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NO. 91
SPRING
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JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

Why we fact-check *Gravy*

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

FIFTEEN-AND-A-HALF YEARS AGO, I WALKED into the Old Main building at the University of Central Arkansas to begin an unpaid editorial internship at *The Oxford American*, as the magazine's name was styled in those days. One of my first lessons that week was a crash course in fact-checking. My teacher was a fellow intern with senior status: a UCA undergraduate who'd been at *The OA* a year or so by then. (This was what we called it for short, years before Netflix released an unrelated science fiction series by the same name.) I think he had been instructed to scare me into taking the responsibility seriously, and he succeeded.

There was good reason for this tactic: Three years earlier, *The OA* had printed an essay entitled "Coal Miner Mother" by a reclusive yet sought-after writer called JT LeRoy. In this essay, he recounted shoplifting food and liquor from a Nashville-area Publix with his mother, the latest in a series of published pieces recounting his painful childhood. But, as a Houston journalist soon realized, Tennessee doesn't allow liquor sales at grocery stores, and there were no Publix stores in the state at the time his story (supposedly) took place.

Eventually, Leroy was unmasked as a hoax with a backstory almost as bizarre as the fictions he—actually, she—passed off as memoirs, but not before duping a number of book and magazine editors and Hollywood film producers who, in retrospect, should have known better. Many of Leroy's lies could have made it into the pages of many reputable magazines by passing through a crack called "on author": The fact-checker accepts as true a detail that only the author himself can verify. But it turned out *The OA* had missed a few very checkable details in Leroy's essay, an oversight that would inform the training of every subsequent fact-checker.

Three years later, I was taught to check for exactly those kinds of inaccuracies. I remember "JT LeRoy" being invoked in the office as shorthand for why we fact-checked as assiduously as we did. But I didn't actually remember that sentence, those details—Tennessee, Publix, liquor—when I began planning this editor's note. It's another argument in favor of fact-checking: We're human. We forget stuff.

I wish I'd kept a list of the more arcane, off-the-wall, and borderline ridiculous facts I chased down that year. The annual music issue demanded the most intensive checking: combing the fine

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print of liner notes for a horn credit or the correct punctuation of a quoted lyric. By the following summer, I was the one training a new crop of interns, measuring my tone to inject a healthy dose of fear each lesson.

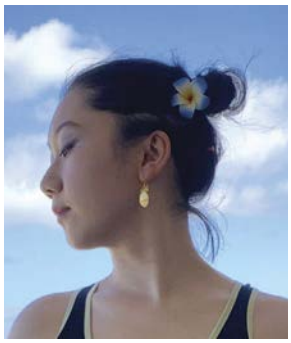
I enjoyed the work, enjoyed geeking out on tracking down sources, finding answers, and offering corrections to sentences, phrases, and even punctuation marks that very few readers would even think to question. (It's Dr Pepper, weirdly.) But once I moved up the editorial ladder, I can't say I missed the tedious nature of fact-checking all that much. Some of my early romance with it may have been simple proximity—*I'm doing a literary thing! I'm helping to make a magazine!* But what's telling is that the fact-checking system I brought to *Gravy* (and later, to *Gravy* podcast) looks a lot like the one I learned at *The OA*.

I'm lucky to work with a handful of women who approach the job with grace, gravity, and, when the occasion calls for it (as it often does), a healthy dose of humor. Olivia Terenzio, who spends much of her time on the podcast side of *Gravy* these days, proved herself as a thorough—and thoroughly organized—fact-checker as a graduate student. On the print side, Katie Carter King copyedits and fact-checks each issue, catching and correcting everything from inconsistent spellings to missing commas to misquoted statistics. Last year, Heather Cole, a seasoned archivist and researcher who has been building the SFA's digital archive for the last three years, joined the team as our podcast fact-checker.

I brag on *Gravy*'s fact-checkers because their work matters. And because, when done well, that work is unseen. As a quarterly magazine and a biweekly podcast, we don't break news. We've never sent a reporter to a war zone or to the White House. But we care deeply that the stories we tell are true and accurate. It's too easy to find ones that aren't.

I'm sure we've made mistakes, and I'm acutely aware that, as soon as I crow about our fact-checking, some eagle-eyed reader is all the more likely to spot an error in this issue. So be it. We'll keep doing our best to get it right.

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS



FLORA BAI is an illustrator based in New York City who has a BA in interior design and an MFA in illustration. She draws with sensitivity and playful colors and is inspired by traditional Chinese line drawing. Her growing client roster includes the *Los Angeles Times*, Dr. Martens, Marvis, TÖST, *Saveur*, Tencent, and others. Bai works mostly from her home studio with her baby Yorkie, Zima.

MERCEDES KANE is fascinated by the human experience and its contrasts and connections. The founder of Daisy May Films, she directed the documentaries *Art and Pep* (2022, Peacock), *More with Less: The Power of HBCUs in America* (2022), *What Remains: The Burning Down of Black Wall Street* (2021) and *Breakfast at Ina's* (2016, Amazon Prime). Kane lives in Atlanta with her husband, their two children, and two mischievous tuxedo cats.

MARÍA LOOR is a graphic designer and illustrator based in sunny Los Angeles. She grew up in Ecuador with Colombian traditions and delicious food. She graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design and has lived in different parts of the world, working in advertising, branding, and packaging while exhibiting her art and raising her two boys. She lives with her wife, two Australian shepherds, and two cats.

ADÁN MEDRANO is a food writer, chef, and owner of JM Communications. He specializes in the Indigenous cuisine and cooking methods of Texas and the Americas, and spent twenty-three years working across Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Medrano is the president of The Texas Indigenous Food Project and the founder of the San Antonio CineFestival, the first and now longest-running Latinx film festival in the United States.

OMME-SALMA RAHEMTULLAH is the executive director of the nonprofit organization FoodShare South Carolina, a 2021 South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) archival creators fellow, and an adjunct professor of food systems at the University of South Carolina's Arnold School of Public Health. Born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and raised in Toronto, Canada, she has lived in South Carolina for the past seven years.

GRACE RAMEY is a photojournalist for the *Bowling Green Daily News* in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where she has covered high-school sports championships, tornadoes, fires, major horse races, and more. After graduating from college with degrees in journalism and business, she previously worked as a photographer and page designer at the *Watertown Public Opinion* in Watertown, South Dakota.

Photos courtesy of the contributor except María Loor (Gilda Zevallos), Adán Medrano (Maria D. De Jesus), Omme-Salma Rahemtullah (Scott Trafton)

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HARDETTE HARRIS GREW UP IN MINDEN, LOUISIANA, ABOUT THIRTY MINUTES EAST OF Shreveport. "People think we're closer to New Orleans," she says. "We're not. We're up north." She moved to Houston, Texas, after high school and worked for a decade as a civilian in the Houston Police Department. Meanwhile, she went to culinary school. She spent several years as a private chef before returning home in 2013 to care for her aging parents. That's when she noticed something: "North Louisiana had adopted southern Louisiana cuisine as ours. But we have our own foodways and culinary traditions in the northern part of Louisiana." Harris began a dinner series celebrating north Louisiana cuisine—including freshwater fish and local produce—which ultimately became her business, Us Up North.

Us Up North

I made a name for myself locally by cooking a meal that the city declared the "official meal of north Louisiana." It included potato salad, pinto beans, rice and gravy, mustard greens, and more. Right now, I have pop-ups. I book culinary experiences for groups. I want the business to be a what's-on-the-stove sort of thing—like if you went to your grandmother's house in the country. My customers' favorites are the greens and fried catfish.

Mahaffey Farms

Mahaffey Farms raises red wattle hogs. The owner, Evan McCommon, has taken an interest in my work from the beginning. I'll take whatever meat or produce he has. They have a farm store now, and you can go in and get all the food they produce. They have an Airbnb on the family property, and you hear animals when you wake up. It's warm and welcoming—one of my favorite places.

Milam Street Kitchen Incubator

MS KICK, as it's called, is sponsored by Southern University at Shreveport. I serve on the advisory board. The tenants have awesome food: Caribbean, barbecue, pistolettes, vegan. These are small businesses that work hard to give you the best of what they offer. Vegans on the Run—I love their nachos. Big Nate's BBQ is the best barbecue in the city. The Smoking Oyster does grilled oysters. It's just a wonderful place for Shreveport.

The Cross Lake Maison

A friend of mine owns a vacation rental on Cross Lake, outside of the city. It's affordable, cute—all of those great things you look for in a rental. And there's freshwater fishing right there. You don't hear anything but what's on the water. They have fishing poles. You can go outside in your pajamas and fish, then come back inside and fry it.

Illustrations by Bridgette Blanton / Tiny Pencil Studio

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

FOOD LITERACY, ONE PLATE AT A TIME

Nutritionist Sadé Meeks is on a mission to empower her clients to make healthy, affordable choices.

BY CHARLIE PAPPAS

THE BEST STORYTELLERS SHOW RATHER THAN TELL. THEY BUILD SCENES THAT ILLUSTRATE a point so a reader or viewer can imagine themselves in the middle of a world the writer has created. Sadé Meeks is doing a version of that right now in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi—through food. After receiving a bachelor's degree in culinary arts from Mississippi University for Women and then going on to Cal State LA for her master's in nutritional science, Meeks returned to Jackson to further her work. The thirty-year-old's goal is to improve the food- and nutritional literacy of residents in underserved communities. She knows she's not the first to try. Yet, through her organization Growing Resilience in the South, or GRITS, Inc., Meeks shows her clients how to supplement their diets with whole foods that proliferated in backyard gardens for generations: green beans, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, collards, cabbage—the sorts of staples traditionally picked fresh and prepared the same day. Her message isn't simply that healthy foods help fight or prevent conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, but that they are ancestral foods that, when prepared healthfully, have the power to connect the eater to their forbears' foodways. Those foods can have the same impact, she tells them, whether they're plucked from the garden or purchased on sale at the grocery store.

It is not easy work. Take the differences between white and brown rice. White rice is a bedrock ingredient in many Southern dishes and meals. But it has come to be viewed as the unhealthy option compared to brown rice, which typically has more fiber. Meeks tells clients to go ahead and cook the white rice but to monitor portion size and pair it with plenty of green vegetables and other ingredients that balance the meal. For her efforts, Meeks won the Southern Foodways Alliance's 2023 John Egerton Prize, which each year honors an individual or organization whose work addresses issues of race, class, gender, or social or environmental justice through the lens of food.

As Meeks says in a video for GRITS: "We may not be able to control all the stressors on the outside, but we can work toward improving the internal stressors. We can start by reconnecting with the foods that generations before us grew up on, thus improving our resilience." She spoke with SFA about her vision for the future and why nothing beats her grandmother's tomatoes.

Charlie Pappas: ***What narratives are present in the discussion of food advocacy today?***
Sadé Meeks: A lot of what we see in the media is a stereotype that portrays Black cultural foods as just soul food, and it portrays soul food as coming from the scraps that the enslavers gave to Black people—but that's not the complete narrative. A part of my job is helping to complete these narratives. When you see it, your whole point of view about food is changed. One way that I like to do this is by talking about my enslaved ancestors and their gardens. Even though they had the leftovers, they also were able to grow collards, mustards, and even kale in their gardens. Those are the stories that I'm trying to connect more people to.

CP: ***What is nutritional literacy? Why is it important to the work that you do?***
SM: Before you can grasp nutritional literacy, it's important to understand *food* literacy, the ways that we interact with food—not just how to cook foods, but how to access foods, how to read food labels. Food literacy is a broader understanding of food and nutrition. I did my graduate thesis project on a food literacy cookbook, and part of what I was trying to argue is that a lot of the time, it's not that people don't want to be healthy. Sometimes they don't know how to access foods, what resources are available to help them resist food insecurity, or how to cook. Food literacy is a skill that enables you to be resilient in whatever environment you're in. One day you may be food secure, the next you may be food insecure. If you have strong food literacy skills, you can navigate those challenges more easily. When I was in grad school I had a level of food insecurity, but I also had a strong level of food literacy because of my background in culinary arts. I was able to navigate shopping at the ninety-nine cent store with ten

A lot of the time, it's not that people don't want to be healthy. Sometimes they don't know how to access foods, what resources are available to help them resist food insecurity, or how to prepare foods.

Photographs by Brittny Miller

Sadé Meeks presents a cooking demonstration in Jackson, Mississippi, 2023.

dollars and prepare foods that were still nourishing. I understand that was a privilege because I had that skill set. I knew that other people may lack food literacy skills, and they couldn't manage their food insecurity in the same way. That's when I began to focus more on food literacy and not just nutritional literacy.

CP: ***Why is it so important for you to be doing this work in Jackson now?***
SM: What is going on could be described as a renaissance in Jackson. There are so many young creatives and artists doing their thing here. As a dietitian, I understand that I'm an artist too. Before I came back, I wasn't calling myself an artist, but I needed to be here to see myself and see GRITS in the way that we are meant to be. Being here has positioned GRITS to step into its fullness, not just as a nutrition or food organization, but as a creative organization that uses storytelling as an art to connect people to food. I've been able to connect with so many artists. We all love the South, and we all tell stories in our own ways. It's a powerful thing when all of those art forms come together. I didn't know that then, but in hindsight, I realize that's why I needed to be back in Jackson, to have that connection.

CP: ***How does food work as a mode of storytelling?***
SM: When I learn about something, I want to connect with it, especially when I learn about the cultures of food. If my grandmother tells me about something, I want to use it. It makes me feel connected to her history. I remember a story my grandmother told me about how she went to Chicago to visit her sister, and she had some tomatoes. [My great-aunnt] said, "My sister got some tomatoes from Mississippi." Before she knew it, she didn't have any tomatoes left for herself—everybody wanted her tomatoes! It's a funny story, and after she told it to me, I made some tomato soup. Hearing stories like this makes me want to create memories with different foods.

Charlie Pappas is an MA candidate in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi and a Nathalie Dupree graduate fellow with the Southern Foodways Alliance.

A selection of conchas, churros, and other baked goods for sale at Mercadito Hispano in Bowling Green, KY

MARKET REPORT

Mercadito Hispano in Bowling Green, Kentucky, offers visibility to a minority within a minority.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

Photos by Grace Ramey

Jackelin Guillen, a Mercadito Hispano employee and a cousin of store manager Jose Gonzalez, bags pastries for a customer on February 10, 2024.

IF YOU ASKED ME TO PICTURE A LATINO mini-mart, I'd imagine a place that looks, smells, and sounds much like Mercadito Hispano in the Little Mexico neighborhood of Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Piñatas hang from the ceiling. Locally made tortillas sit on the shelves, along with tostadas from El Milagro, a multimillion-dollar Chicago company that distributes regionally. A butcher counter does a brisk business in chorizo, arrachera, and carne asada. A hot tray holds freshly made chicharrones. Spanish is the lingua franca.

But a closer look finds products not typically available at many Latino markets in the Bluegrass State.

Bags of Zambos, a Honduran snack brand that specializes in plantain and yuca chips, share space with Doritos and Takis on the chip rack. The freezer stocks dough to make empanadas, a flaky turnover popular across Latin America but more common in Central and South America. A request for a quesadilla will be answered with a question: Which kind? The Mexican dish made of a tortilla filled with melted cheese? Or the Salvadoran version, which is similar in texture and flavor to sweet cornbread? Mercadito Hispano serves both.

Mercadito Hispano is a rarity in the South: a Salvadoran-run Latino market in an industry dominated by Mexicans.

Salvadorans are the third-largest Latino group in the United States, behind Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. But in the American South, they remain a minority within a minority. In Kentucky, for instance, census figures show Salvadorans are just the sixth-largest Latino group, numbering about 4,300 people. By comparison, over 100,000 people of Mexican descent live there—more than 50 percent of the state's Latino population.

Such demographic disparities lead to something Central American scholars and activists call "Mexican hegemony"—the idea that when we talk about Latinos in the United States, too often we talk only about Mexicans and Mexican culture. That's what makes a place like Mercadito Hispano so important—it offers Latino representation in a city where Latinos make up less than 9 percent of the population and showcases a facet of el Sur Latino that doesn't get enough attention.

Gloria Escoto opened the store in 2000, transforming a long-abandoned dry cleaner into a market and restaurant. After leaving her native El Salvador in the 1980s, she initially settled in California. Then, in 1993, she moved to Bowling Green when the furniture company she worked for at the time relocated there. Today, she focuses on baking Mercadito Hispano's bread: fluffy bolillos (French rolls), conchas (a bread roll studded with sugar that looks like its namesake, a seashell), and other Mexican and Salvadoran pan dulces.

Her son, Jose Gonzalez, is the store manager.

"They're the pioneers," the thirty-four-year-old says of his mother and other older relatives who still help. "I'm trying to make it [all] fit."

He was about three when his family moved to Bowling Green. Home life was "very Salvadoran," Gonzalez remembered, while school wasn't. "Having to switch to Spanish at home, it felt like there was a huge disconnect."

Gonzalez felt further angst about his Latino identity when he started to work at Mercadito Hispano as a preteen, and customers poked fun at his Spanish. He described himself as a *no sabo* kid—a term of deprecation used against the children of Latino immigrants who didn't learn Spanish or care much for the customs of their parents.

He originally kept working at Mercadito Hispano after high school out of "a heavy sense of responsibility." But as the years went on, Gonzalez came to appreciate the role his family's business played in the community.

"I love helping the community, because I see my mother in these situations twenty years ago," he said. "They'll bring in papers that they need me to read. Then they'll try to tip me. I'm like, 'No—just buy something here!'"

As the market manager, Gonzalez has focused on making Mercadito Hispano a hub—not just for Salvadorans, or even Latinos. He wants it to be a place where the city's different cultures can meet to share shopping notes or sit down for a quick meal with food everyone can relate to. In the produce aisle, Central Americans and African migrants alike pick up plantains and yuca. Mexicans favor jalapeños stuffed with cheese and chicharrones. African American customers enjoy the chicharrones, which they know better as pork rinds.

Burmese prepare costillas (pork ribs) similarly to Latinos, Gonzalez said. "For white customers, I try selling them pig stomach, and they say, 'You mean hog maw?'"

His sister, Melissa Escoto, is the operations

Mercadito Hispano manager Jose Gonzalez helps a customer on February 10, 2024.

manager at Mercadito Hispano and also is in charge of the tres leches cake, putting playful spins on the Latino classic by giving it flavors like cookies and cream or Fruity Pebbles. Every fall, they also bake pan de muerto, the anise-flavored bread customarily consumed on Day of the Dead. In recent years, Mercadito Hispano has also offered rosca de reyes, the Latin American version of king cake that Catholics traditionally eat on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany.

Gonzalez is beginning to lean on Mercadito Hispano's role in Bowling Green as an established business. His family owns the building that houses Mercadito Hispano and leases the adjacent space to Delicias Los Amigos, a Central American restaurant. Every Wednesday, he invites food trucks to park in front of Mercadito Hispano "to help them gain a bit of notoriety." In 2022, Gonzalez and other Latino restaurateurs held the city's first-ever Latino food festival. Last fall, he helped to organize a Day of the Dead display at Bowling Green's annual Harvest Festival.

But even as he helps other Latinos, Gonzalez is also excited that Salvadoran culture is becoming more visible the South. Pupusas, El Salvador's most famous dish, are a telling example. They're griddlecakes made from masa stuffed with cheese and another ingredient—sometimes carnitas, sometimes beans—then topped with pickled slaw called curtido. Mercadito Hispano sells pupusas; so does Delicias Los Amigos.

"They [non-Salvadoran] customers started to care about pupusas just four years ago," Gonzalez said with a laugh. "Corn, pork, and cheese—doesn't get more Southern than that! Those ingredients break down the wall, so that the pupusa is no longer foreign."

He then thought about that for a bit. "This is the cuisine we thought we brought over," he finally said, "but it was already here."

Gustavo Arellano is a columnist for the Los Angeles Times *and a* Gravy *columnist.*

HOW WE SPEND OUR DAYS

An excerpt from *Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves*

BY J. DREW LANHAM

THIS DAY IS THOSE DAYS WHICH ARE these days of many-hued leaves leaving. These are the days the wind comes in and rattles fall's cage, stripping the maples and poplars nude of saffron and scarlet but leaving them wrinkled, soiled clothes on beeches and oaks. These are the days of white-throated sparrows arriving in the back yard to sing of old Sam Peabody's poverty-stricken Canadian times. These are the days of deer chasing, of bucks' antler rubbing, of does' white tails lifting, of future fawn-making, the convergent intersected result. These are the days of me wishing I was watching them ghost through at dawn. Of me wishing I was waiting until dusk for them to reappear. Of me wishing I was above it all, voyeuring into wood's lust. These are the days of the beaver moon hiding behind earth's shadow. Me getting out of a warm bed at 2 a.m. to see it turn a pinker shade of pale. It is the day of me howling to myself.

This is the day that becomes the days of stress coming, expectation swelling, perfection failing. Familial ailing. Holidays. These are the days of true friend revelations. These are the days of double-dose vaxxing. Boosting. Hoping that odd coughs are just coughs. These are the days of still masking. These are the days of wondering why Black lives don't matter beyond marches or unarmed Negroes dying. These are indeed the times that try our souls—one day of despairing multiplied into too many and knowing that justice is an ephemeral thing lain at the intersection of *juris prudence* and luck of the jury drawn.

These are the days of the very last leftover katydid half-humming. These are the days of witnessing black birds gathering. Flocking. Peppering bruised purple evening sky. Feathered barometers as accurate as the meteorological coin flip. These are the days of autumn becoming winter before winter is official. These are the days of winter wrens in woodpiles chattering, not caring whether it is winter or not. These are the days of kinglets ruling over thickets with ruby and golden crowns. These are the days of first frost. Of sapsuckers mewing like arboreal cats. These are the days of cuddling a real cat. A tabby cat. A purring tabby cat that trusts my lap for a few moments of napping. This is the day I envy feline relaxation technique. This is the day to be a copycat.

These are the days when Christmas moves to the front of the hyper-capitalistic line and any

other holiday gets bumped out of mind. These are days the once tender summer green gets bit by below-32 degrees and curled to crispy brown. These are the days of second and then third cup coffee-ing. These are the days of cardinals being redbirds. Juncos being snowbirds. Flickers being yellowhammers. Vultures being buzzards. These are the days of flip flops, chilly toes, and fleece vests for warming. These are the days of ashy ankles needing more lotion. This is the day I don't care about what I look like. These are the days that the mustard greens get bitter and taste best. The days of rutabaga bottoms mashed to a pulp and boiled purple top turnips with butter. These are the days of deep-fried turkeys and cornbread dressing (never ever ever *stuffing*). These are the days of sweet potato pie (punkins are for jack-o-lanterns and for fake coffee flavorings). This is not the day to visit the scale.

These are the kitty-corner days. The nearby faraway days. The days of converting celsius to fahrenheit and back. Why, because zero isn't always zero and thirty-two can be hot as hell. These are the days of ellipses and words never written but thought. These are the days between warblers and waterfowl, between butterbutt yellow rumps in the myrtle bush and butterball buffleheads on the farm pond. These are the days of doing downward-facing dog with the non-napping cat alongside. This is the day I thought of tadpoles in puddles as commas which made me pause as a boy. Still do as a man. These are the days of goldenrod the color of sun. Of sumac red as blood. These are the mellow days of minor chord wringing tears from my head. These are the days of chipmunk hoarding scurry. These are the days of take your time, but hurry—'cause there's not enough time.

These are the days when slop fat pigs used to wonder how long it would be before the cold day came and it was the end of their time. That the sharp knife and the heavy ax and the boiling vat would come callin'. These are the days when November thinks of retiring. These are the days, all wrapped into one. This is a day in my mind. A day in the life. What date you ask? Yesterday or today. Or maybe tomorrow. I can't remember now. Each present has become yesterday way too fast. Tomorrow is today already. This day past tense to that. All of this swirls before I wake or in a dream or between yoga mat and shower and first call from someone wanting something I procrastinated doing. This is a day of another Zoom. There is something due this day, I'm pretty sure. Perhaps it is what you read now. Perhaps not. Here it is, anyway, for your perusal. This day is singularly plural. This is the day I dared write down what one day of musing might be like. The day I thought about who, what, where, and when brings peace to my life and who, what, where, and when shreds my life to pieces. This is the day of a single sigh, an extended exhale. Hoping to take in another, so as to keep the stream of consciousness flowing.

J. Drew Lanham is a bird watcher, poet, MacArthur fellow, and a distinguished professor of wildlife ecology at Clemson University. He lives in Seneca, South Carolina.

Illustration by Flora Bai

Epistle to My Lord Concerning My Sons' Future Spouses

BY BETH ANN FENNELLY

Because I will not be around forever, Lord,
I find myself considering those who will feed my sons
after I'm gone, Lord, for my sons are joyous eaters,
joyous and prodigious, but care not for the ways
of the kitchen, despite my attempts at instruction.
Forgive them, Lord, they know not how to cook.
Still, they're accustomed to eating well,
so I think, Lord, humbly, Lord, that you might
bear that fact in mind when choosing their spouses,
be they female or male or non-binary,
because I'm down with that, Lord, and believe
you are, too, for God is love, hallelujah.

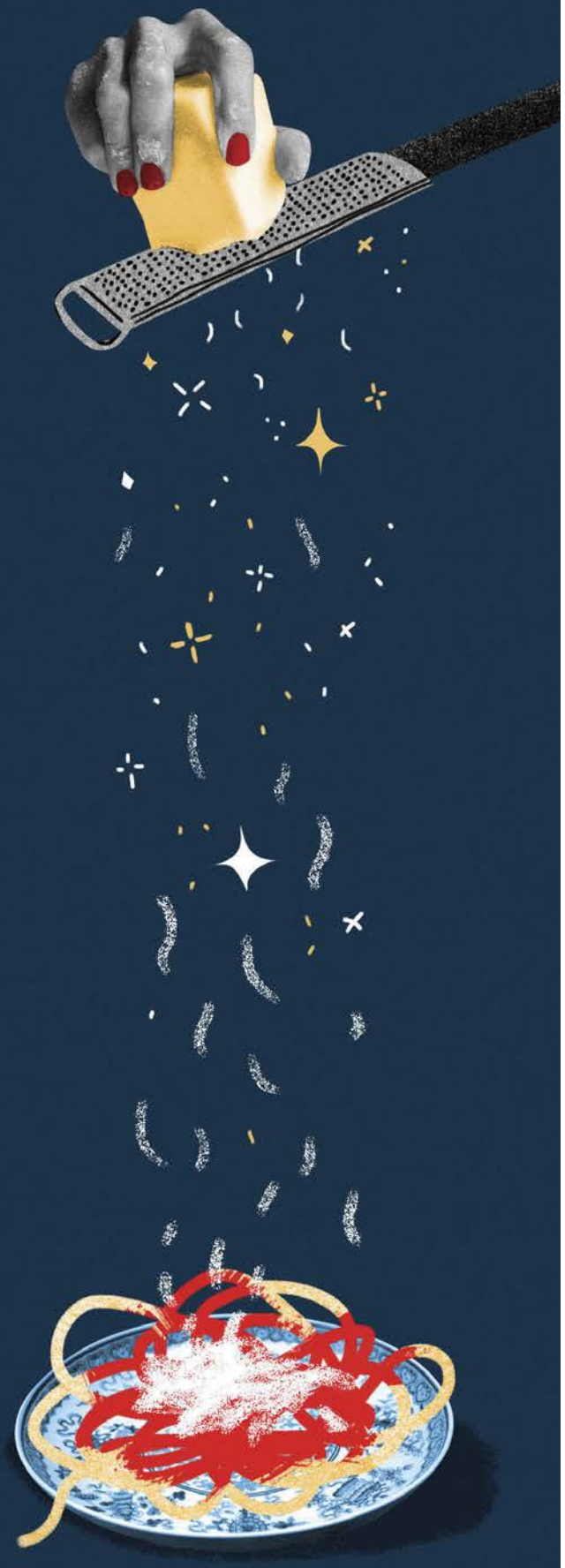
Even when my sons were young, Lord,
I educated their palates, even when they were toddlers
I gave them ingots of Parmigiano Reggiano,
from Parma, Lord, the real deal, its name tattooed
on the rind. Yea, I have let them gnaw, Lord,
its salty nutty sweetness calving onto their tongues,
I have taught them to savor that grainy crunch
of tyrosine crystals which the ignorant fear is mold
but is in fact the glory and gift of the aging process,
praise be. And I've steadied many a child's paw
on the planchette of parmesan, careful
to clear their fingers from the microplane's teeth,
to shower a host of angels into the fettucine's
steamy embrace. Yea, my sons have feasted, Lord,
and your name has been exalted on their tongues.

Illustrations by Natalie Nelson

Lord, smite my enemies who are even now
indulging wicked thoughts about my extravagance,
and swinging the word "privilege" about
like a rolling pin looking to connect with a skull,
for verily I shop at thrift stores, drink tap water,
and, at this very minute, am sporting socks with holes,
and furthermore please remind those haters
that when you were chilling at Simon the Leper's crib
and allowed that woman to anoint your head
with perfumed oil, Lord, prompting your disciples
to meanly observe that such pricey oil might instead
be sold to feed the poor—you defended her,
saying she prepared you for your burial: *For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.*
And thus, Lord, when my sons have me not always,
grant them spouses, but not the kind who buy
green shakers of powdered, shelf-stable "cheese
food product" containing plant cellulose—
aka wood pulp—that Kraft dares to call "parmesan."
That shit is nasty, Lord, can I get an Amen.

If I may press my case, Lord, and surely
I don't deserve more than you've already given me,
but your ways are unfathomable, Lord,
and you've proven yourself generous beyond reason,
so perhaps you will see fit to select for my sons
spouses who not only buy real cheese but transmogrify it
through holy fire; yea, gift them talented home chefs,
who come to the marriage bed bearing cookbooks
that fall open to recipes freckled with grease.
Such chefs, I submit, would be ideal, but—if I may—

perhaps do not send them chefs especially skilled
in the art of beef bourguignon, Lord.
Beef bourguignon being my signature dish, Lord.
Beef bourguignon being my sons' favorite
to such an extent that my eleven-year-old once asked
if he'd be allowed to come home from college
when I serve it. Consider that, Lord, I pray.
Consider my youngest growing anxious
at the prospect of missing my beef bourguignon
seven years hence, and you'll understand
that his future spouse best not attempt it,
Lord, because mine is just that good.



In truth, Lord, there exist a few recipes
I make so well and so often that my sons' spouses
might avoid them altogether, simply because
their attempts can't live up to mine, Lord,
which is no fault of their own, I simply got there first,
and shaped my sons' taste buds in my image.
I admit I have ruined my sons for certain meals
prepared at the hands of others, ruined them
with my willful, profligate excellence.
I'm thinking here of those meals my sons eat
until their cheeks flush, eat until their foreheads
shine, eat until their breathing grows labored,
eat until they unbutton their pants,
which is disgusting, Lord, and flattering, Lord,
in equal measure. Disgusting and flattering,
the way, clearing the table, they turn their backs
and hunch to lick their plates. Maybe ten dishes, Lord,
I've brought to that pinnacle at which plate-licking,
though lowly, is justified. Ten dishes, or maybe
twelve, Lord, that we might proactively retire,
to prevent the spouses of my sons from bitterness,
for verily you warn against the gall of bitterness.

Lord, when these spouses confide to their friends,
"I don't even *try* to make lasagna, because his mom's
was *so* delicious," heed them, Lord, and bless them,
bless them in their humility and reward them
with many offspring. These fifteen dishes—twenty, tops—
I will enumerate, Lord, in a subsequent epistle.

Your faithful servant, etc.

Beth Ann Fennelly is the author of six books and was the poet laureate of Mississippi from 2016–2021. She teaches in the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Mississippi.

A FEAST FIT FOR SPIRITS

Could a Korean memorial ceremony help keep my Kentucky father alive?

BY MERCEDES KANE

THE AIR SIZZLES AND STEAMS AS MY HUSBAND, SANGHOON, FILLS A HOT SKILLET WITH gooey, off-white batter for buchimgae. Bubbles rise within the doughy mixture, which is studded with slices of scallions and matchstick-sized slivers of zucchini and sweet potatoes. He flips and presses the pancake as it firms and crisps before turning his attention to a pot of boiling water. Gently, he drops beef chunks, minced garlic, and snow-white shavings of daikon into its gurgling waves.

The aromas of meaty soup, tangy salted cod, and sweet rice permeate our boxy Atlanta bungalow. It's December nineteenth, the date Sanghoon's father passed away in 2018. Every year since, on the anniversary of his death, we welcome his abeoji (father) and our children's harabeoji (grandfather) into our home for a feast in his honor, our version of the Korean jesa ceremony.

This ancient ritual was new to me when Sanghoon introduced it to our family. Rooted in Confucian practices that began nearly 650 years ago in the Joseon Dynasty, jesa has traditionally been a ceremony that honors generations of deceased ancestors. Today, many Korean families living all over the world continue to perform it, but mostly for their late parents or grandparents.

A customary jesa ritual takes considerable preparation and effort, work that women have historically assumed while being left out of the ceremony itself. Sanghoon remembers his umma (mom) and sister waiting in the kitchen while he, along with his father, uncles, and brother offered up the feast the two women had spent hours, sometimes even days, preparing. When Sanghoon initially shared the history of jesa with me and suggested our family perform it for his father, we knew without question that all four of us would participate.

Sanghoon carries the bulk of the work, traveling forty minutes to the closest H-Mart in Doraville for ingredients before chopping vegetables, meat, and fish, seasoning the soup base, and steaming the rice. He transforms our coffee table into a makeshift Jesa table, turning it to face north (the direction of the dead) and draping it with a beige tablecloth. After carefully arranging a dozen or more dishes of food and fruit, he sets out a small carafe of rice wine with shallow ceramic shot glasses, rice bowls, and chopsticks.

In the center, Sanghoon lays out a shrine of candles,

Illustrations by Kristen Solecki

incense, and the chukmun, a written prayer that is read to the visiting spirit. The shinwi, or "spiritual body" of his father, Sung-Woo Lee, is represented on a piece of paper by his last name and its origin written in Chinese characters, as is the tradition. A photo of his dad glows from my propped-up iPhone. In the image, he's a handsome twenty-something sporting a leather bomber jacket and slicked-back black hair.

OUR CHILDREN, Jasper, nine, and Daisy, six, proudly claim jesa as their favorite "holiday" next to Christmas. When I pick them up that afternoon from a winter camp at the local Boys and Girls Club, the women working the front desk know all about the evening's ceremony, having heard our children proudly explain their roles in it.

On the drive home, I ask them why they like jesa so much. Daisy beams and says, "Because I get to see Harabeoji."

As soon as I park in the driveway, the kids tumble out and burst through the front door, tossing off their shoes and sliding their backpacks across the tiled hall. "It smells great in here!" Jasper announces. Daisy bounds upstairs and returns minutes later wearing her pastel-colored hanbok, a traditional Korean dress with striped arms and a billowy skirt. I adjust the stiff fabric and help tie the jacket's bow as Jasper pulls on the pant-legged version of his own hanbok.

Once outfitted, their demeanor shifts. Jasper, who often shouts his sentences is suddenly speaking in a mellow, even tone. Daisy stops doing handstands against the wall and crosses her wrists across her waist, waiting patiently to begin.

Sanghoon and I clean up quickly and swap out our sweats—his for black slacks and a button-up shirt; mine for a cotton dress and tights. He lights the candle. It's time.

Our family of four crowds the entryway, opening the door slowly and welcoming our dinner guest. The kids say, "Come in, Harabeoji. It's cold out there." Sanghoon sweeps the air with his hand, ushering the ghost of his abeoji into our home.

Sanghoon leads the ritual, but we all assist, each of us performing ceremonial bows and pouring sips of wine. As he reads the prayer, Sanghoon is overcome with grief, rare tears dampening his flushed pink cheeks. Jasper puts a hand on his dad's back and moves it slowly side to side. Daisy wraps her small fist around his pinky. Their gazes rest on the altar. Jasper squeezes his eyes shut to prevent his tears from forming.

Sanghoon continues moving a set of chopsticks from plate to plate, serving his father the meal he's made for him. Ladling a spoonful of rice into the beef soup, he leaves the utensil in the warm liquid so his abeoji can experience the rich flavor that took all day to develop.

After we all bow a final time, the ceremony is over. We walk our guest silently to the door and close it behind him, lingering a few seconds after it clicks shut. Sanghoon burns the shinwi, then we move each dish of food to our dining room table.

We hunch over our bowls of hot soup, Jasper and Daisy's energy rising with each slurp. They fire off questions about their harabeoji and Sanghoon's life with him. "What did you do together?" "Was he strict?" "Did he make this soup for you?"

Sanghoon speaks slowly, thoughtfully, about his complicated father, a man who stayed silent each evening after returning home from his office job in nearby Seoul. On Sundays, when their extended family visited the apartment, his solemn dad transformed into a loud and boisterous jokester whose silly behavior and wisecracks had their visitors crying with laughter long into the evening.

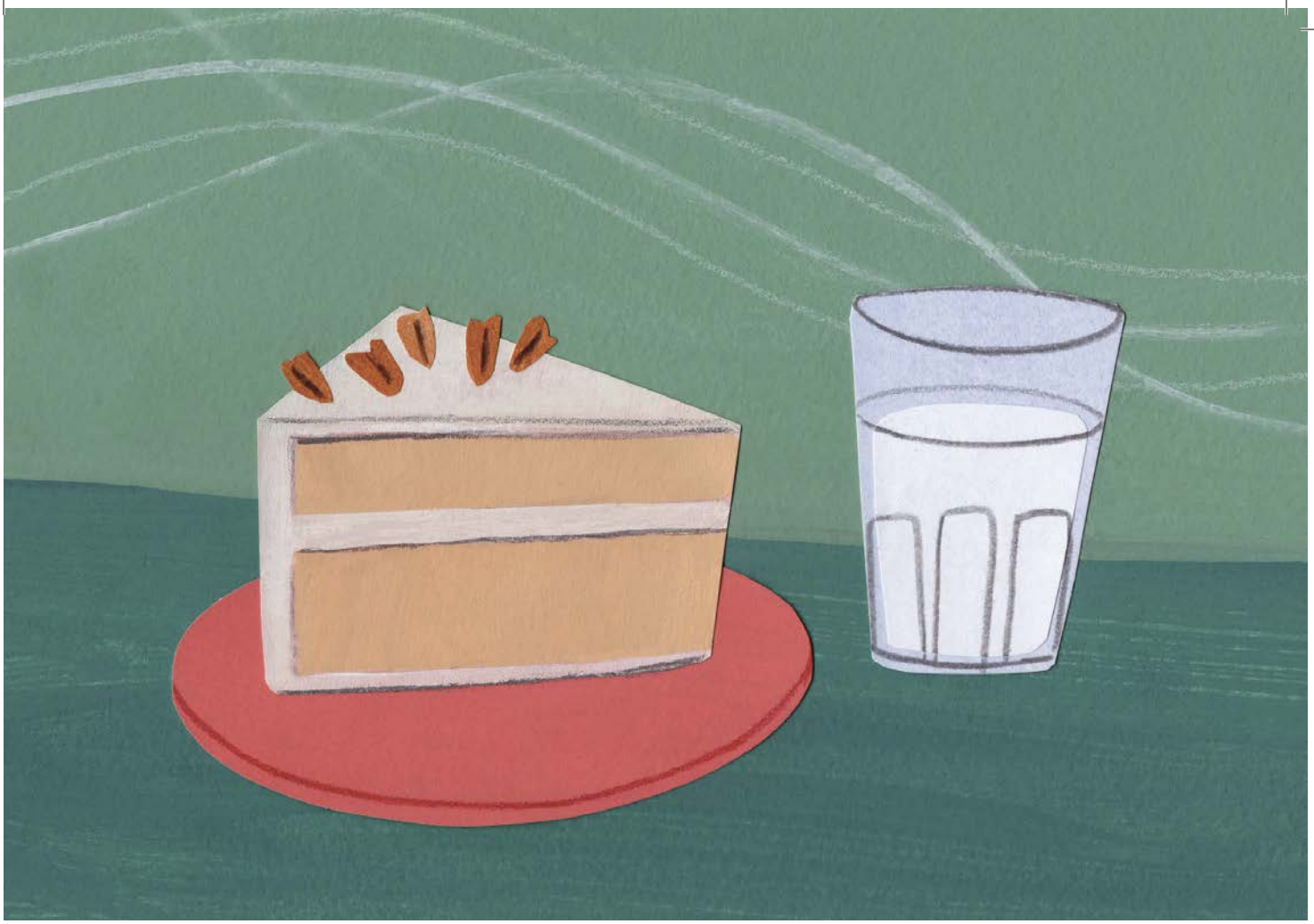
"Abeoji didn't do the cooking; Umma did," Sanghoon says. "When we would sit down to dinner as a family, we had to wait until he picked up his chopsticks before we could eat."

Our children's eyes grow wide. "You're joking," Jasper says.

"I'm not," Sanghoon continues. "But Abeoji could be fun. He was a great storyteller, and I loved listening to him talk. I always wondered why he didn't tell stories more often."

Jasper visited Korea twice while Sanghoon's father was alive. Daisy has only spent two weeks with him, when our family traveled to Incheon and stayed at Sanghoon's parents' small condo, just months before he perished. But they feel like they know him, and jesa is why.

MY FATHER DIED, somewhat unexpectedly, in October of last year. While our kids spent far more time in his presence, I worry that each passing month without his face on a video call, each year without a birthday card from him, each holiday spent without his famous butter-yellow mashed potatoes will push him further from their conscious minds.



On a recent Sunday morning, Sanghoon and I scooped scrambled eggs onto our kids' plates as they dipped blueberry pancakes into pools of syrup, the winter sun peeking through the slats of our blinds. From a kitchen speaker, I heard the mandolin strings of Rod Stewart's "Maggie May." In a flash, my dad was before me, dizzy with joy, strumming an air guitar and singing along like he had done many times, much to my teenage horror.

I swallowed a bitter sip of coffee. As Stewart's gravelly voice purred on, it struck me that my own goofy kids would never know their Kentucky-born papa's love of rock music or that, despite his propensity to anger, he was also quick to love.

I began to imagine a jesa fit for a country-boy-turned-big-city-Chicago-restaurateur: a table crammed with greasy beans, biscuits and gravy, salty cornbread, chicken and dumplings and rhubarb pie; Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Bad Moon Rising" spinning on a turntable; a glass of bourbon and a fat cigar the final touches.

Around the same table, I would share the details of my dad's life that he never tired of talking about: running shoeless over the steep Appalachian terrain of his childhood, his one-room school, the dirt-floor cabin he grew up in, his long-standing luck with the ladies. And I could tell my own stories: the time he took me to a neighborhood festival and bought me a Cabbage Patch knockoff after a fiery explosion between my mom and him forced us out of the house; the dinner dates he would take me to on his rare nights away from the restaurant; the fun times and the fury.

"Dad," I'll say next October fourth, on the anniversary of his death. "Can I offer you another slice of hummingbird cake and a cold glass of milk?" Knowing he'd never refuse either, I'll cut him a frosted chunk of cake and sneak a corner bite before passing it his way.

Mercedes Kane is a writer and documentary filmmaker living in Atlanta. Her most recent film, Art and Pep*, is available to stream on Peacock. She will receive her MFA in narrative nonfiction from the University of Georgia in August 2024.*

The Art of Texas Mexican Cooking

The point of culinary art is not that we survive, but *how* we survive.

by

ADÁN MEDRANO

Illustrations by MARÍA LOOR

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THE ART OF COOKING

has the ability to transcend our everyday limits and lift our horizons beyond just feeding. In my own Indigenous Texas Mexican American community, it has sustained us through suffering.

Our Texas Mexican culinary art is born of want and dispossession. Colonization killed 90 percent of our Indigenous ancestors—a horrible truth, and yet today we are still cooking. How has the art of cooking worked to sustain our memory, fashion identity, and strengthen community?

I define the art of cooking as the act of preparing food in a technically proficient, tantalizing way, so that it has significant impact on individuals and relationships within a community. As it functions, it evokes memory, forms identity, and impacts community. Anthropologist Alfred Gell described art in terms of its power to advance social relations. Artistic activity is a type of agency that "is collective, ancestral, and essentially political in tone," Gell wrote. That type of powerful agency is at work every day in our restaurant and home kitchens.

In my kitchen in Houston, Texas, my cooking is shaped by a continually growing awareness of my Indigenous roots, coupled with an awareness that I'm cooking in my ancestral lands. My ancestors were the first people to step on Texas soil over 15,000 years ago, and they cooked with fire. When I boil water for a stew, I feel, I know: That technique of boiling has produced delicious family meals in Texas for over 750 generations. When, on my grill, the mesquite smoke wafts over Texas Gulf shrimp on a Sunday evening under the big Texas sky, I think of how my Native American ancestors enjoyed the same aroma and employed the same technique.

There's a saying that I learned from my mom that I keep as a guiding compass in my cooking: "Las tortillas no se cuentan." It translates to English as "Don't count the tortillas." I used it as the title of my second book.

In the book, I tell a childhood story. Six years old, I was crouched at the table, watching my mom make tortillas by hand, enjoying the aroma and rhythm of it all. As the pile grew taller, I wondered how many she'd made. I reached over and—practicing the arithmetic I was learning at school—began adding them up. She stopped me. "Las tortillas no se cuentan." *Don't count the tortillas.*

Over the years, I've remembered her voice, her inflection, that stack of corn tortillas, and I've learned the many meanings of that *dicho*. Was she telling me that food is not a commodity? That food is sacred? That I should not be cavalier when approaching food, because it is a vehicle for human interactions? Yes: all of these meanings, and more.

Her words have guided me toward the understanding that cooking is more than mere mechanics and feeding. Cooking is about elemental connectedness and generosity. It is technical and creative, with the power to captivate. It is art.

Cooking is memory. It's a way that we remember our family and community traditions. How our ancestors cooked shows how they dealt with their environment, how they cared for their sources of food. This implies a value system for making choices.

Cooking is also about identity. When we cook, we narrate who we are. Styles of cooking have origins in places and moments that we've lived. Over time, they shape who we are.

Finally, cooking is about community. It brings people together. Seen in its cultural context not just of survival but of hospitality, cooking nourishes community and can define its boundaries.

FOOD AS MEMORY

One of my earliest memories is about landscape and an avocado taco.

I now live in Houston, Texas, but I was born in San Antonio. In addition to our home in San Antonio, my family owned land in a town named Nava, in the Mexican state of Coahuila, just twenty-five miles south of the Rio Grande. I remember riding in the back of a pickup truck for the three-hour ride between my two hometowns, a journey that took me from one country to another but held me in a single landscape.

One breezy evening in Nava, we were relaxing outdoors, and my uncle served us freshly made heirloom-corn tortillas. The tortillas were hot off the griddle, and inside each one he had tucked a slice of avocado that he had just picked from the tree that shaded us, topping it with just a tiny sprinkle of salt. Taking a bite, I was walloped by the exquisite flavor. To this day, that iconic Mexican flavor combination is a poignant memory of embodied pleasure.

Weeks after we drove back to San Antonio, my mom made a fresh corn tortilla and, while it was still steaming, laid upon it two thin slices of avocado sprinkled with a little salt. I started eating it, and it was pure memory. My palate, my body, had the realization that it was the same

taco I ate under the avocado tree in Nava. I felt at home, with an identity that easily connected to my extended family in Texas, USA, and also in Coahuila, Mexico. Food fosters human interactions and creates memories and connections that can endure a lifetime. The avocado taco, to this day, holds those memories.

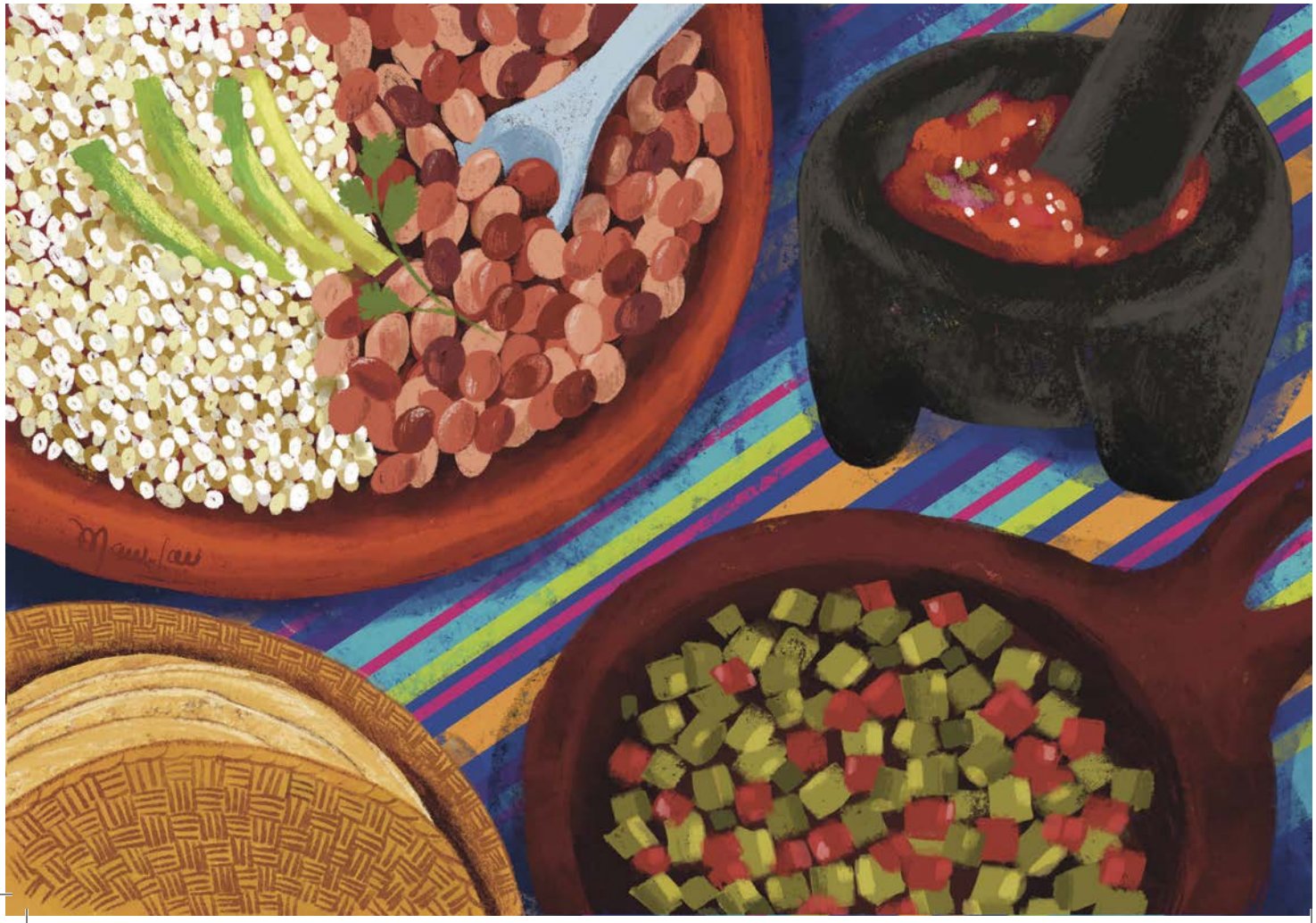
I realize now that to understand what anthropologists call commensality, the act of human beings eating together, it is necessary to take off my nationalistic eyeglasses. When I do so, and look at the border, the Rio Grande, the country to the north, and the country to the south, they become landscape. I can appreciate the weather, the rivers, the soil, and the earth formations. Bodies of water weave forcefully or meander through the terrain. Birds fly back and forth based on where the berries are and where the weather calls them, and they never stop at any immigration checkpoint.

For over 15,000 years, my ancestors communicated and traveled from places in what is now south Texas to places in what is now northeastern Mexico, exchanging cooking techniques, ingredients, stories, and recipes. My family's food, cooked in San Antonio, Houston, and other Texas cities, did not come from across the border. It is rooted in the landscape, with a history that dates back to the Texas First Peoples: the Karankawa, the Tonkawa, and hundreds of others, including my ancestors, the Coahuiltecos.

Then I pick up my eyeglasses of nationalism and put them back on. Geopolitical borders are important, to be respected. But now I've added landscape and movement to my understanding of place, food, and people.

As humans travel the globe, food also travels. Its flavor changes, and so does its meaning. Today every cuisine is, in some way, cosmopolitan. Goats, which were first domesticated in what is now Iran, are raised and served in Monterey, Mexico, and claimed as their own. The hot chile peppers of Indian and Thai cuisines arrived as war loot from the conquest of Mexico. African watermelon is now an iconic ingredient of Texas Mexican cuisine.

Chefs everywhere, when faced with new ingredients, relish the opportunity to play and to



discover new flavor possibilities. They sometimes copy and often share techniques. When chefs pursue their artistic vocations in this way, using new ingredients, the dishes—and the future—become more beautiful.

But sharing and adaptation can also cause real harm, so chefs need discernment. Native Texas Mexican cuisine is the *comida casera*, the home-style cooking of Texas Mexican American families, with iconic dishes like cactus salads, mesquite-flour breads, and pan-roasted, oil-free pinto beans. In some instances, it has been appropriated by commercial cultural poachers who in the process hurt both the cuisine and the community that created it.

I use the term "cultural poachers" to describe people who pretend to represent the best of a cuisine but cannot ever do so because their actions divorce the cuisine from its culture. Culinary cultural appropriation can escalate from harmful to sinister when it hides behind the pretense of culinary auteurism, the same word that film directors use for their role as authors (auteurs) in creating films.

What I mean by auteurism is the cook's rightful artistic exploration and expression. It should be championed. But that is far different from poaching. How to tell the difference? I try to discern voice, agency, and money.

Does the entry into another culture's cuisine diminish or silence the voice of the original creators of that tradition? One example is how we understand and use chile peppers in cooking. Poachers of Mexican cuisine have defined chiles according to the amount of capsaicin in the seeds and membranes. The Scoville scale assigns a number to each type of chile, based on heat, so one can select properly the type of chile needed for a recipe. But that ignores the real way that chiles work in the cuisine.

The original voices of Mexican cooking will explain that chiles are used for taste, color, aroma, and texture. One example is the Texas Mexican enchilada, where we cut open the chiles to remove all the seeds and membranes, which is where the mouth-burning capsaicin resides. Heat is the lesser flavor concern. So, when poachers promote heat as the authentic character of Mexican food and erase the flavor qualities of chiles, not only the original voices but the cuisine itself is diminished.

I also look at agency. As opposed to collaboration, poaching into another's cuisine minimizes, even erases, agency, which is the artistic ability to create flavors and dishes. Indigenous Texas Mexican women are the agents who created the stew we now call "chili." But the credit is most often given to Texas cowboys, with stories and legends that aggrandize them—erasing the agency of Indigenous women.

Native Texas Mexican cuisine is the* comida casera, *the home-style cooking of Texas Mexican American families, with iconic dishes like cactus salads, mesquite flour breads, and pan-roasted, oil-free pinto beans.

And finally, I follow the money. Beginning with the arrival of Spaniards in 1528, native peoples were violently dispossessed of our Texas lands, and our markets of trade and travel were decimated. The economies of Indigenous Mexican American communities were destroyed, deprived of capital—and it is working capital that underpins the restaurant industry.

Cultural poachers who do have access to capital grab the best of Texas Mexican dishes and turn them into businesses that quickly overtake the traditional, small, family-owned Mexican restaurants, who suffer the vestiges of historical capital deprivation. When taking another culture's recipes and overtaking their market, food poachers cause economic harm. In this way, competitive market advantage replaces native dishes with high-salt, high-fat, and high-sugar imitations and thus destroys a community's culinary art.

Cultural poachers need to get beyond their "auteur" argument that chefs have the right to artistic freedom and therefore can act without constraint, any way they wish. That, alone, is not

The guiding principle of artful cooking is to create joyfully and skillfully a meal that advances and strengthens human relations.

an artistic vision. There is another, overriding value and vision that all artists must face: Can you have beauty without justice?

Every dish has a past. When we cook, we reach into history to find meaning. Nutrition is only one dimension. The guiding principle of artful cooking is to create joyfully and skillfully a meal that advances and strengthens human relations.

With each meal, the good cook narrates to us who we are, individually and as a community, and, with enchanting food, conjures up togetherness. It's through the pleasure of eating that a cook's artistry enmeshes diners in a world of what holds us together. This is why cooking is an important artistic act: It shifts the focus away from purely feeding and infuses material culture with meaning.

We are human beings, capable of love. We are not about the survival of the fittest. Sure, we have to eat to survive, but the whole point of culinary art is not *that* we survive, but *how* we survive. We survive with beauty and by affirming who we are as human beings and who we want to be as a community.

COOKING AND IDENTITY

Cooking makes me remember that I have Indigenous roots here on this land. It speaks to my identity as Native American. I regularly cook with cactus, which has grown in our state for over 9,000 years. I also cook venison, crab, catfish, duck, snails, and so many other food sources that formed the diet of the first peoples of Texas.

In addition to Indigenous roots, there is a second aspect of identity: What does it mean to be a colonial immigrant on this land? I respond to the colonial immigrant question as I do with the Indigenous one: by doing. I cook and I garden in ways that celebrate my European immigrant identity. For example, I enjoy watching "mi Yorkshire puddings" rise in the oven, using a recipe a chef shared with me when I visited northern England.

Although my surname, Medrano, originates in Spain, I don't often identify with the culture and traditions of the Spanish conquerors who began to arrive in Texas in 1528. It's mainly the painful effects of conquest that touch me: discrimination and dispossession.

The question of immigrant colonial identity asks us to identify and unveil the sense of entitlement that some European immigrants have. Unfortunately, many of my non-Indigenous chef friends lack awareness of themselves as immigrants on this land. Nor do they consider the damaging effects that colonization has had on Indigenous communities as regards to land distribution, destruction of traditional food sources, and exclusion from the dominant social and political spheres. More reflection in this regard, I believe, would benefit all of us in the Southern United States and would promote a sense of honest, meaningful encounter. Anyone can accept this realization of having newly arrived by undertaking practical, personal actions.

How to do this is exemplified by Suzanne Bellamy, an artist from New South Wales, Australia, who worked with earth sculptures and agriculture. I chose an Australian cook and artist as an example to show that we are not isolated in our pursuits. Our Texas and Southern food questions are shared by other communities around the world.

Bellamy, who died in 2022, was not Aboriginal, but said she felt an absolute dedication and connection to Australia, her real and only home. Acknowledging the displacement and devastation that colonization wreaked upon the Australian Aborigines, and aware that she was a colonial immigrant, she lived in a community of solar-powered dwellings. Her garden art works explore how humans can connect with and respect the land.

Yet in her writing she described her awareness that her actions were of someone who is newly arrived: "In an ancient, dry continent like Australia, we are beginners, always needing to confront deep alienation and ignorance from the forces of the land as European colonials and immigrants."

FOOD AND COMMUNITY

Foodways of all peoples, when they are preserved and celebrated, cannot help but make us whole. Delicious food begs to be shared. It helps connect us to each other and to the planet. Sharing a meal is about hospitality, an atmosphere of generosity, of openness—to others, and also to change. A good meal invites us to soften our boundaries and rigidity toward the other. That is the basis of community.

We can build community as good stewards of our traditions, keeping our culinary heritage alive and accessible, and taking it to a place that is vivifying.

We do not eat just to survive. The art of cooking invokes memory, impacts identity, and strengthens community. How our ancestors cooked generations ago in the place where we stand now, in its social and cultural context, can encourage us to look more deeply into who we want to be as a society. The art of cooking is not about the survival of the fittest. It's about the survival of the finest.

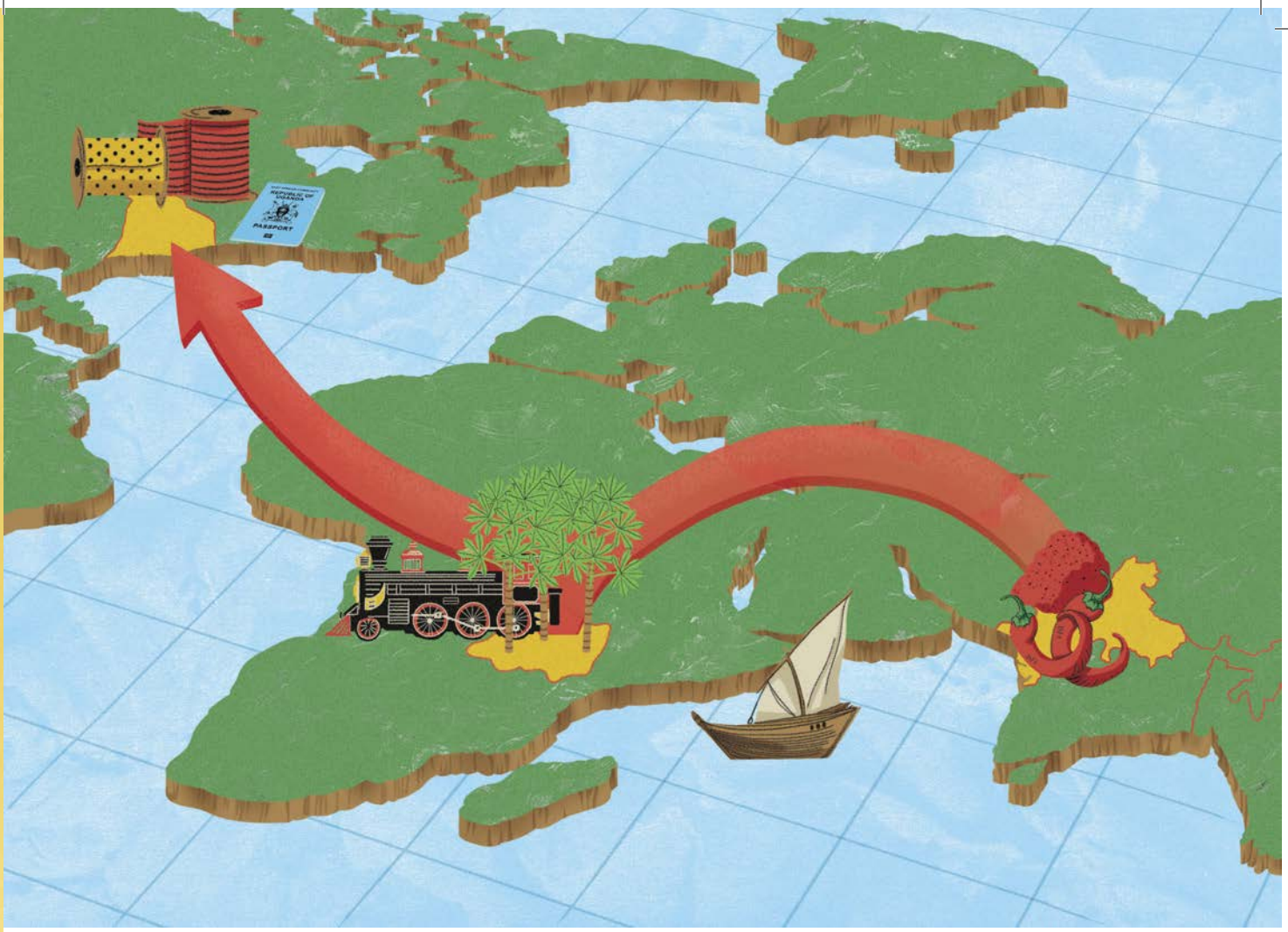
Adán Medrano is a writer, chef, and owner of JM Communications. He specializes in the Indigenous cuisine and cooking methods of Texas and the Americas.

In the Kitchen with Ashraf Aunty

A new Southerner finds a familiar East African–Indian community in upstate South Carolina.

by **OMME-SALMA RAHEMTULLAH**

Illustrations by **LINDSEY BAILEY**



Ashraf Ellison, who of course I call "Ashraf Aunty" out of respect, lives in a double-wide in Duncan, South Carolina, just west of the city of Spartanburg. When I got to her house, her American husband, Lonnie Ellison, was making a cup of chai in the microwave. She told me that he loves the Indian-style milky tea more than she does. I was there to learn how to make fried mohogo, an East African–style cassava dish from her childhood in Jinja, Uganda. She told me that when she was a schoolgirl in the mid-1960s at the Madwani Girls High School,

she and her friend Santhok were responsible for selling the snack at the school's canteen. Cassava is a starchy root tuber native to South America that's also a staple of many African cuisines. It's known as yuca in Latin America, garri or manioc in West Africa, and mohogo in East African Swahili. The Ugandan school cooks boiled a huge vat of sliced mohogo then fried the slices in hot oil, resulting in a crispy snack a bit like a thick-cut french fry. Ashraf and Santhok would bring their Indian touch to the treat: a sprinkle of red chili powder and salt. "You know," she says, "the local Africans would just boil it with tumeric, but we liked adding the chili." If it was the right time of year, the mohogo would be accompanied by a fresh mango plucked from a tree nearby.

Ashraf Aunty was born in Uganda, a landlocked country in East Africa, and is of Indian descent. Her dad moved to Uganda from Kutch Mundra, in the western Indian province of Gujarat, likely in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Trade between the northwest coast of India and the east coast of Africa goes back centuries, following the tides of the monsoons that carried dhows across the Indian Ocean. In a world marred by imperial trade and empire building, it wasn't long before the British began to exploit resources in the interior of East Africa, such as ivory and rubber, and created a cash cropping economy of tea and coffee in the favorable climate. In order to facilitate the transportation of these resources, and stake political control of the source of the Nile, the British colonial government indentured Indian labor to build a regional railway from the port of Mombasa on the shores of Kenya to an inland port on Lake Victoria in Uganda. Thirty-two thousand laborers from India, most of them Punjabi, built the railway between 1896 and 1901. After its completion, most of those workers returned home. Some 7,000 stayed, creating a settled community of Indians in East Africa. Though indentured contracts always promised a return home, Indian indentured laborers in other parts of the world, such as in the Caribbean or South Africa, usually stayed in their new homes and became part of the local populations.

Ashraf Aunty's father was part of a second wave

of Indian migration to East Africa. British colonial interests encouraged Indian immigrants to settle in communities along the rail line. While the ostensible promise to the new settlers was economic prosperity, most of the available jobs were in retail or clerical work and served to further British trade. This class of mostly dukawallas (general-store owners) "serve[d] as a buffer between Europeans and Africans in the middle rungs of commerce and administration," wrote historian Jan Jelmert Jørgensen. When Ashraf Aunty's father moved to Uganda at the age of fifteen to join his brothers, he initially worked in the shop of another Indian immigrant. Eventually, he saved enough money to buy his own shop deep in the countryside.

At the time of Ugandan independence in 1962, there were roughly 80,000 "Asians," as they became known, in the country. Though they made up only 1 percent of the total population, they possessed outsized economic power. As Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a Ugandan-British journalist, writes in her memoir *The Settler's Cookbook*, "somewhere along the line, we were relabelled, no longer called 'Indians' but 'Asians' (an illogical label), thus confirming a shifting identity and the seep of modernism." Though Alibhai-Brown considers the term "Asian" to be illogical, I actually prefer it, as it signifies a racial rather than national category. These Asians were two or more generations removed from the initial settlement of their ancestors. Having lost most connections and family ties to India, they called Uganda home.

That changed in August 1972, when Ugandan dictator Idi Amin declared that Ugandan Asians had ninety days to leave the country, regardless of their citizenship or documentation. Ashraf Aunty found out about the expulsion order on the front page of the local newspaper. She was twenty-four years old, recently married to her first husband, and a new mother.

A decade earlier, when Uganda became independent, Ashraf Aunty had chosen to retain her British subjecthood. She, and others in her situation, were forced to leave Uganda for England. She spent the next six months in a British refugee camp with her in-laws and two-year-old daughter. Meanwhile, her husband, who had been a Ugandan citizen, sought refuge first in Rwanda, then in a refugee camp in Naples, Italy, and was finally resettled in South Carolina. He was one of about 1,500 Ugadan Asians admitted to the United States under "parole" status. The responsibility of their settlement in the United States fell to sympathetic nonprofits and networks of volunteers. In South Carolina, the Tolstoy Foundation agreed to settle 500 Ugandan Asians in the state. Most of them were placed upstate, where jobs were available in the then-busy textile industry. It was the first such resettlement program in South Carolina. With the help of the Tolstoy Foundation, Ashraf Aunty and her daughter were eventually reunited with her husband.

Today, the number of Asians in East Africa is significantly less than it was a half-century ago. Thousands of Asians fled Kenya and Tanzania out of fear in the years that followed the 1972 expulsion from Uganda. Most of them settled in Europe or North America. Wherever they went, they took their recipes with them.

In a story as old as movement itself, migration brings with it adaptations of language and food, culture and family. Ashraf Aunty brought with her to South Carolina, as immigrants do, the foodways of her home. "You know, we call it *mogo*," she says of the cassava we're frying, "but it's actually *mohogo* in Swahili. I guess Asians just didn't know how to pronounce it." When she first arrived in Spartanburg in 1972, she could not find the root vegetable in grocery stores; Americans just didn't know what it was. She made do by substituting potatoes, but it wasn't the same. But as the Mexican population increased, they knew

Trade between the northwest coast of India and the east coast of Africa goes back centuries, following the tides of the monsoons that carried dhows across the Indian Ocean.

what it was, she said. Now, yuca, as it's usually called in Spanish, is available in the freezer case at her local Publix.

We chat and reminisce as we cook. We speak mostly in Kutchi, a language we share, and talk about the history of our jamatkhana in Spartanburg, the Ismaili Muslim mosque where we first met. Ashraf Aunty thaws the frozen mohogo and then cuts it into big chunks. After they are boiled in salted water, she drains them, telling me this also removes the excess starch. As she cuts them into smaller pieces, she is very particular about removing the fibrous chunks in the middle. Working in batches, she fries the pieces in hot oil and finishes them with a sprinkle of red chili powder mixed with salt, just as she did back at school in Jinja.

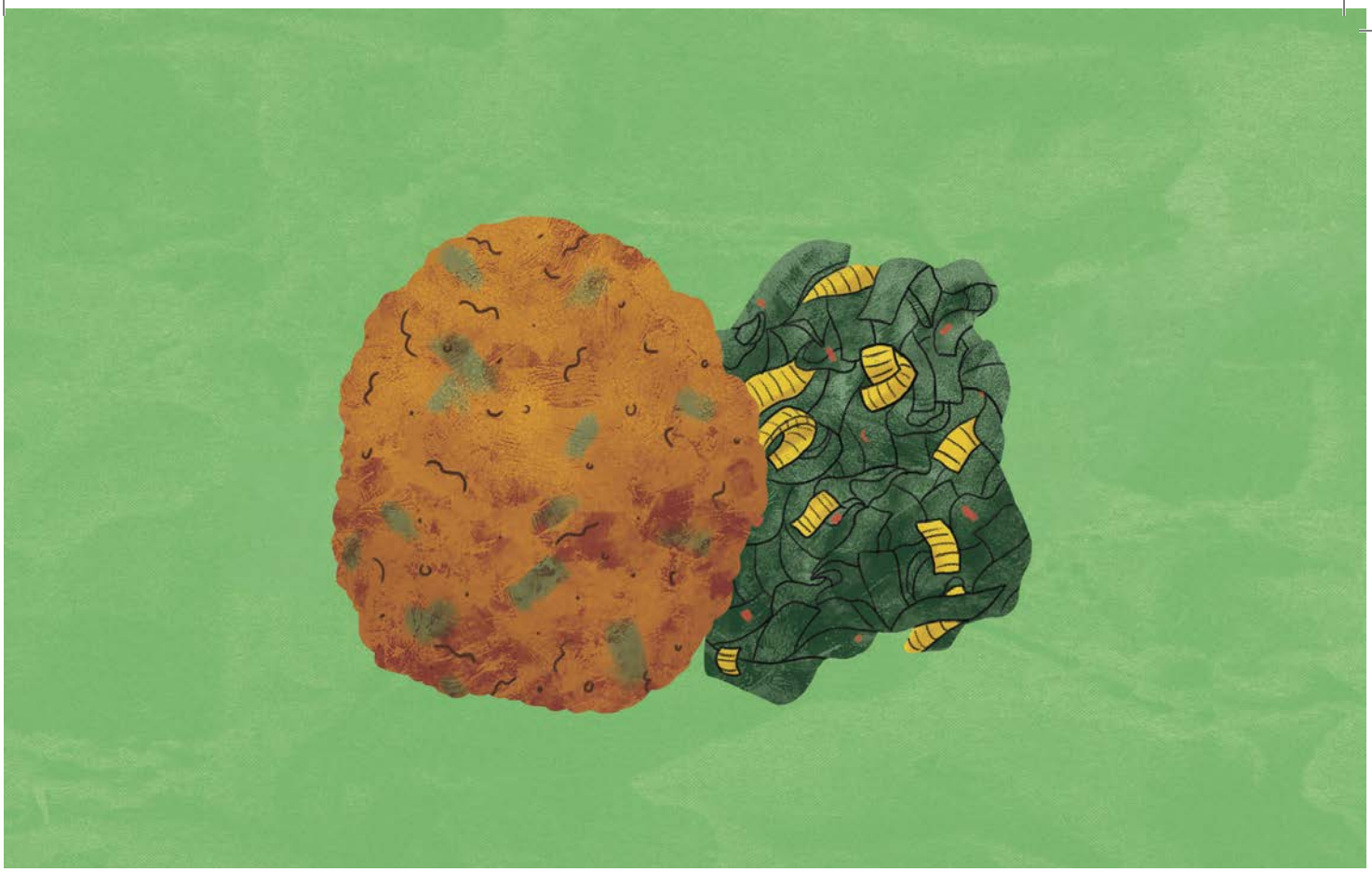
Ashraf Aunty and I share the same love for chili-spiced mohogo, as it reminds us both of home. Though I am not from Uganda, I was born in neighboring Tanzania to parents who were also born there. My maternal grandparents migrated to Tanzania in the 1920s from Rajkot, in the Indian state of Gujarat. The migration story on my father's side is less certain, though we believe our first ancestor to leave India and sail to Zanzibar in East Africa was likely my paternal great-great grandmother. Through these generations, we maintained our Indian language, Kutchi, which comes from the Kutch (or Kathiawar) region of Gujarat. My family migrated from Tanzania to Canada in 1979, so I grew up mostly in Toronto. In 2017 I moved to Columbia, South Carolina, to be with my partner. I found a community of East African Asians whose recipes and food traditions were similar to my own, and I began to document their stories.

Over the past decade or so, South Asian foodways have gained attention and recognition in the South. Chefs like Vishwesh Bhatt, Cheetie Kumar, Meherwan Irani, and others tell their individual and collective stories through dishes like chaat and pakoras, cataloging the blending of two cultures and strong food traditions. But East African Asians have a fifty-year presence in the South, with little recognition of our food cultures. There are no restaurants serving our style of food here, so it remains within the walls of our home kitchens. I am often asked what my favorite Indian restaurant is in Columbia, because acquaintances assume I'm a native informant of all things Indian. I find it hard to offer an answer without delving into colonial histories of migration. If anything, when I moved to the South, I found a familiarity in Southern food: grits are similar to the East African staple ugali, and roadside boiled peanuts, a childhood treat I never really understood as quintessentially African, are my mother's favorite whenever she comes to visit. After all, the foods of the South are African, and so am I.

When I moved to South Carolina, I wanted to cook the foods I'd grown up eating, and I also wanted to better understand the legacies of Black African cooking in the South. As a way to negotiate these desires and histories, I went on a quest to learn about and perfect a few dishes. From Ashraf Aunty, of course, I learned how to make fried mohogo. I had my mom teach me how to make the most perfect fluffy chora ja bhajia, black-eyed pea fritters—the field pea being another African ingredient that found its way onto Southern plates via the Transatlantic slave trade. I also searched for a home caterer who specialized in East African Asian food. In Toronto, we called these cooks "visi aunty." They ran their businesses from high-rise apartments in the east end of the city.

A cousin in Atlanta told me about Naseem Vira, a home caterer from Tanzania who cooks the East African Asian delicacies of my childhood. I have yet to try her food, but when I reached her on the phone, she excitedly told me about her cooking style in her sweet, fast Kutchi. The menu she sells from her Atlanta home includes all of my favorites from my mom's kitchen and my few visits to Tanzania. I long to try her kuku paka, slow cooked chicken in a thick rich yellow coconut curry; and sambusas, the East African variation on samosas that have a thinner crust and are filled with lightly spiced beef and onions. She also makes kokotende, a popular fried treat originating in Zanzibar, made from flour, coconut, and coconut milk, with a hint of cardamom. And no East African Asian menu could be complete without mandazi, a triangular fried sweet dough. It's used to scoop up barazi, a dish of pigeon peas simmered in coconut milk. The pairing is reminiscent of the traditional Indian chapatis and daals.

Naseem Aunty moved from Tanzania to Atlanta to live close to her grown children, who had made Georgia home after attending college there. Naseem Aunty has quickly become a local star of



East African Asian cooking among her community of Ismaili Muslims in suburban Atlanta. And she has managed to build a broader following: She told me that through word of mouth, and through sharing her food at mosque events, her customers now include Indians and Pakistanis throughout the Atlanta metro area.

"They were not used to our cooking before," she said. "It's very different, like a pilau. They just used garam masala only, and just the packaged spices. It's very heavy with spices. We don't do that. We start with a base of lots of onions and tomatoes and add only a few spices." Potatoes, she explained, were also an addition to East African Asian cooking that she doesn't often find in Indian cooking: "We use lots of potatoes in our biryani too. I've never seen them use potatoes in biryani."

These subtle tweaks are what we've brought to Indian food via our generations-long lives and homes built in East Africa. Though such variations in ingredients and techniques might get lost in the ever-changing landscape of Southern immigrant cooking, they are immensely significant to our identities as East African Asians. That is why I find these practicess worthy of documenting and laying claim to: both to maintain the flavors of our African homes and to pass them on to our children. In doing so, we can affirm our identities as East African Asians in the United States. Ashraf Aunty, Nassem Aunty, and I take pride in the ways our ancestral Indian dishes have taken on new ingredients and cooking techniques to create a cuisine that marks our presence and identities as Africans.

On my first new year in my new home in South Carolina in 2018, my Southern husband informed me that we must have black-eyed peas and greens on New Year's Day to bring us luck and prosperity. I think that was the moment I fell in love with the South. It felt like home. That New Year's Day, and every one since, I've brought a twist on this Southern tradition into our home, one that is already a twist of African and Indian food traditions. I stock my kitchen with three bunches of collard greens, a bag of dried black-eyed peas, and plenty of onions and cilantro. On New Year's Day, I fry chora ja bhajia as my mom taught me. I serve them with a side of coriander and coconut chutney—and a love for my homes here and across the world.

Omme-Salma Rahemtullah is an oral historian and the executive director of FoodShare South Carolina.

CALIFORNIA CRAWFISH DREAMING

In the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta, Louisiana red crawfish offer a taste of home.

BY KATIE CARTER KING

IT'S 11:30 A.M. ON A BREEZELESS SUNDAY IN late June—Father's Day—and people are hungry. More than 250 festivalgoers wait on hot asphalt in a snaking but orderly queue, chatting with each other in various languages. Two elementary school–aged boys are hard at play, weaving through adult legs, as their parents gulp warming beers. Dozens of vendors line Main Street, hawking everything from grilled oysters to beignets to turkey legs, but few appear interested in their offerings. For the first time in fourteen years, the town of Isleton, California, is hosting the two-day Isleton Crawdad Festival, and crawdads are what people want.

On this side of the Diablo Range, the mountains that form a natural barrier to the cool Pacific air, the June heat is vicious. Although the festival gates opened an hour and a half ago, we're told the mudbug-heavy takeaway boxes—one pound for twenty-five dollars, three for sixty—won't be ready for another fifteen minutes at least. Founded in 1986, the beloved festival drew huge crowds to the half-square-mile town every summer for twenty years, until small-town infighting between the city council and local chamber of commerce destroyed the event. One local politician even claimed the chamber put "daggers in everything we do." But no one is thinking about those harsh words from 2006 today. Everyone is just excited the Crawdad Festival is finally back.

Halfway down the ever-growing line, local attorney Matt Schumacher isn't bothered by the temperature or the tardiness. He's enjoying talking with the other crawfish-obsessed as he waits for his son to return with refreshments. The third generation in a career-military family, Schumacher was born on Travis Air Force Base, about thirty miles northwest of where we now stand. Although his family is originally from the Midwest, bases along the Gulf Coast brought them south before moving them west. "There are a lot of people around here from Mississippi, Louisiana, largely because of Travis," Schumacher explains.

Isleton, California (population 797) rests at ten feet above sea level, tucked beneath the leveed banks that form the northern edge of Andrus Island, one of almost 200 islands carved out by the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. Bridging the distance between the Bay Area and Sacramento, a dozen half-empty Delta towns dot the soft edges of quiet sloughs, artifacts of bygone economic boom times brought by agriculture and industry. While Schumacher drove down for the day's festivities from nearby Vacaville, roughly thirty-five miles north, his son, Matthew, traveled more than an hour to join him for the day. Today, State Route 160 is a parking lot, with cars stretching for miles down the black-topped levee. Tens of thousands of visitors from the surrounding counties have descended on Isleton's tiny downtown, a fever dream flush with perspiration and Zatarain's seafood boil.

Standing behind white-haired women in umbrella-capped folding chairs, Schumacher explains to me that while he is not technically from the South, he still considers himself Southern. Growing up in a career-military family, his parents moved him and his three brothers all over the country. "Florida. Boston twice. New Orleans, Alabama. New York," Schumacher said. "I grew up everywhere. But Mississippi was—in air quotes—home." His grandparents moved to Biloxi from Illinois when his grandfather was stationed at Keesler Air Force Base. After his grandfather's death in the early 1950s, Schumacher's grandmother remained. His uncles returned to the Gulf Coast after their own stints in the military; some found work at the nearby Ingalls Shipyard in Pascagoula. Mississippi became, and remained, the family's center of gravity.

Schumacher's father followed the trajectory of the rest of the men in his family: enlisting in the Air Force before spending the bulk of his career as a military contractor. Each summer, Matt and his brothers returned to the Gulf Coast, where equal parts work and play awaited them. Their uncle Larry, a retired master sergent turned commercial fisherman, would host a large fish fry to herald their homecoming, a backyard party full of just-caught mullet, shrimp, and crawfish. He'd put the second generation to work: "We'd set up the foldable table in the backyard. It was just an assembly line," Schumacher remembered. "I can still strip shrimp probably faster than anybody in California," he said, laughing. Sometimes, when the coast was pelted by summer storms, the cousins would run through medians and along roadsides to harvest the flooded-out mudbugs. These moments of camaraderie remained indelible, long after those summers came to an end; long after he grew up and had a son of his own.

DESPITE WHAT THE festival's turnout might imply, northern California has not always been a

Illustrations by Molly Brooks

While present-day California was once home to three native crawfish species, European settlers used them primarily as fishing bait—a tool of sustenance, rather than sustenance itself.

crawfish-eating destination. While this expanse of western land was once home to three native species, since Europeans began arriving in 1769, crawfish were primarily used as fishing bait—a tool of sustenance, rather than sustenance itself. Even so, all three are now either endangered or extinct. Other species of crawfish are the primary culprits, chief among them the red swamp crayfish, *Procambarus clarkii*. In the Gulf South, these are affectionately termed Louisiana reds.

No one knows exactly how they first came west, but there are plenty of theories, each sounding more folkloric than the last. As Isleton Crawdad Festival founder Susan Ramon explained to me, "In the late 1930s, early 1940s, a Frenchman from Louisiana... trucked in Louisiana red crawfish and infiltrated the northern California rice fields." Maybe it happened that way; maybe it didn't. Others suggest they crept up from southern California after a bullfrog farmer in San Diego County imported them to feed his army of amphibians in 1932. No matter how they arrived, armed with oversized vermillion claws and a notoriously aggressive nature, reds quickly conquered irrigated and leveed waterways throughout the state.

Since California's incorporation into the continental United States in 1848, white men, typically from New York or New England, had dominated emigration to the Golden State. While industrialists initially enticed Chinese and Japanese laborers to build levees and railroads across the state, rising xenophobia and federal immigration policies curbed this migration after the Civil War. As economic historian James Gregory wrote, "Like the Midwest, California's population was emphatically Euro-American," remaining 90 percent white until the start of World War II.

But as Louisiana reds began to proliferate in the state, so did newcomers with a distinct taste for them. Tasked with outfitting the American military for the Pacific Theater in the wake of Pearl Harbor, the federal government began pouring billions of dollars into West Coast defense contractors and weapons programs. By 1946, California was home to 140 bases, 190 naval shipyards, 18 aircraft manufacturers, and 9 landed vehicle factories. Working-class Americans followed the burgeoning job market like a beacon of economic light, bringing migrants from all over the country but especially from the South. Black Southerners went in search of steady employment and racial tolerance—a new life on a golden coast. Whites, too, began to make a small exodus, as farmers across the country walked away from exhausted soil and rising costs. "Second only to the gold rush," Gregory wrote, "the war remade California."

For many transplants—far from home, often far from family—the discovery of Louisiana reds in California waters became a tether to the known in this unknown place. And as the state's population continued to grow and diversify, this taste for mudbugs remained. Scott Brady, a cultural geographer at Chico State in the Central Valley—the sprawling expanse the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta gives way to—explained me last fall, "Different groups have shown up and created foodways that weren't here fifty years ago." When Brady, a native of Thibodeaux, Louisiana, first arrived in California in 2000, he would load his wife and sons into the car on Saturday afternoons to drive around rice fields and sloughs, looking for a good place to lay a crawdad trap. After turning down a series of gravel lanes, he says he'd often encounter Hmong and Mexican families congregating around well-producing waters.

Brady grew up one of five brothers in Louisiana, and on the weekends his father would keep them busy with physical labor. "I think it was so we would stay out of trouble. It kept us occupied

in a way that would make us tired," he said. For Brady, bringing his own two boys into northern California's irrigated ditches was an extension of this familial ethos: "They would probably say all kinds of terrible things about how many hours we spent in canals by rice fields and ditches." Although he loves crawfish, he suspects only one of his own sons has retained a palate for them, while the other can only taste the sweat of childhood chores.

But for the Schumachers, California crawfish were primarily about fun and family bonding. When Schumacher and his brothers would return to California, armed with Mississippi know-how, they would set out to catch some mudbugs on their own. "In downtown Sacramento, I used to [fish for them]," Schumacher explained. "They're in all the little creeks." While the family was stationed at McLellan Air Force Base just north of the state capital, the teenaged Schumacher boys would walk down the railroad tracks before cutting through the golf course to nearby Arcade Creek to lure mudbugs from their silty holes with cheese-baited string.

Today, Schumacher doesn't really consider himself a crawfish connoisseur. Rather, the experience of eating crawfish—and mingling with others who do—serves to connect him both to his childhood summers in Mississippi and to his son. Unlike his father, Matthew didn't grow up fishing in sloughs and creeks for the Southern scuttlers, but instead found and devoured them in the Viet Cajun restaurants that have become increasingly popular throughout California in the last few decades. He also remembers attending springtime crawfish boils when he was a law student at the University of Mississippi. This was the pair's fifth year in attendance, and Matthew was prepared to eat his father under the table, as he had since he was a kid.

JUST WHEN IT felt like it couldn't get any hotter, patience finally paid off. One by one, people began to pass us, their arms heavy with reds. The crawfish had sold out early the day before, and no one was letting their well-earned turn go to waste, with some holding teetering Styrofoam boxes stacked five or six high.

Crustaceans secured, Schumacher and his son made their way a few blocks down to a tent filled with long tables and black folding chairs where big groups laughed together and shared their hard-earned rewards. "Family-style is what I call it," Schumacher later explained. The offerings weren't the fresh, perfectly spiced crawfish of his childhood summers on the Gulf; these mudbugs were mild to the point of bland. Yet Schumacher hardly seemed to mind. "Everybody was just interacting with everybody. I liked it a lot," he said. "Most of us were just excited [the festival] was back."

Other attendees were less forgiving. A middle-aged woman cut through the lingering queue and stage-whispered, "I don't need crawfish *that* bad." Some complained about the prices. Still more said the mudbugs' seasoning was a little heavy on the mud, implying they hadn't been properly cleaned. But many, like the Schumachers, showed up on Father's Day looking for a hard-to-find taste of home in an unexpected place: eating Louisiana reds under a northern California sky.

The heat broke by mid-afternoon, and once the crawfish ran out, families began to filter out back to their cars. Although they couldn't have known it then, this would be the last time festivalgoers would be invited to litter the streets of Isleton with bright-red carcasses sucked dry. A private company, The Crawdad Festival LLC, now runs the event. They plan to move it to Cal Expo, the state fairgrounds in Sacramento, with the hope of attracting even larger crowds and providing them with ample parking. It will still happen over Father's Day weekend, though, just as it always has.

I asked Schumacher recently if he thought he and his son would still go, continue their tradition. He thought for a moment. "Probably. But it won't be the same." To his mind, reds—whether at a boil in the South or at a festival out West—are eaten fresh, ideally overlooking the very canals and sloughs they came from. But this June, he'll still be able to close his eyes in the thick summer heat and get a Styrofoam box laden with mudbugs, seasoned perfectly by the flavor of memory.

Katie Carter King, Gravy*'s copyeditor, is a writer and researcher based in San Francisco. A child of the Georgia Piedmont, she is a graduate of the MA program in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi.*

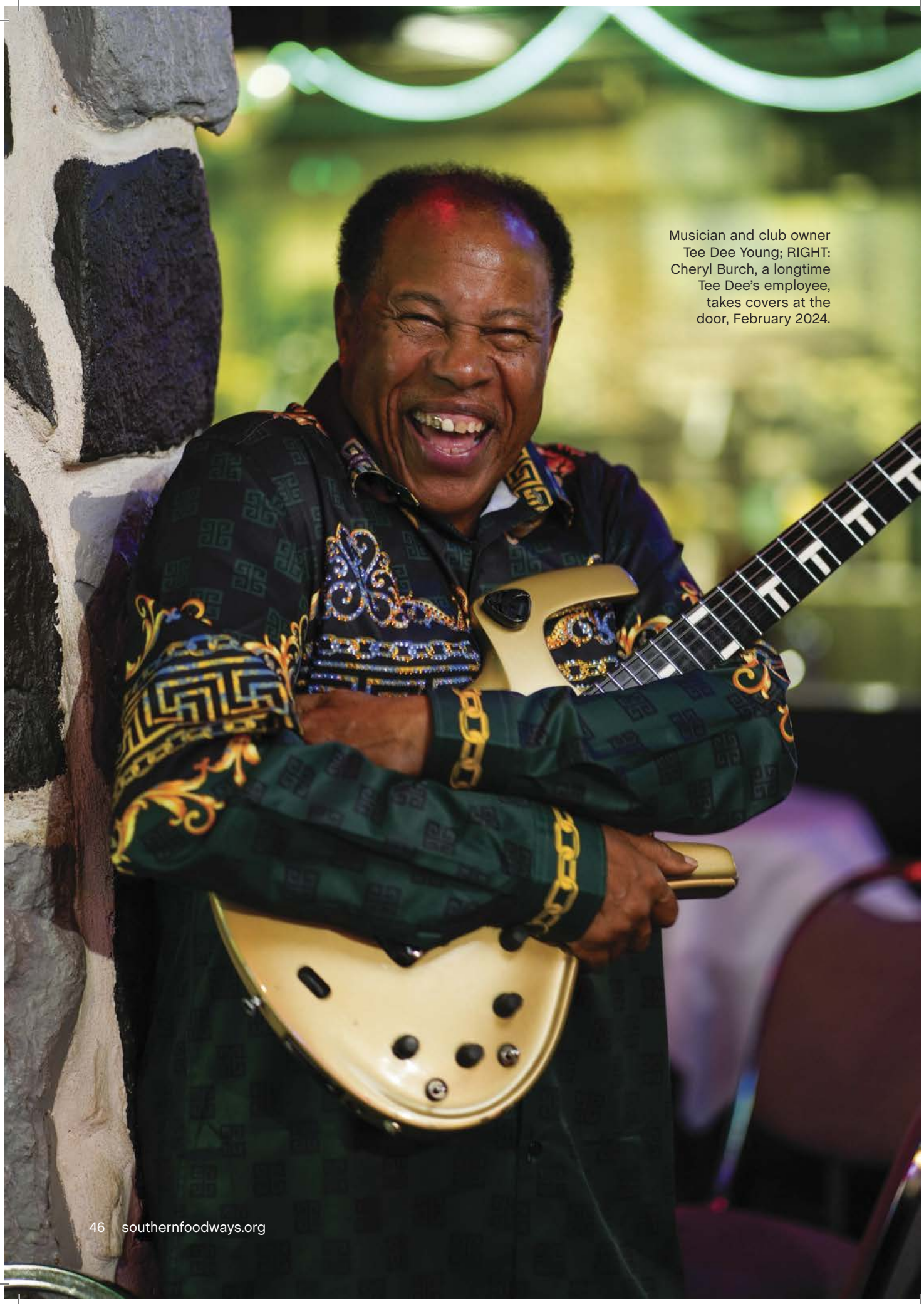
MUSIC UP FRONT, FRIED FISH OUT BACK

In summer, it's hard to leave Tee Dee's Bluegrass Progressive Club feeling empty.

BY JARRETT VAN METER

Photos by Patrick Murphy-Racey

Terrance "Tee Dee" Young leads his band at Tee Dee's, February 2024.



Musician and club owner Tee Dee Young; RIGHT: Cheryl Burch, a longtime Tee Dee's employee, takes covers at the door, February 2024.

THE MUSIC STARTS SLOW, ALMOST CREEPS up on you. First the tiptoeing blues guitar, then the organ, bass, drums, and saxophone. Once everybody is tuned up, they set off like a rolling ball of harmony into the June night. It's Monday, just after 8:40 P.M., and the music won't stop until almost midnight. The band gains speed, picking up players along the way for a song or two.

Tee Dee's Bluegrass Progressive Club is a quintessential blues bar. At the edge of downtown Lexington, Kentucky, the club occupies the bottom of a two-story brick building that looks like it was once a storefront. You can't see inside now, though, as stone mosaics have replaced the first-floor windows. Step through the front door, and your eyes adjust to the darkness. From the glow of string lights and a few colored bulbs overhead, you can make out a pool table in the corner, a stage, a bar, and smattering of tables and chairs. The place has been open nearly forty years—on Monday nights and Monday nights only.

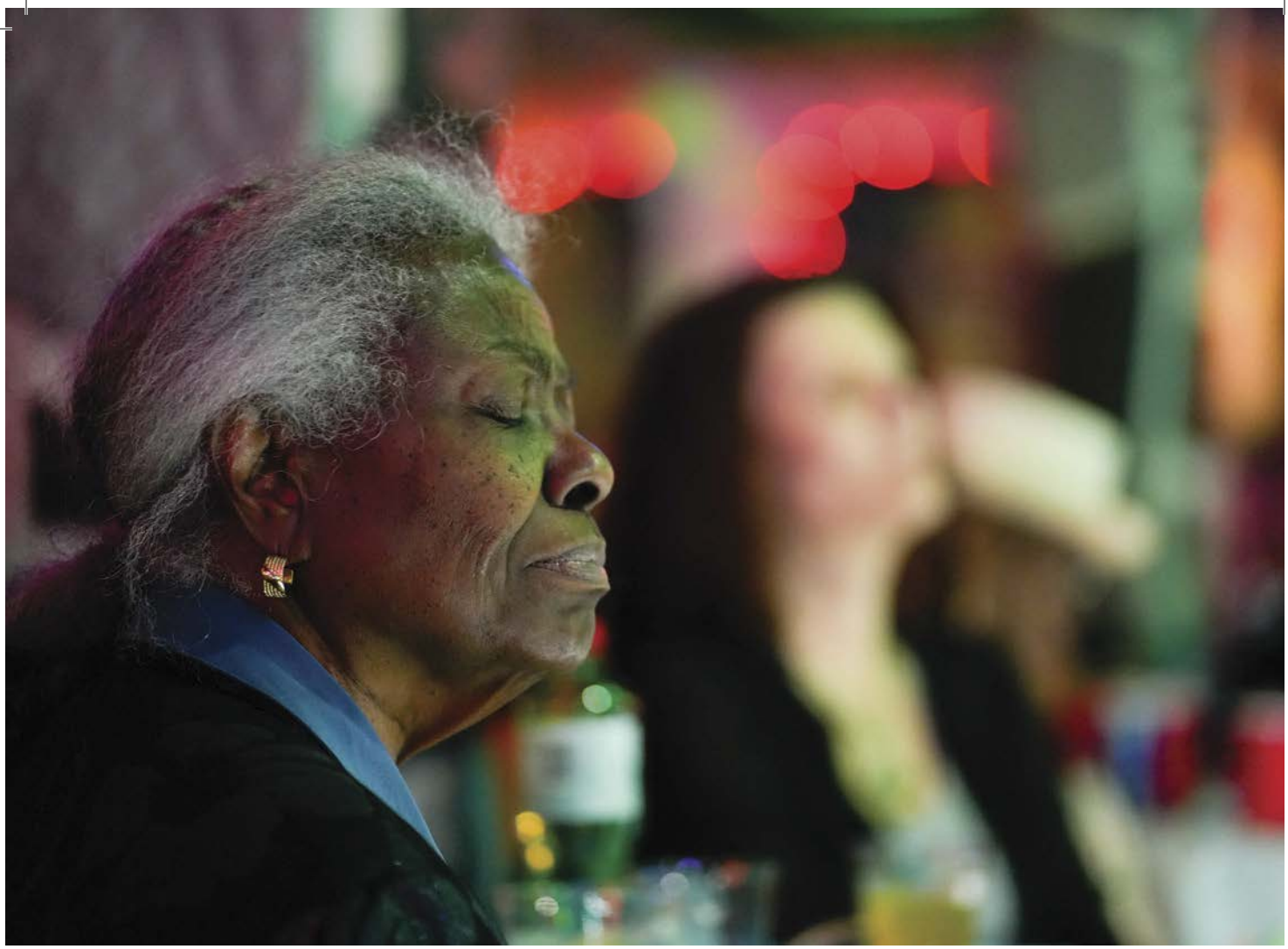
The walls are lined with mementos bearing the name and face of the man on stage. He wields an electric guitar and flashes an effervescent smile. Back in the day, Terrance "Tee Dee" Young opened for James Brown and Aretha Franklin. He was inducted into the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame and even earned his own official day in the city of Lexington, September 13. Now sixty-nine, the music has kept Young's spirit youthful. Sweat drips from his brow as he digs into a solo. The man is working, bending, popping, ducking, and picking. The crowd nods with him and taps their feet, some sipping from Budweiser bottles or cocktails in Solo cups. Some faces are new; others he has known for decades. Some are white; just as many are Black.

AS THE FIRST song ends, Young takes the microphone. There is no dinner menu here—but, as he reminds us, there is fried seafood, prepared under a tent on the back patio. It's available in the summer months, and some say it's the best in town. Young claims he is the only person alive who knows the recipe.

"We sell fish and shrimp out back," he says. "Is it good?!"

He grins at his question. He knows the answer.

It's Rebecca Young's recipe: his mother's. He says she taught it to him and nobody else. The Young home in Lexington's Pralltown neighborhood was filled with music and food. Tee Dee, his five brothers, and their father, Leonard Young,



were musicians. Miss Becky, as she was known, fed everybody who came through her house. She spun mouthwatering meals out of simple ingredients: gizzards and rice, chili dogs, cake, and her signature fried fish.

Today, Tee Dee Young keeps his family's traditions of food and music alive. He makes the fry meal for the fish each week from scratch. While he jams onstage, his cook, David Bingham, mans the fryer on the back patio. For more than three decades, Bingham was a cook at the iconic Max's Loudon Square Buffet on Lexington's north side. When the restaurant closed two years ago, Young, who had been a regular at Loudon Square, asked Bingham to come work for him at the club.

WEARING A TUPAC T-shirt and basketball sneakers, Bingham dredges and lays each whiting fillet into the oil like he's trying not to wake it. While Young won't share his mother's recipe, from the looks of it, a cornmeal base is involved. Everyone orders their fish at the bar, then Bingham brings them inside, still steaming from the fryer. A basket comes with two fillets and two slices of white bread.

Young has put a lot of work into the place since buying it about forty years ago. When he decided he wanted to purchase the building, he had about 500 dollars to his name. The price tag was $15,000, and he couldn't get a bank loan. He says he borrowed the money from a man he was doing carpentry work for and paid him back within three years. At the time, the roof let in more rain than it kept out, and weeds grew up through the floor. Today, the club occupies the ground floor, and there are a few apartments upstairs. Some people who have lived in Lexington for years don't know the place exists.

Bingham plates a few orders and shuttles them into the noise and heat and darkness of the club. Young and company are still tearing away. His loose, short sleeve, button-up shirt is a mashup of fabric swatches, like a quilt with armholes hanging from his ropey frame.

As the song ends, Young steps to the microphone.

"Is anybody in here a musician?" he asks the crowd.

A white guy with a bushy goatee, short-sleeve denim button-down, and jeans mumbles loud enough to catch Young's attention.

"What?" Young asks the man.

"I play guitar," the man says.

"Well, where is it?"

The room is full of tension, the good kind, as the exchange unfolds. Eyes turn back to the scruffy guest.

"In the car."

"Well, go *get* it!" Young booms. To great laughter and applause, the man rises and shuffles toward the front door. "It's illegal to leave your baby in the car."

THIS IS STANDARD on Monday nights. The house band starts with a couple of songs, then Young opens the stage to whoever wants to play. People in the audience pull everything from guitars to djembes from beneath their chairs and step forward. The guests play a few notes, then Young and the band join in, urging them on regardless of style, genre, or ability.

The band takes a break to sip water and towel away sweat. Bingham darts in and out with fried seafood orders. Guests pop shrimp into their mouths and fork bites of whiting. A basket comes with two fillets and two slices of white bread. Some put the tender fillets between the bread, hit it with hot sauce, and make a sandwich. Beer or Jack and Cokes wash down each bite.

Soon, the goateed man from the crowd returns with his guitar slung over his back.

He steps to the stage and, speaking into the microphone, introduces himself as Aaron McGlone. "I'm from far northeastern Kentucky, where nobody can find me unless they have to or I want 'em to," he says. "Way up in the holler."

With McGlone leading the way, the band launches into Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues." Next, McGlone introduces an original he calls "Guitars and Wine." He plays a few chords, allowing the band to feel it out, then everybody jumps in.

They play on; time is lost. Soon, it's past 11:00 P.M. on a work night.

Young and the band do a rendition of The Beatles' "Yesterday." Near the end, the song shifts from an organ-heavy, Sunday morning–church sound to a reggae beat.

Toward the end of the night, Young introduces the house band: William "Woo" Johnson on drums, Tim Talbert on organ, William "Billy D" Linton on bass, and Jacob O'Donnell and Kirby Davis on saxophones.

AFTER THE SHOW ends, Young will head to Waffle House with some of the crew to wind down. He will sleep in late tomorrow, then make his way back to the club to finish cleaning up and begin restocking. Depending on the week, he and the band might have a few gigs lined up for the weekend ahead. But next Monday, he'll be back in this spot, beckoning the crowd to dance and play along. And if it's summertime, he'll make sure no one leaves with an empty stomach.

BELOW: An order of fried fish is served with two slices of white bread, summer 2023.
LEFT: A Tee Dee's patron closes her eyes to listen to the music, February 2024.

Jarrett Van Meter

Jarrett Van Meter is a writer and basketball coach from Lexington, Kentucky.

STICKY RICE WITH MUNG BEANS AND BISCUITS WITH GRAVY

For a Vietnamese refugee finding his way in the South, the notion of home expands meal by meal.

BY MINH-Y TRAN

MY FAMILY GATHERED AROUND THE DINING room table just before sunset and sank into the high-backed, cushioned chairs, ready for the journey ahead: Thanksgiving dinner in my parents' home in Arlington, Texas, in November 2022. A whole roasted goose; a bright salad of marinated kale, persimmon, and red peppers; roasted honey-balsamic carrots; goose fat–coated air-fried Brussels sprouts; and lemon-pepper asparagus crowded the table. Serving bowls cradled mashed sweet potatoes and two types of sticky rice, which my father had made himself: one with toasted peanuts and the other with green mung beans.

When we were a few bites in, my dad mentioned that the last time he'd had his mom's sticky rice with mung beans was when he was eleven years old and half a world away in Đà Lạt, Vietnam. This was in 1967, and his country was at war. Eight years later, my father, Trần Văn Thành, fled with thousands of others when Saigon fell to the communist party on April 30, 1975. Because the United States supported South Vietnam during the war, the fall promised retribution against those who remained and who refused to embrace communism.

With his older brother's sandals on his feet and little in his hands, he boarded one of the many ships that some 800,000 refugees used to escape from Saigon to ostensibly safer places like Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. My father and the wave of refugees became known as "boat people." Thousands who weren't fortunate enough to board ships attempted the crossing on rickety boats. Many of them drowned or died at sea. Those who survived often encountered more dire and complicated futures in overcrowded refugee camps once they reached their destinations.

My father traveled for about two weeks, from Saigon to the Philippines to Guam and finally to the United States, where he arrived in mid-May 1975. He was transferred to Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, an Army base that by then was serving as a refugee camp. President Gerald Ford's Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975 made way for nearly 130,000 Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian people to start new lives in this country.

In Fort Chaffee, my dad and over 50,000 other refugees were provided with food, shelter, and medical care as they waited to get matched with sponsors in other cities. In the meantime, my father began his new life on a base at the southern edge of the Ozarks. And that meant adjusting to Southern food.

Illustration by Yuki Murayama

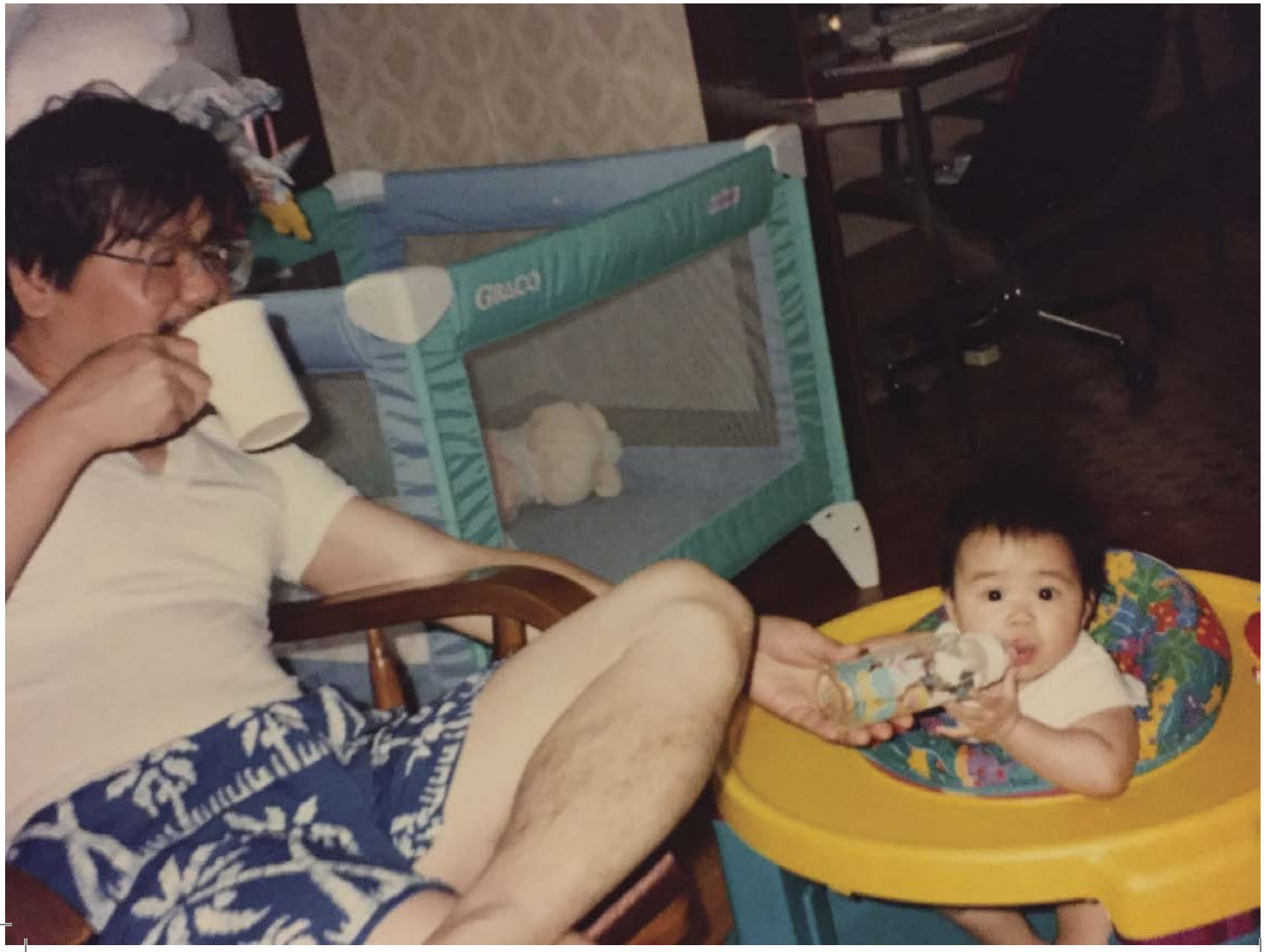
Over the next four months, my dad spent his time wandering around Fort Chaffee—the refugees housed there were not allowed to leave the premises. He started his day with breakfast: a buffet that included scrambled eggs, corned-beef hash, and hash browns. Then more wandering, sometimes with friends; maybe an English language class. Then lunch, also a buffet, typically featuring fried chicken or Spam and rice. After lunch, it was time to settle in for a nap before even more wandering. Then came dinner, usually another buffet with similar offerings to lunch. But the menu changed on Fridays. Apparently, the refugee camp administrators were under the impression that all Vietnamese people are Catholic. Every Friday, the mess hall served what my dad recalls as egregiously smelly canned fish. Most refugees, including him, dreaded those meals.

During his second month in the camp, my dad applied for sponsorship so he could leave the base. He was paired with a twentysomething couple named Joe and Chris Jacob in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. He was on his way to becoming a Southerner.

The morning after he arrived, he sat down for breakfast with the Jacobs. On the table in front of him was not the corned beef and scrambled eggs of Fort Chaffee, but a fruit that was both unfamiliar and familiar: It looked like a large orange, with an off-yellow rind and pink pulp. This was his first encounter with a grapefruit. He had no idea how to eat it. Anh Joe and Chị Chris (anh and chị translate to "older brother" and "older sister") showed him how to scoop out the meat of the fruit. Tangy and sweet, it tasted like nothing he had ever eaten.

Joe and Chris were vegetarian. They mainly prepared meals of beans and rice with cheese (something my dad still makes to this day) or dishes from Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet*, a bestselling 1971 cookbook that

The author (R) and her father, 1994



Courtesy of Minh-Y Tran

promoted the environmental benefits of eating non-animal proteins. My dad, on the other hand, was a true carnivore. Growing up, he had eaten meat almost weekly, when his mother would slaughter pigs to sell at the market in his hometown. Luckily, once a week, Joe and Chris took my dad out to a local cafeteria-style restaurant that served Southern staples like fried chicken and pork chops. He remembers filling his tray with every meat except hamburgers—he wasn't interested in the bun.

> On the table in front of him was not the corned beef and scrambled eggs of Fort Chaffee, but a fruit that was both unfamiliar and familiar...This was his first encounter with a grapefruit. He had no idea how to eat it.

ONE MORNING, HIS sponsors were out of town, and he wanted to try something new: to order a meal on his own without help from anyone. He biked to the local burger joint next to the Piggly Wiggly, mustering up all his courage on the ride. After parking the bike, he walked in and ordered the Number One. They gave him his first-ever American hamburger. It was as though he'd forgone those cafeteria burgers for this very American moment: a smashed and griddled beef patty, iceberg lettuce, and slice of tomato, dressed in ketchup, mustard, and mayo. He still remembers the happiness he felt that day. At the time, there were less than a handful of Vietnamese refugees like him in Ocean Springs, but after that Number One burger, he felt confident being on his own and ordering his own food in English.

He eventually racked up more firsts: first job, first day at school, first Thanksgiving and Christmas. For Thanksgiving, he and Anh Joe headed to New Orleans to Chị Chris's family's home. In New Orleans, he discovered the magic of jambalaya and gumbo, but also a nascent Vietnamese community of refugees like him. Many of them were brought to the area in 1975 by Catholic Charities after the fall of Saigon. It was the same organization that helped my dad resettle in Ocean Springs. Over the next thirty years, this small community in New Orleans grew to about 14,000 Vietnamese people. They would go on to change not only the demographics of the city, but also its culinary landscape. With both Vietnam and New Orleans' historical ties to France, this might have been expected. Traditional Vietnamese flavors and ingredients like lemongrass, ginger, Thai chilies, and garlic paste were interwoven with Cajun foodways to create a new American cuisine: Viet-Cajun, famously found in crawfish boils today. This Southern expression, a blend of his home country and his new home, became a family favorite in our own seafood boils.

Four months after that Thanksgiving, my dad moved out of his host family's home and into a trailer in Ocean Springs—the first home of his own in the South. Eventually, he moved to Texas, where he earned a bachelor's degree in sociology and later a PhD in social work at the University of Texas at Arlington. Between those degrees, he returned to Mississippi to get his master's in social work at Jackson State University. While he worked on his degree in Jackson, he also took a job with a program that offered social services to Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugee children. From the "white house" (a nickname for the shared men's home he lived in while working and studying) to Jackson State's school cafeteria, cooks at this historically Black university introduced him to much of the Southern fare he came to love: grits, biscuits and gravy, collard and turnip greens, cornbread, and catfish.

THOUGH MY DAD went on to live in Michigan, Massachusetts, and California, he spent his formative first American decade in the Southern part of the country: Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Kentucky. The biscuits and gravy and collard greens he came to love are foods he treats himself to whenever he can find them on a restaurant menu or hotel breakfast buffet. Recently, I asked him if he ever felt like he was really in the South during those early years Did he understand the region's history? Its way of life? He said that, at the time, he didn't have a sense of what "the South" meant or felt like in comparison to the rest of the United States. He was so focused on surviving—having a roof over his head, a job to pay the bills, and enough to eat—that his surroundings could've


Cuisinart

Courtesy of Minh-Y Tran

Though he built a social circle of fellow Vietnamese refugees wherever he lived, nowhere in the United States could ever come close to home.

been a black box. All he knew was that it could never, and would never, compare to Vietnam.

My dad went on to spend his career in academia and social work. But he is also an accomplished poet, recognized in Vietnamese communities here and abroad. His work, which he writes in Vietnamese and often translates to English, is filled with memories of his past: his mother, father, and siblings; and the village and farm he called home, where he found happiness "*...waking up in the morning waking/Hearing the crowing of the roosters/And wondering whether or not I am dreaming*." Surrounded by coffee and banana trees, this is where his family shared meals filled with roasted yams, bowls of rice, and ripe yellow bananas. Though he built a social circle of fellow Vietnamese refugees wherever he lived, nowhere in the United States could ever come close to the land of his birth. And yet, with each plate of collards or bowl of gumbo, he adapted to the foodways of his new home.

When he finally had a family of his own, he made sure to bring the South to the dinner table, even if it was fast food. I grew up in the Northeast and Southern California eating home cooked, traditional Vietnamese staples, but on some occasions, we gorged on buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken, orders of red beans and rice from Popeye's and my dad's own version of dirty rice, which is essentially Vietnamese-style fried rice enriched with bacon, turkey drippings, mushrooms, and green onions—a nod to his momentous Thanksgiving dinner in New Orleans with Anh Joe.

I CELEBRATED THANKSGIVING 2023 not in Arlington but with my fiancé's family in Charlotte, North Carolina. It turned out that Anh Joe had moved to North Carolina, and I had the opportunity to meet him for the first time. Following a flurry of text exchanges between my dad, Anh Joe, and me, I found myself spending the next day with my fiancé, his brother, and Anh Joe.

In a five-hour whirlwind, I hopped on a tiny, four-seater plane with my fiancé and his brother, who flew us 125 miles northeast to Burlington, North Carolina. Joe lives in nearby Saxapahaw, a tiny rural community, where he owns a company that offers canoe and kayak tours on the Haw River. He gave us a tour of his office and took us to the Saxapahaw General Store for dinner. Though macaroni and cheese and red beans and rice were on the menu, I had a veggie plate that wasn't remotely Southern: roasted Brussels sprouts, risotto, and asparagus. As we ate, I asked Joe about his time with my dad. Joe didn't remember much from those six months. There was, of course, a language barrier. But what remained indelible, he said, were my dad's kindness, warmth, and fortitude.

My parents told me that for their own Thanksgiving dinner in Arlington last year, they made duck three ways: smoked duck, a Vietnamese duck salad, and Vietnamese duck and bamboo noodle soup. Dad loves to cook, and his phở, bún măng vịt, and thịt heo kho are some of my favorites. Sometimes, he binges YouTube videos to learn how to make Vietnamese dishes lost to him when he fled communism. Other dishes he learns on his own through trial, error, and will. Then there are special ones he makes from memory, including his mom's sticky rice with mung beans, which he grew up watching her prepare. When he's not cooking, he enjoys taking our family out to dinner for Texas brisket, ribs, fried chicken, and collard greens. Southern and Vietnamese cuisines usually don't make an appearance together at my family's dinner table. But over the decades, my dad has rooted himself in both. He is bound to both places. And whether at our dinner table over pho, or at a Texas barbecue joint over brisket, he shares the stories of the places that made him.

Minh-Y Tran is the director of business development at Robb Report *and* Art Media. *She is also an MA candidate in food studies at New York University and volunteers as an associate board member and high school mentor with Apex for Youth. Visit southernfoodways.org to read a poem by her father.*

A Berry Good Harvest

Mabe's Berry Farm of Walnut Cove, North Carolina, does a brisk business at the 2022 Stuart Strawberry Festival in Stuart, Virginia. This year's festival is scheduled for May 18, 2024, the height of berry season in the upper South.

Photo by MAGGIE ROTANZ

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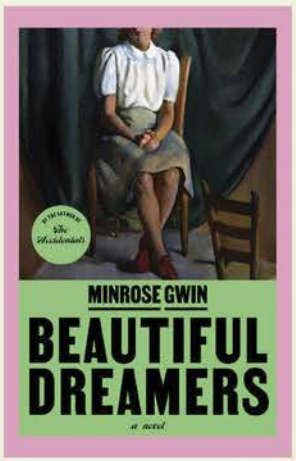

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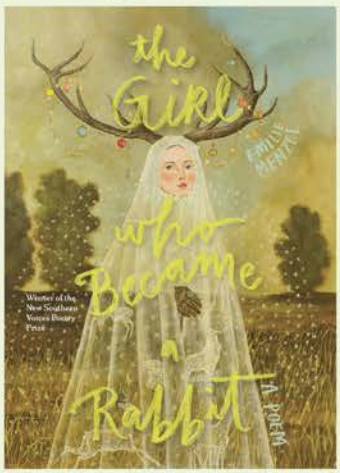

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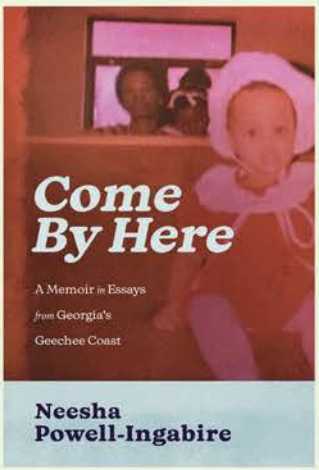

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