



AN INTERVIEW WITH

Valerie Erwin

A Geechee Girl,
balancing
innovation
and familiarity

by Sara Camp Arnold



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

This year we had a family of South Asian descent: two twentysomething daughters and their mother. They had recently

moved to Philadelphia after living in Alabama for years. One of the daughters complimented me on a dish and then said, "We're Indian. We know flavor."

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

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

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

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

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