that kind of stuff in high school when I worked at my family's drive-in theatre—that I could affect how the hamburgers and French fries came out."

"I think I became regional—like a lot of people—in the early 1980s," he says. "My beginnings were in a French kitchen and those guys were tough on American food. Back then it was all 'hamburgers and Coca-Cola.'"

Osteen's knack is for combining French techniques with typical Lowcountry, coastal Carolina ingredients—rice, sweet onions, fish, shellfish, and oysters.

"All regional cuisine is that byproduct of the heritage of the regional population as well as the stuff that grows there," says Osteen. "[Which is] all very logical, but exploring these backgrounds a little makes for some interesting items. Most all of the kitchen techniques that we use relate back to their classic French cousins."

Osteen has built a bustling "off-season" business in Pawleys with nightly and weekend specials geared to locals—his fried chicken Sundays are legendary from Myrtle Beach to Charleston. He's also opened a super-casual, funky eatery on the same property called the Fish Camp Bar—a place, that, more often than not, you can find Osteen and/or his wife Marlene eating lunch.

"Sort of like how regional food evolves because of place, so does the clientele," says Osteen. "Just makes sense to feed who's there." Of the Fish Camp Bar, Osteen says that, "We all know that 'fine dining' is challenged, so it seemed time to relax a notch."

One thing that won't change, according to Osteen, is the focus on local and regional ingredients. "We buy a great deal of local fish and seafood," he says. "We'd like to buy more produce locally, but it's difficult…When I first moved to the South Carolina coast, there were six processors of South Carolina crabmeat. Now, there are none. I think that's a real shame."

Which is just like Osteen, you understand: thinking locally, and, as a result, acting globally.

Soup Beans: An Appalachian Tradition

by Mark Sohn, Author of *Appalachian Home Cooking*

Next fall when the excitement gets underway in Harlan, Kentucky, you can expect to see huge pots of beans—thick, simmering, pork-flavored soup beans.

You'll find them at the Festival of Mountain Masters, a grand gathering of fiddlers, quilters, craftsmen, and cooks. Standards are set by cooks of fried apple pies and stack cakes. But pinto bean and its soup counterpart, soup beans, will have special places at the table. Known in Latin as Phaselous vulgaris L., soup beans are, along with cornmeal and wheat flour, a first choice, a winter choice, a traditional Appalachian food.

When the sun is so low in the sky it fails to reach back into the hollows, soup beans are constants. Fifty years ago they often simmered on the back of the stove all day, and in the eighteenth century when some hill country householders were truly pioneers on the frontier, the combination of soup beans, fried potatoes, and cornbread provided sufficient protein for survival.

The original Americans gave settlers beans and corn. Native Americans were successful farmers, and early frontiersmen learned from them how to grow, dry, and store pinto beans. In later times grocers imported the beans from the Midwest, Southwest, and even Mexico.

Soup beans, the dish you'll find in Harlan next fall, are a combination of cured pork and pintos, and they merit a place on the list of famous Southern soups and stews, including burgoo, peanut soup, pine bark stew, and she-crab soup. But in the mountains when the sky turns gray and the sun is low at noon, it's the delicate aroma of boiling beans that fills the house. In Harlan next fall, it will filter over the streets.

Boiled dry beans are so common in the mountains, you would expect to find home cooks using the leftovers to make fried bean patties or cakes. And they do. Highlanders also use cooked beans to make chili and, on occasion, they even mix them with coconut, butter, eggs, sugar, and corn syrup to make sweet bean pie.

So next fall when the frost has browned the last of the marigolds and most leaves are off the trees, head to Harlan, Kentucky, for the Festival of the Mountain Masters where you will find soup beans served with cornbread, chopped onions, and long-cooked greens.

This year's festival will be held November 24-25. For more information, call the Harlan County Chamber of Commerce at 606-573-4717.

The University of Mississippi
Southern Foodways Alliance
Center for the Study of Southern Culture
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