

Tales of **Swamp Cabbage & Coleslaw Wrestling**

by Hayley Downs and Julie Kahn



Swamp photos: Courtesy Hayley Downs and Julie Kahn

I was born in Central Florida to a Florida Cracker dad and an Alabama Belle mom. Not the Disney World Florida or the Florida where the snowbirds move when they retire. Not the Florida you send postcards from. In my Florida, there was wild boar hunting, gun toting, hard drinking, and swamp cabbage.

When I tell folks I'm "half-Cracker" I almost always get the same look—a cross between bemused and offended. But to my people, the term "Cracker" is not some sort of shorthand for bigot.

We think of Crackers as Scots-Irish pioneers who made their way to Florida as early as the 18th century, seeking an alternative to whatever fenced them in: the long arm of the law, poverty, their spouses, you name it. They braved treacherous terrain, heat, panthers, snakes, gators, and cow-killing mosquitoes in exchange for independence in an exquisite, primordial landscape. There were places to hide and room to get weird.

By the time I came along in the '70s, everybody was still weird, but without all that room, thanks to air conditioning and no state income tax. My rural-raised parents were torn between chasing the American dream and realizing that nothing tasted quite as good in the suburbs. Our subdivision house was tricked out with a vegetable garden, a walk-in cooler for storing game, and a junkyard refrigerator repurposed into a smoker.

The ubiquitous neighborhood chain-link fences ended at our handmade, coquina wall. We trolled the St. Johns River in search of massive, largemouth bass for frying and drizzling with "Old Sour," a condiment made from distilled key limes, salt, and hot pepper. My father's friends hunted cabbage palms to make swamp cabbage, a stew made from the delicate heart of the sabal palm, Florida's state tree.

Around me sinkholes swallowed my neighbors' homes; infamous Florida serial killers haunted my dreams; the space shuttle Challenger exploded over my junior high school; and every spring brought the "Super Bowl of Bike Week," a tournament of topless women wrestling in a vat of coleslaw. On the day my neglected pet rabbits disappeared from their hutch, my parents served up "tiny chicken" for dinner.

Embarrassed by my strange community, I took off as soon as I finished high school to reinvent myself as an urbanite. I headed south to Miami, eloped with a Cuban painter, and, to my father's chagrin, moved north to New York City.

I was living large until 1999, when a series of personal tragedies began to unfold, causing me to re-think what I had tried for so long to escape. My father died after a mighty struggle with cancer, and my husband left me...for my best friend.

I spiraled downward for years until I met a sweet Brooklyn

cellist unlike anyone I had ever known. On the eve of our engagement, he was diagnosed with cancer. After chemotherapy, multiple surgeries and a lengthy recovery, he's doing fine, but we are changed forever.

To make sense of it all, I find myself turning back to the most unlikely place—the mysterious landscape of my childhood, Florida. I realize I was never so much a runaway as a missionary, preaching the beauty of Cracker Florida, carrying it inside me like an ache.

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So I've teamed up with another Florida filmmaker, Julie Kahn, to make a documentary about my story, and what we might learn from Florida. In honor of getting to the heart of things, we are calling it *Swamp Cabbage*.

Yes, it's true that sprawl and thoughtless subdivision development have devastated my state. Where sabal palms once grew like weeds, they are now, like Crackers, a disappearing species. But as anyone who has ever weeded a garden there knows, you can't contain Florida. You can try to pull it up and cart it away, but all the while it patiently waits, finding just the right moment to wrap its tendrils around you and draw you back home.

For their work on Swamp Cabbage: A Dark and Sweaty Documentary, Hayley Downs and Julie Kahn were recently awarded the SFA's inaugural John Egerton Prize.

IN THE KITCHEN with Dinah



By Timothy C. Davis

Back before signature sauces, back before anodized cookware, back when butter was too often margarine, there was a stately old dame by the name of Dinah Shore.

People will tell you that Dinah probably wasn't the greatest cook in the world. People, in this case, were no doubt right. Her vittles voice had much in common with her singing one. She was able to take the territorial and the traditional, synthesize (and sometimes sanitize) it, and deliver it to a much wider audience than any of her countrified contemporaries, Justin Wilson and Betty Feezor included.

Shore never hurt for an audience, thanks to her Hollywood bonafides. The Winchester, Tennessee, native talked up her native Southern cuisine whenever given the chance, most often to the cavalcade of stage-and-screen stars who shared the stage with her on one or more of the many talk shows she hosted towards the end of her career.