Gravy

WINTER
'09

A FOOD LETTER

FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

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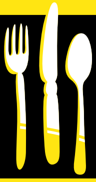

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ABOUT GRAVY

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A PLAGUE OF CORNBREAD

By Linda R. Monk

You couldn't get my grandfather to eat cornbread. No matter what food was served, John Monk wanted hot biscuits to go with it. Turnip greens, field peas, fried catfish—all seemed unhitched on the plate without a slice of cornbread by their side. But my Paw Paw always wanted biscuits. He said it was because he ate too much cornbread growing up.

I loved my Paw Paw so much that it didn't matter to me that he could not read me stories. He was proud of my A's even though he never attended school himself. And when I got admitted to Harvard Law School, he smiled and said, "That's great, honey. Harvard—isn't that in Tennessee?"

Truth is, about all my grandfather had to eat was cornbread in the New South economy of 1920s Mississippi. The three Ms of Southern poverty—meat, meal, and molasses—were the staple diet in mill towns, lumber camps, and sharecropper shacks across the region. Salt pork, cornmeal, and cane syrup had all the ingredients of today's fast food: fat, starch, and sugar.

They made cheap and filling fare for landless folks, both black and white, who lacked resources to grow livestock and vegetables, or lacked money to pay for them at the company store. Plantation owners forbade their tenants to raise subsistence gardens; every inch of soil had to be used for the cash crop.

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But in the spring of 1902, a new disease appeared in the South that never before had been diagnosed in America. Named *pellagra* ("rough skin") by the Italians who had suffered from it for centuries, it was associated with European peasants who depended upon corn—which had been introduced from the Americas—for their main diets.

Polenta, the Italian cousin to grits, filled many an Italian belly, but was also linked to a disfiguring disease of the skin that produced red, scaly eruptions on hands, feet, the back of the neck, and the face. In addition, it caused diarrhea, dementia, and death. So linked was the disease to Italy that when it emerged in the United States in the early 1900s, Italian immigrants were initially blamed.

Pellagra spread like wildfire throughout the South, where it predominated. Scientists who studied pellagra noted its correlation to corn-based diets and poverty, both of which were prevalent in the South. Some speculated that pellagra was caused by "musty corn" contaminated with fungus; others believed it was carried by insects, like malaria, or caused by infectious germs, like cholera. Still others believed it was inherited.

Contagious or not, the fear of pellagra ran rampant, and its victims suffered from ostracism as well as disease. Pellagra was the leprosy of the New South.

All told, the epidemic struck three million people and caused 100,000 deaths—chiefly among poor, white women and African Americans, who ate at the bottom of the Southern food chain. Pellagra-induced dementia also filled Southern asylums, which only perpetuated the disease through poor diets. But asylums also helped prove that pellagra was not contagious, because nurses and staff did not contract it from their patients. However, they ate much better diets than the inmates, who were often fed corn three times a day due to limited state budgets.

The epidemic lasted for almost 40 years—due to regional pride, about 30 years longer than necessary. In 1915 the hero of the story, Dr. Joseph Goldberger of the U.S. Public Health Service, after healing hundreds of children in Mississippi orphanages by feeding them higher-protein food, identified the cause and cure of the disease as diet. Yet states were reluctant to increase expenditures on public health, and they accused Goldberger, a Jewish immigrant from Hungary, of stereotyping the South as backward. (They chose to ignore that he was married to Jefferson Davis's grandniece.)

The end of the epidemic came after niacin was identified as the missing nutrient. With the improved economy, spurred by World War II, came the introduction of fortified flour and cornmeal.

My grandfather was born in 1915, during the height of the pellagra epidemic in Mississippi, which had the most cases in the nation. His mother died when he was young, probably, so he was told, of pellagra.

But I found her a few years ago, on a genealogy database, in the 1920 federal census. She was an inmate at the Mississippi State Insane Asylum in Jackson. Then she appeared again in the 1930 census as a patient at the Mississippi State Hospital, the new name for the asylum.

She died there in 1969, after 50 years as a patient, her body unclaimed and therefore, under state law, donated to the medical school for dissection. For almost 30 years she lived within an hour's drive of my family, and we never knew she existed. Thank goodness, my grandfather died before I could tell him.

Linda R. Monk is a constitutional scholar currently at work on a memoir, White Trash Roots: From Jamestown to Harvard and Back Again. *Photo Courtesy National Library of Medicine.*

TRUCK STOP

By Bill Addison

Archna Becker takes a swipe through the rich, dark emerald puree in front of us and sighs. “Oh, this tastes so good,” she says. “I can’t eat too much. I’m trying to diet.” She pauses, and then cries, “Wait! We forgot one of the most important parts.”

She rushes back into the kitchen of Bhojanic, the Indian restaurant she owns with her family in Decatur, Georgia, and returns with a thick pat of butter. “Here, dollop this on top. In India, we’d use freshly churned butter.”

It’s an addition Southerners will recognize and appreciate: The puree is made from mustard greens, and the butter mellows the greens’ harsher qualities while sweet-talking the other flavors to come forward.

No fatback glosses these mustard greens. The dish, called *sarson ka saag*, is a wintertime specialty of the Punjab region of Northern India. The greens (including a couple handfuls of spinach to temper the mustards’ pungency) cook slowly with onion, garlic, ginger, tomato, and spices like cumin and coriander. Every family varies the recipe; Becker’s grandmother chops the ginger a little coarsely. It zigzags through the greens’ intensity.

Some ingredients have soul mates, no matter the hemisphere in which they’re prepared. Indian has become one of the world’s top producers of corn, and just as it would be hard for Southerners to face a pot of greens without a slice of cornbread, *sarson ka saag* has its essential maize counterpart: *makki ki roti*, a thin flatbread fashioned much like hoecakes. Cornmeal, salt, and water form the dough. Crushed ajwan seed (which tastes similar to dried thyme) and fenugreek leaves add subtle flavor, but the bread’s crusty fringes and yielding interior convey a familiar, nutty earthiness.

Sarson ka saag and *makki ki roti* are staples of home cooking, but the duo also frequently appears at dhabas, or all-night truck stops, in Northern India. In the U.S., the dishes are novelties. During a recent tour of nearly forty Indian restaurants in the Atlanta metro area, Bhojanic is the only place I found them offered. “Most restaurants don’t want to deal with it,” said Becker. “The *roti*, especially, is time consuming and requires skill.”

To demonstrate, she takes me into Bhojanic’s kitchen and introduces me to Santosh Sharma, a slight but sturdy woman from a tiny village in Punjab who has worked so long for Becker’s family that they all call her “Aunty.” Sharma is in charge of the *rotis*. I watch her take hunks of dough and pat them into circles, dabbing the surface with a bit of butter as she works. Then she puts them on a round board and pounds the dough even flatter with rhythmic thumps from her palm: *bam-bam-bam-bam*. Rotate. *Bam-bam-bam-bam*.

Becker reaches underneath the table and pulls out a wooden rolling pin, asking Sharma in Hindi if she's ever tried using one. Sharma waves her away and replies (via Becker's translation), "A long time ago—it doesn't come out right."

> *A fine hoecake—in any cultural translation—is an increasing rarity in Atlanta restaurants.*

She tosses these rounds on the griddle, par-cooks them, lets them cool, and wraps them tightly in plastic. During meal service, she'll finish cooking the flatbreads in butter. I ate both a freshly made *roti* and a reheated one and could barely discern the difference.

Mustard greens may be a seasonal dish at Bhojanic, but the restaurant serves the *rotis* year-round, typically alongside a roasted eggplant relish. A fine hoecake—in any cultural translation—is an increasing rarity in Atlanta restaurants. (I'm thinking particularly of the recent closing of Son's Place, a venerable Atlanta soul food joint that could work a hoecake.)

The universal appeal of cornbread makes *makki ki roti* one of the most requested dishes on Bhojanic's menu. No surprise, then, that Bhojanic has such a diverse customer mix. Folks from all backgrounds munch on flatbread, listen to live jazz at night or recorded blues during lunch, sip a sweet lassi (a yogurt drink comparable to buttermilk), and savor the intertwining of worlds, culinary and otherwise.

Bill Addison is the food editor of Atlanta *magazine. Indian roti photo also by Bill Addison.*

WEDNESDAY GREENS AND SUNDAY GREENS

By Eugene Walter

Greens! A humble and constant presence. Not many collect "fence corner greens" any more, save in truly rural Alabama: dandelions, wild sorrel, pokeweed, all that. But in the everlasting returning cycles of life, dandelion greens have begun to turn up in the snobbiest salads at yuppie, with-it, and trendsetting tables. But turnip, collard, and mustard, along with cabbage, go on forever.

Nothing irritates me more than the phrase "soul food," a catchall label for simpler and more traditional Southern dishes. In the late '40s and '50s, the big record companies began to divide black music into two categories: dance bands and show music on the one hand, and blues, gospel, and ballads on the other. Pop music and soul music. Nightclub music and revival tent music. Later, some smart aleck or other, with imprecise reasoning, decided to split Southern food into rural, po' folks (mostly black) cooking and fancy, citified (mostly white) cooking. All wrong!

There are as many social classes and degrees of culinary sophistication among blacks as among whites in the Deep South, and what I was served in a soul food restaurant in New York makes me gag even in recollection. I mean soggy, thick cornbread, probably made with Wesson Oil, and dreary long-dead greens so swimming in pork fat that the teeth and tongue were wearing thick silk pajamas after one spoonful. No flushes of beer made it possible to taste the other dishes that followed.

I remember two delightful messes of greens. Once I went with a hunting party to Mt. Vernon, Alabama. I was after wild flowers; they were out to shoot Bambi. The midday meal was prepared by a black woman who served up a grand repast on a table covered with comic sections from the Sunday paper.

The food had been cooked in the fireplace, whether in pots hanging from hooks or sitting in the embers. The steaming mixed greens (mostly turnip and mustard) were flavored with cubes of lean bacon, onions, and one or two not-so-hot red peppers. They were delicate, not at all greasy, and infinitely satisfying. They had simmered on the hearth all morning and were tender but had not disintegrated.

Years later I was invited by the Conrad Aikens to a private club in Savannah where a silver tureen of turnip greens was served in triumph. This time, with bits of ham and ham fat. The dish, most delicate, could have been brought forth at a Paris table with Tabasco on the side. I asked the chef how he had cooked it, and he replied, "Low fire, slow cookin'." And that's the title of a cookbook I have in progress.

Well, greens, ah, yes. So many Alabama dishes have a double personality. Simple for everyday or homefolks, fancy for guests or on Sundays and holidays. For instance, a great many serious eaters feel strongly that the turnip leaf and the turnip root are two different items and should be prepared separately even if you are serving them in the same bowl. And feelings run strong about whether the roots should be served on top of the greens, or alongside the greens, or in a separate dish.

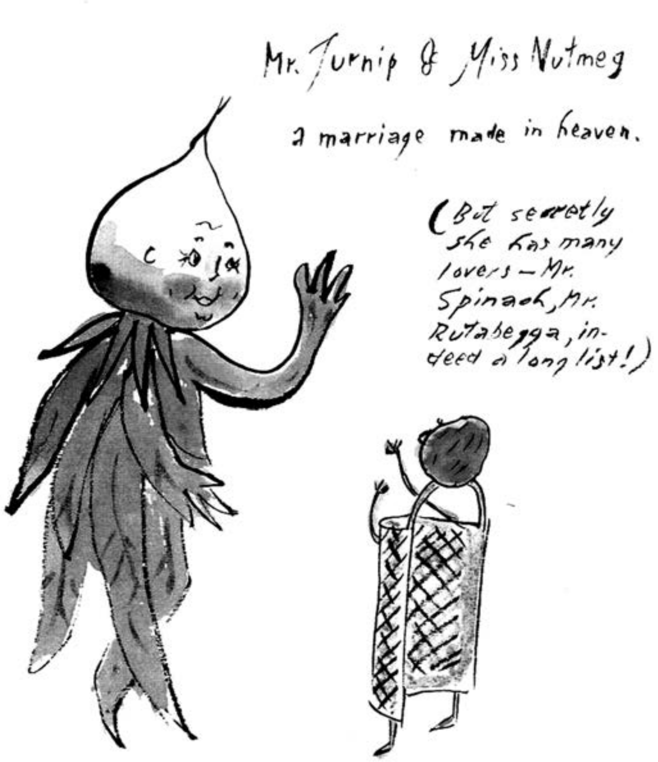
Let's look at two versions of such:

Wednesday Greens And Sunday Greens

In your big pot, brown as much bacon or fatback as you like. Pour off all but a tablespoon of fat (save it, naturally!) then put in your turnip or mixed green leaves which have been washed many times then torn up, not cut. Put a pinch of salt, a bit of red pepper, and some finely chopped onion. Add a little water, and let this simmer forever. Boil your turnip roots with a pinch of sugar and a pinch of salt. When fork will just pierce, drain, peel, slice or cube, then keep hot until you serve them on top of greens.

Now the Sunday version. Put a small piece of fatback or bacon in the big pot. In this case, brown your chopped onions, put in some ham hocks and the torn up greens, flavoring with salt, cayenne, and a few chopped green onions. Almost cover with water, and cook over low flame, stirring occasionally. Simmer the turnip roots in water with pinch of sugar and pinch of salt just until fork will pierce. Peel and cube, butter well, add a couple of tablespoons of heavy cream and flavor with a grating of nutmeg or a good pinch of powdered mace. Serve alongside the cooked greens.

In North Alabama greens are often served with a good handful of sippets over them. These cubes of stale bread, fried in bacon fat with a couple of unpeeled garlic toes, are usually known by their French name of croutons, but the ancient English name is sippets. Very fine they are with any dish of greens or any clear soup.


Mr. Turnip & Miss Nutmeg
a marriage made in heaven.
(But secretly she has many lovers – Mr. Spinach, Mr. Rutabegga, indeed a long list!)

Eugene Walter (1921-1998) was the author of American Cooking: Southern Style *in the Time-Life* Foods of the World *series. "Greens" written in the 1980s, is an excerpt from the forthcoming book* The Happy Table of Eugene Walter*, edited by Donald Goodman and Thomas Head. Used by permission of Donald Goodman. Drawing Courtesy Estate of Eugene Walter.*

THE COLD TILE BLUES

By Greg Brownderville

“Here,” the old man said. His grandson parked the wheelchair. “They was a row through here where Daddy always planted watermelons, in amongst the cotton. Thataway, when you was picking, you could bust open a cool rind and snatch the heart out.”

Everyday low prices, boasted the employees’ vests. The old man said, “Jesus in a blue sedan! Muscadines, four dollars a quart. Used to, you could pick them here by the dishpansful. Fresh and free.” He continued, “I told myself I’d never darken the door of this hellhole.”

“How come you to change your mind?”

“When you’re dying, the hard things you been putting off seem like the only things worth doing.”

“You mean coming here or forgiving yourself for selling the land?”

Silence.

Rubbing an arrowhead between his thumb and forefinger, the old man mumbled, “Bust me open.”

Sweet home Ala

Larry to automotives please

Larry to automotives

so blue

Greg Brownderville, a native of Pumpkin Bend, Arkansas, was the winner of the 2007 Porter Prize for his “substantial and impressive body of work.” Photo by John T Edge.

I’M ONE OF THE ACES IN THE BUSINESS

By Francis Lam

Frank Parker was talking. “Well, I don’t mean to be blowing my own horn, but if somebody was 20 years old and they seen me—‘Hey, that guy right there, he catches a lot of shrimp. He’s good at his game.’ Shrimping’s not like oystering or crabbing. The oysters don’t move; they stay there. The crabs, they’re a little bit more lucid, but shrimp, they’re a totally different animal. You always have your aces and then you have your jokers, and I really feel like I’m one of the aces in the business.” He said these things in a gentle, modest voice, but it was great to finally hear a little bravado from a Biloxi fisherman.

You see, they used to all have swagger. Biloxi once called itself the Seafood Capital of the World, where the Gulf of Mexico’s shrimp and oysters came to land, to be shipped across the world. But in the hundred or so years since, tougher circumstances have surrounded the industry. As I collected my oral history interviews for an SFA project, story after story ended with some requiem for the past—the market for shrimp bottomed out years ago, pummeled by rising fuel costs, and crushed by cheap imported stuff. Boats bob at dock, festooned with “For Sale” signs. Even those still making a living don’t think there’s much of a horizon left.

So it was with pleasure that I sat in Frank Parker’s home, listening to him tell me about being the seventh generation of fishermen in his family despite his parents’ displeasure: “My mother’s side of the family, we’re all fishermen. My dad’s father ran a gas station. My father grew up around the fishing industry too, but he got into the furniture refinishing business. ‘An education is one thing nobody can take away from you,’ he always said to me,” Frank recalled.

And so Frank went to college, despite always knowing he wanted to shrimp. “I got about 12 hours from my degree and I said, ‘Shoot on this.’ I dropped out and bought a shrimp boat.”

How did your parents react?
“They was disappointed, but at 24 years old, you’ve got to kind of step up and say, ‘Okay, well look: I should have done been done with school by now. I’ve been dragging my feet,’ And that’s what I told my dad. It’s all about being happy, you know? And when I bought my boat, my father went to work with me.”

I looked up. Excuse me?
“My father, he was too young to retire. And I think it’s something that he always wanted to do, but my mother didn’t want him gone all the time. So she’s on the boat with us, too. She referees when we butt heads. I guess it’s every kid’s dream. You’ve got your parents on the boat with you. Your mama cooks all the meals, washes the clothes, takes care of cleaning and stuff, and my father, he’s my grunt; I’m the boss, you know? I mean, what more could you be?” Frank laughed.

I was impressed. I count my parents giving up on me becoming a doctor to be the greatest parental breakthrough of my life, but this is on another order entirely. But what about the people who keep saying there’s no future left in shrimping?
“It’s just hard to be pessimistic when you’re doing something you love,” Frank said. “And yeah, you’re not making as much money as what you used to, but as long as you’re doing what you love and you’re paying the bills—it’s got its negative aspects to it but you have to stay positive. A bad day shrimping is better than a good day working.”

As we talked, I could hear his kids playing in the other room, a cherubic three-year-old daughter and a months-old son. What about them?
“This is something I want to do until I die; I’m going to stay on that boat until I can’t lift my leg over the rail. There’s still that sense of adventure, just striking out to get your fortune. That’s the same way I feel about with my kids; if they want to go to college, hey I’m going to support them 100%. I’m not going to push them to fish. But if they want to stay in the fishing business, then let’s do it.”

Francis Lam writes about food, cooking, and people. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan, the Culinary Institute of America, and Gourmet. *Photo by Francis Lam.*

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

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