



Gravy

"I'm selling my pork chops, but I'm giving my gravy away." - Memphis Minnie

Number 12, Fall 2003

News from the Southern Foodways Alliance

Southern Foodways Symposium to Explore Appalachian Cooking

The sixth annual Southern Foodways Symposium will be held October 2-5, on the campus of the University of Mississippi in Oxford. For 2003 we explore the people, places, foods, and traditions of Appalachia.

This event provides opportunities for cooks, chefs, food writers, and inquisitive eaters alike to come to a better understanding of Southern cuisine and Southern culture. Lectures, held in Johnson Commons, at the heart of the University of Mississippi campus, are complemented by informal lunches and dinners served in and around Oxford.

In keeping with our tradition of offering attendees practical instruction in the study and dissemination of oral histories and the like, on Thursday, prior to the official opening of the symposium, Ann McCleary and Helen Chambers of the Department of Public History at the University of West Georgia will conduct a workshop on incorporating oral histories and documentary photography into foodways exhibitions and festivals. The workshop will be free of charge to the first 20 registrants.

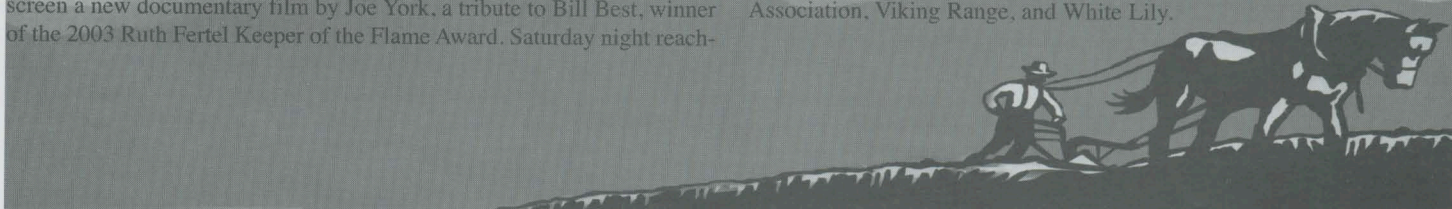
This year we continue to expand our entertainment offerings. Thursday night, after a dinner catered by Amy Crockett of Ajax Diner, we stage *Nanny and Blake*, an original one-act play written by Southern Studies graduate student Kendra Myers and set in the mountain South. On Friday night, we bring the music of the mountains to Mississippi when Greasy Beans, a five-piece band that fuses bluegrass and newgrass and old-time influences, takes the stage at Taylor Grocery. On Saturday afternoon, we screen a new documentary film by Joe York, a tribute to Bill Best, winner of the 2003 Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame Award. Saturday night reach-

es its zenith with the debut of Ed Dye and the Hambone Orchestra.

But as Rick Bragg will no doubt remind us on Saturday morning, we should not forget the food. Among the highlights will be a lunch of shuck beans, stack cakes, and cornbread. And a pimento cheese tasting. And a fish fry featuring, in addition to our traditional taste of catfish, a sampling of char raised in the mountains of West Virginia. Not to mention Appalachian appetizers from Jared Richardson of Kentucky's Wallace Station. And that's just Friday. Other featured foods include grits and garlic custard from John Fler of the Inn at Blackberry Farm; buttermilk and cornbread from Tennessee's Cruze Dairy; a country ham tasting highlighting the best ham men and women from, among other places, the mountain South; a brotherly battle of fried pies with Robert and John Stehling; and a Sunday morning biscuits and grits and gravy breakfast hosted by John Currence of Oxford's own City Grocery.

Host for the event is the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture. Contributors to our efforts include Ajax Diner, Biltmore Estate Wine Company, City Grocery, Cruze Farm Dairy, the R&B Feder Charitable Foundation for the Beaux Arts, Glory Foods, the National Pork Board, West Virginia Aqua, and the Yoknapatawpha Arts Council.

Primary sponsors of the Southern Foodways Symposium are Fertel Foundation, Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey, the Southeast Dairy Association, Viking Range, and White Lily.



MEMBER NEWS

If you have news or projects you'd like to let other SFA members know about, please e-mail them to Tom Head at thomashead@thomashead.com. Please keep submissions to about 50 words.

Corina's Way, a novel by SFA member **Rod Davis** (also author of *American Voodoo: Journey into a Hidden World*, UNT Press), was released in June by NewSouth Books. *Kirkus Reviews* describes it as "in the tradition of Flannery O'Connor or John Kennedy Toole: a welcome romp, told with traditional southern charm." Although not a food book, David says, it is set in New Orleans and might impart a flavor of the city to readers.

Sherry Twork of Kingsport, Tennessee, was awarded a \$100 cash prize for gathering oral histories on baking traditions in East Tennessee

and Southwest Virginia. The competition was underwritten by SFA. Twork interviewed five regional cooks last fall as part of a course entitled "Foodways of the American South," taught by SFA board member Fred Sauceman through East Tennessee State University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

Elizabeth Karmel is the editor for a new food-oriented magazine called *Fresh*, with an e-mail newsletter called FreshCity News. She is looking for information on new products, restaurants, heirloom produce, books, and especially those food things that are a little off the beaten track. Material or ideas may be sent to her at 411 West Ontario Street, Suite 206, Chicago, IL 60610; by telephone (312-951-8394); or by e-mail (freshcitynews@yahoo.com).

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Lamb Barbecue: Cultural Codicil, Baa-aad to the Bone

Earlier this summer, on a culinary tour of Savannah, Georgia, a friend turned me on to her favorite menu item at Johnny Harris, the barbecue landmark and former dance hall (not to mention rumored speakeasy) dating back to the 1920s. “You’ve got to try the lamb barbecue sandwich,” she said with the urgency of a paramedic treating a potentially fatal nutritional disorder. For the unschooled, Johnny Harris’s place is one of the great historic monuments to ‘cue. Photos of its 1940s heyday show patrons in tuxes and ball gowns in its circular dining hall, with big bands like Harry James’s on the revolving bandstand in the center of the room. “Starlight” twinkles from tiny bulbs in the vaulted ceiling.

The circular dining room is still intact, but the patrons now are largely Savannah folks in khakis and loafers, often with kids in tow. Harris’s barbecue sauce won the 2002 Diddy-Wa-Diddy Award (first place) at the American Royal International Barbecue Sauce Contest in Kansas City, and business is so good the place may expand into a Shoney’s next door to accommodate groups. The sliced lamb sandwich is tender, great with Harris’s mustard sauce, on soft wheat bread with a pickle slice.

It was a delicious treat, the kind that lingers in your memory. It was still haunting me later that summer when, on a trip to Memphis, I made the obligatory pilgrimage to Charlie Vergos’s Rendezvous and rediscovered that iconic institution’s barbecued lamb riblets. That in turn took me back to my college days in Owensboro, Kentucky, where the local specialties are barbecued mutton and burgoo, a thick stew of mutton and vegetables (much like Georgia’s pork-laced Brunswick stew), served up at the famous Moonlite Bar-B-Q Inn. And as every journalist knows, three examples make a story. I set out to uncover the role lamb plays in the ‘cue cultural catechism—to shear it, if you will, of its woolly origins.

The three restaurants—Johnny Harris, the Rendezvous, and Moonlite—share similar lifelines: All began as taverns, some on dirt roads, with the sale of a few sandwiches. The Rendezvous is the youngest establishment, dating only to 1948, although the current owners of the Moonlite, the Bosleys, bought the then 30-seat joint in 1963. All are still family-run, with Johnny Harris’s place in the hands of the descendants of Harris’s partner, K. L. “Red” Donaldson, who’d worked his way into management from dishwasher and pitmaster. At the Rendezvous, employees are often third- or fourth-generation descendants of original staffers.

But the styles and origins of their menus’ sheepish traditions are as far-flung as the restaurants’ locations. At Johnny Harris, the six-to-eight pound, boned, rolled and tied lamb roasts twirl in specially designed Roto-Flex carousel-style gas ovens. (The original hickory pit “never drew again” after a renovation, says Norman Heidt, Red’s son-in-law.) The comparatively small roasts are cooked only four to six hours, unsauced and unmarinated, with the flavor coming from the cut of meat, slow cooking, and hickory smoke. Sauce is served on the side of tender, lean slices of meat.

The Rendezvous is, of course, famous for Memphis-style dry seasoning, a term that Charlie’s son John Vergos prefers to “dry rub.” (“It’s not a rub, and it’s not dry,” he points out.) At the Rendezvous, two to two-and-a-half pound raw, unmarinated half-slabs of lamb ribs are cooked less than an hour over hardwood charcoal. When the ribs emerge from the ovens, crisp-edged and still deliciously fatty, they’re basted with hot vinegar and water, and sprinkled with Vergos’s spice mix (chili powder, garlic powder, oregano, paprika). They’re terrific with the vinegary, mustardy house coleslaw.

Owensboro in Daviess County, Kentucky, is the barbecued mutton and burgoo capital of the world. “Mutton” is essentially older lamb, with most calling it that after the animal is more than a year old. Although mutton is

noted for its gamier taste, Moonlite’s Patrick Bosley notes that the inn’s slow-cook, low-temperature barbecue methods (12 hours over hickory coals for each quarter-mutton, often cut in-house) tenderize the meat and tame its wilder flavors, while retaining its unmistakably gutsy taste. Traditional tomato-based sauce is served on the side of a sliced or chopped sandwich or plate. The Moonlite sells an average 10,000 pounds of barbecued mutton per week—not including burgoo.

So, why? Why lamb, why these areas, why the specific methods? Surprisingly, despite all the vagueness of barbecue history, there were some very definitive answers. Moonlite’s Bosley notes that Daviess County, Kentucky, was home to a huge population of Welsh settlers. (In Wales today, he says, there are still four sheep to every resident.) In addition, the tariff of 1816 made wool production a profitable concern in what was then the West. Older sheep, no longer producing wool or offspring, were more dispensable than the younger lambs. Later, says Bosley, mutton went the way of all barbecue, becoming a cheap meat staple of church picnics and political gatherings. Today it’s still the ‘cue of choice at Daviess County Catholic gatherings.

At the Rendezvous, the lamb riblets were part of the process that also birthed Vergos’s spice mix. John Vergos’s Greek grandfather, Charlie’s father, first ran a hot dog stand on Beale Street. He sprinkled his dogs with the spices that Greeks put on almost every meat—garlic, oregano, a little lemon juice. “It was the Southern Delta tradition, even the New Orleans tradition, that added the chili powder and cayenne,” he says. And lamb, of course, had long been a staple in the Vergos household, at every Easter and Christmas.

Johnny Harris’s lamb barbecue was a favorite of Savannah’s Jewish residents, says Heidt. Though the cooking method certainly isn’t certified kosher, apparently many wanted to enjoy barbecue without eating pork. (Johnny Harris has never served beef barbecue.) And so its stylish denizens danced to big bands, drinking their potable of choice, with the barbecue that suited them most.

“For most of us, barbecue is a result of a situation—poverty, for one thing, because the ribs were the cut most folks were throwing away. It’s truly American and unique,” says John Vergos. “It’s kind of like the pictures on the wall here—no one planned this look. It just happened and grew because it works somehow.” And so to the established and hallowed blend of cultures that created barbecue, most notably the meeting of African and Southern souls, add these cultural codicils that gave us the lamb addendum: Welsh, Jewish, and Greek traditions.

KRISTA REESE





Books by Three Giants Back in Print

Camille Glenn and the late Eugene Walter and Bill Neal were arguably three of the best Southern food writers of the last century. Recently, four of their masterworks have been brought back into print in affordable new editions.

Camille Glenn's *The Heritage of Southern Cooking: An Inspired Tour of Southern Cuisine* (Black Dog & Leventhal, \$24.95), a modern classic that has never gone out of print, has been reinterpreted in a handsome new, color-picture-filled edition. Even if you have the original, you will find this book hard to resist.

Bill Neal's *Biscuits, Spoonbread, and Sweet Potato Pie* (UNC Press, \$19.95), originally published by Alfred A. Knopf, has come home to Neal's first publisher. Neal's inspired recipes and meticulous research make this a must-have for anyone interested in regional American baking.

Eugene Walter, a native of Mobile, is best known as the author of the best-selling *American Cooking: Southern Style* in the Time-Life Foods of the World series. Walter is an inspired storyteller. His *Delectable Dishes from Termite Hall* (The Bookshop Press, Townsend, Georgia, \$18.95), originally published in 1982, has been reprinted with a foreword by Pat Conroy. This quirky book is full of riotous stories and truly delectable recipes.

Hints & Pinches (Hill Street Press, \$15.95) is long on tall tales and short on verifiable history, but it's vintage Eugene Walter: chock full of great recipes, Walter's delicious pen and ink drawings, and plain good writing. Originally published in 1991, its return to print, with a new foreword by John T Edge, is most welcome.

DAMON LEE FOWLER

Brown Sugar: Soul Food Desserts from Family and Friends

By Joyce White. HarperCollins Publishers, \$24.95.

Dessert is an essential part of any Southern meal, and we should never let the carbohydrate counters take that away from us. Alabama native Joyce White, whose earlier book *Soul Food* explored home-style African American cooking, here takes on the world of pies, cakes, cookies, ice creams, and jams and jellies that provide a proper, sweet ending for a Southern dining experience.

Some of the recipes are collected from family and friends; many are recipes that White herself perfected after eating a delicious dish for which the cook could not—or would not—share the recipe. I'm eager to try her watermelon ice cream, for which she devised a method of intensifying the watermelon flavor with a syrup of pureed watermelon and sugar.

White's book is particularly welcome to those of us who no longer have mothers or grandmothers close at hand to answer questions about how to make the desserts we grew up with. Her discussion of caramelizing sugar is a valuable guide to the world of burnt-sugar candies and cake icings dear to the South. While all the recipes are rooted firmly in Southern tradition, many of them provide new twists on traditional favorites: peach coconut cake, spicy molasses pecan pie, a version of banana pudding with gingersnaps rather than the usual vanilla wafers. It's a mouth-watering collection of recipes that confirms the generosity and creativity of the soul of the South.

THOMAS HEAD

Pickled: Vegetables, Fruits, Roots, More—Preserving a World of Tastes and Traditions

By Lucy Norris. Stewart, Tabori & Chang, \$22.50.

A popular conceit holds that only the freshest in-season foods should grace our tables for proper, healthful, and, let's face it, morally sound meals. Unchecked, such policies might leave us bereft of such preserved pleasures as country hams, lowcountry atjar,

chow-chows, and pickled peppers. Lucy Norris soundly plugs this philosophical bughole with *Pickled*, her paean to the brined, fermented, and otherwise mildly rotten foods we can't live without.

Pickled weaves oral histories gathered for a New York Food Museum project among some 80 family recipes documenting ethnic picking traditions. The celebrated pickles of Eastern Europe's winter larder—dills, beets, sauerkraut—bob to the surface, but Norris successfully dips deeper for fried dills, watermelon flesh (the *other* watermelon pickle), Korean kimchis, ceviche, and preserved lemons.

Whether you regard them as summer in a jar or corruption in the cupboard, do yourself a favor: Make pickles before winter sets in. None of Norris's recipes holds universal appeal—pickled duck tongues, anyone?—but the book is a gem for sensible cooks willing to buck a trend that implies pickles are déclassé, too much trouble, or, worst of all, just plain make you a bad person.

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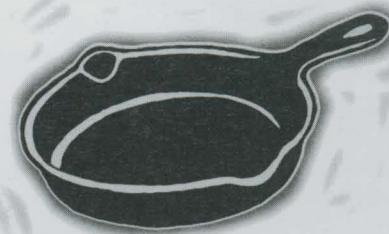
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Chicken-Fried Steak: In Texas, It's Not Just for Dinner

Debbie Morgan doesn't understand why chicken-fried steak has such a poor reputation elsewhere in the country.

"It gets a lot of respect here," says Morgan, who is one of the managers at the 23-table Café 290 in tiny Manor, Texas, population 1,200—and where it's the most popular item on the menu. "I suppose, if you don't know any better, it does sound kind of icky, kind of like deep fried hamburger."

But the customers there do know better. Café 290, on U.S. Hwy. 290 just east of Austin, serves a steady stream of residents, jaded Austinites who are tired of eating nouvelle Texas, and others yearning for a menu that can best be described as classic Texas diner—fried catfish, Tex-Mex-style enchiladas, and, of course, chicken-fried steak.

Café 290 is a Mecca for chicken-fried aficionados who are tired of frozen patties covered with soggy breading that's never cooked correctly or who must endure national chains covering their misdeeds with pools of greasy, tasteless gravy. Café 290, along with places like Vern's in Dallas, Threadgill's in Austin, Massey's in Fort Worth, and Goodson's in Houston, should be mandatory stops on the chicken-fried trail.

Yes, chili gets more publicity and barbecue attracts more controversy, but chicken-fried steak is more likely to be recognized as the national dish of Texas—served with white gravy, of course (unless one is feeling adventurous, and then it is smothered in chili, cheese, and onions).

At Café 290, there is chicken-fried steak for breakfast (with two eggs, grits, and biscuits). There is chicken-fried steak for lunch (check out the

Wednesday buffet, served with two vegetables, for \$5.95). There is chicken-fried steak for dinner, served in two sizes—large, and twice as large. All told, not including the buffet, the restaurant sells almost 400 orders a week.

And Morgan is probably correct about the name. One reason that those unfamiliar with the dish tend to shy away from it is that it doesn't sound like what it is—a piece of beef, double dipped in egg wash and flour and then deep fried until crisp, probably no more than two or three minutes. Just like fried chicken, but who would assume that anyone would cook beef that way?

And, though there is agreement on this basic outline, there are many variations. Some argue that true chicken-fried should never see a deep fat fryer, but should be pan fried on top of the stove in a cast iron skillet (which is how Morgan makes hers at home). Then, it's easy to throw some flour in the drippings to make the gravy.

And though cube steak is the most common beef used, others insist on round steak (beaten first with a cast iron skillet) or even sirloin. Something to consider the next time you're in Texas for breakfast.

JEFF SIEGEL



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