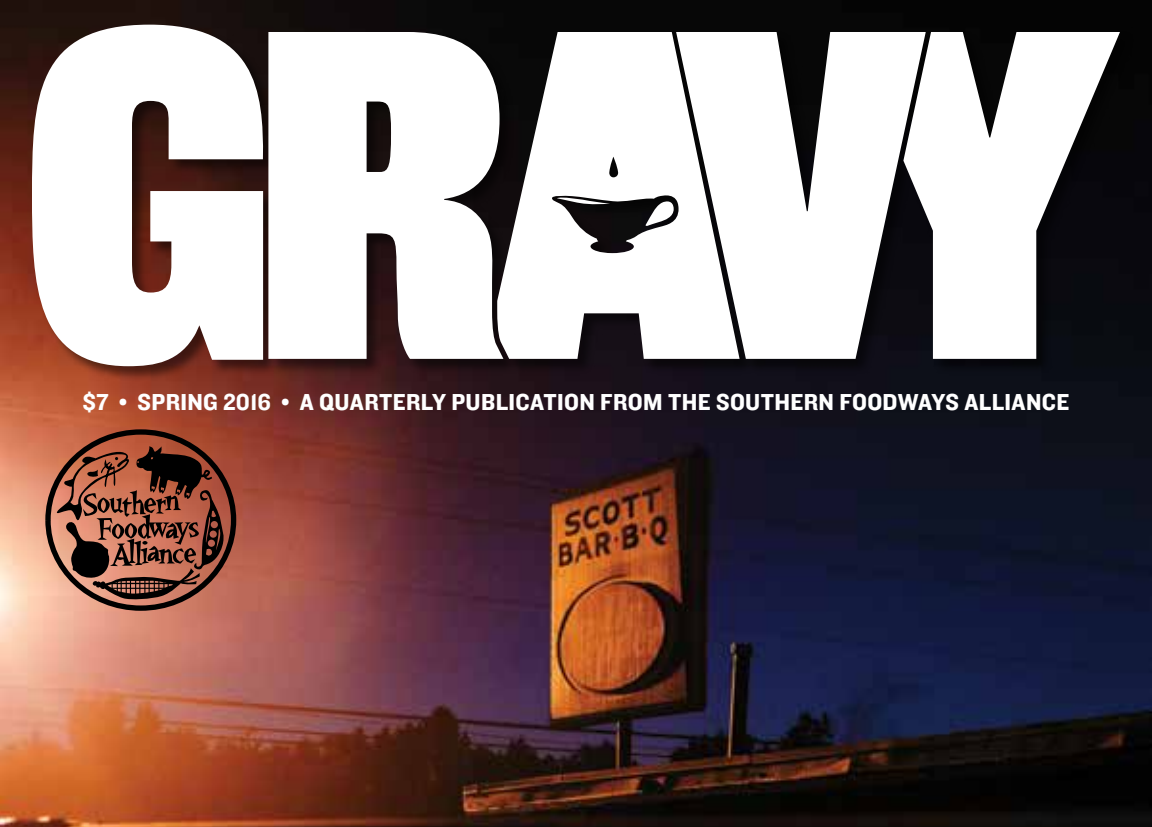
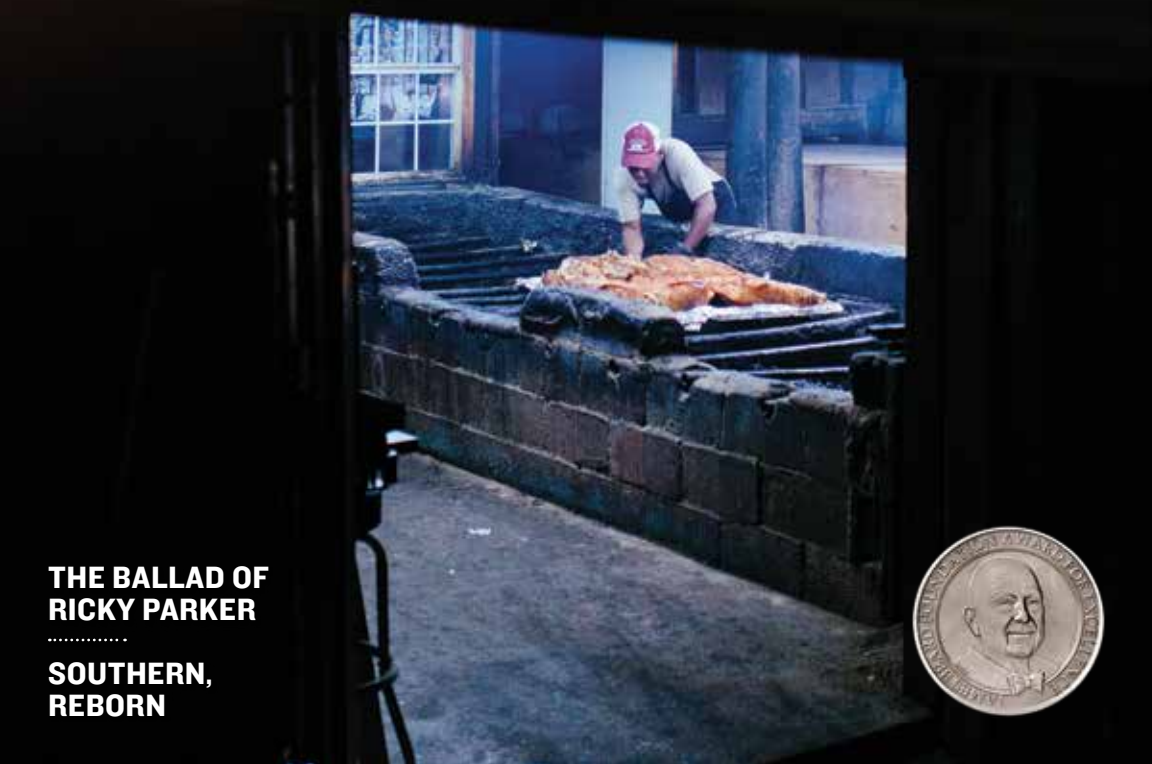
GRAVY

$7 • SPRING 2016 • A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Southern Foodways Alliance





THE BALLAD OF RICKY PARKER

SOUTHERN, REBORN

ISSUE #59
SPRING 2016

Houston Cofield

GRAVY

THE SFA SERVES YOU...

FEATURE

Cover photo by
DENNY CULBERT

First Helpings

PUTTING ON THE RITZ

Ladies' Home Journal, October 1937

I REALIZED REMARKABLY LATE in the game that this edition of *Gravy* is about comfort food. Food as solace. Food preparation and consumption as acts that soothe and restore us.

"What's the theme this time?" asked everyone from Richie, our graphic designer, to my husband, Kirk, at various points in the production cycle.

"We're not doing that anymore. The feature is about barbecue, but really, there's no theme. Well, okay, a bunch of the stories are set in the Mid-South. But that's not a theme. We're not doing themes."

Here at the SFA, we're always doing themes.

I'm not a cook who finds zen in a pot of boiling water, nor an eater who practices mindfulness on a raisin. My comfort food is Ritz crackers. By themselves. With peanut butter. Pimento cheese. Regular cheese—fancy or otherwise. Salami. A hot dip, if the universe is really on my side.

When possible, I like to alternate a dipped or topped Ritz with an unadorned one. It's a vehicle, yes, but it's more than that, and must be appreciated as such. Turn the cracker upside down so that the salt lands on your tongue. Bite it in half and feel it flake apart. Savor the hint of butter, which is surely not real butter at all. A quarter-sleeve later, and the world is right again.

The writers and characters in this issue find solace in fried corn. In cheese dip. In collard greens. In whole-hog barbecue, and in pulled shoulder. May their stories comfort you. —*SCM*

Tip No. 59 Are you an SFA member? Join or renew for 2016 at *southernfoodways.org*.

NASHVILLE

*Is the South's 4th Largest City**

**Outside of Texas, that is.*

IN PREPARATION FOR THE SUMMER FOODWAYS SYMPOSIUM JUNE 23–25, WE LOOKED AT SOME OTHER NOTABLE 4S IN MUSIC CITY.

NASHVILLE IS KNOWN FOR ITS MEAT & THREES. WORD ON THE STREET IS THAT THE NEXT TREND IS THE MEAT & FOUR.*

**We made that up. But wouldn't it be great?*

NASHVILLE IS HOME TO FOUR HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (HBCUs):

Fisk, Tennessee State, American Baptist, and Meharry Medical.

FOUR THINGS TO DO IF YOU ARRIVE EARLY:

JUN 18 TASTE of MUSIC CITY

JUN 19 *Ringo Starr* at the RYMAN

JUN 22 WALK *Eat Nashville's* SoBro/Downtown FOOD TOUR

Visit Athena at Centennial Park's Parthenon and let the Goddess of Wisdom prepare you for three days of learning about the city's foodways.

The Parthenon Museum; Jennifer Justus

ABC'S NASHVILLE is in its fourth season.

Summer Symposium tickets go on sale to SFA members on Wednesday, 4/6.

In addition to supporting our work, you'll be eligible to purchase tickets to the Summer Symposium.

Featured Contributor

RIEN FERTEL

Rien Fertel (left) and Denny Culbert (right)

Katie Culbert

RIEN FERTEL put seven years of research into his new book *The One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog* (which he would sub-subtitle "What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Barbecue"). Photographer Denny Culbert was his copilot for much of the journey. The pair conducted dozens of oral histories for the SFA, including the stories of a shrinking number of pitmasters who cook whole hogs over wood coals. Rien chatted with SFA graduate fellow Kate Wiggins about the experience.

Take us on a tour of the Barbecue Bus.

It's a green-certified, diesel-chugging, Mercedes-chassised mini motor home (sleeps 6!). Though the smell is thankfully long gone, the "Oink if you love BBQ!" decals remain.

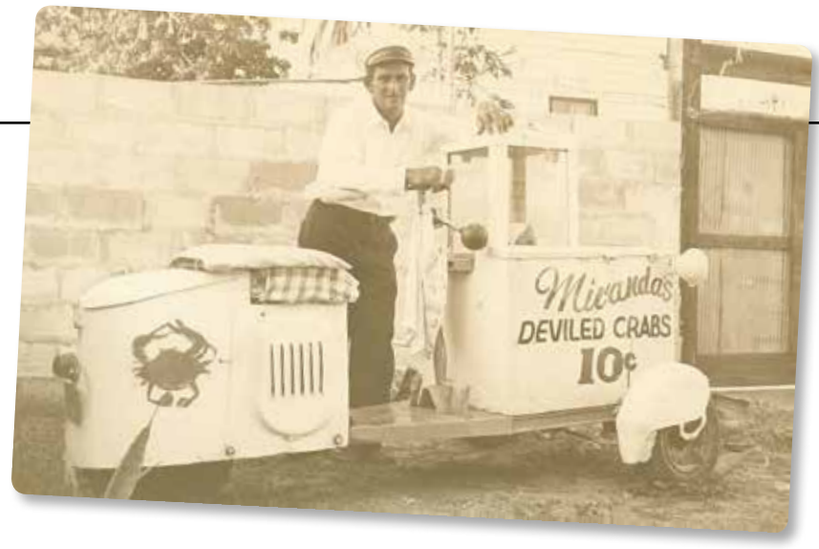
Whole hog barbecue has traditionally been a masculine domain. Did you come across many women?

I found that though, yes, barbecue is a mostly male-centric enterprise (and is too often marketed and discussed as such), women have left and continue to leave their mark. The Dennis/Jones clan of Ayden, North Carolina, famously pride themselves on being the oldest whole-hog dynasty. When Bill Dennis opened the area's first fixed barbecue stall in 1900, his wife Susan killed, dressed, and cooked the hogs before hauling them via chuckwagon to the shop.

My family is from Wilson, and I grew up eating barbecue from Parker's and Bill Ellis's. While I'll concede that the wood-cooked stuff is better, my bigger issue is this: Do any of these places have corn sticks?

Corn sticks, hushpuppies, and cornbread: barbecue ain't often found without a side of maize-based bread. But my favorite is the sweet potato muffins from Bum's Restaurant in Ayden—no barbecue accompaniment needed.

An excerpt from Rien's book begins on page 28.



Courtesy *Cigar City Magazine*

THE DEVIL WENT DOWN TO TAMPA

THE DEVIL LOOMS LARGE, even in the kitchen. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a confluence of cultures provided Tampa with its own version of the croquette. SFA oral historian Sara Wood learned that this spicy street food earned its name for being "hot as the devil."

During strikes, Italian, Spanish, and Cuban cigar factory workers incorporated their culinary traditions into preparation of the plentiful Tampa Bay blue crabs, adding sautéed onions and peppers (known as sofrito), tomato sauce, and red pepper flakes. They rolled this mix into crusts of day-old Cuban bread and water, deep-fried them, and either sold them for five or ten cents or served them at home as an inexpensive meal.

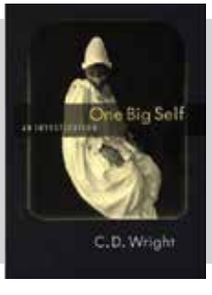
The tradition remains in the Tampa area. For more on the devil crab's continued life in Florida foodways, check out the oral histories, available on *southernfoodways.org.*

Gravy's *summer issue will feature a Southern food named after its traditional five-cent price. Slugburger oral histories go online April 25 at* **southernfoodways.org.**

GRAVY BOOK CLUB

SFA staffers read more than cookbooks. In this space, we share our favorites. Oral historian Sara Wood offers this issue's recommendations.

UP IN THE OLD HOTEL
by Joseph Mitchell
The late Robeson County, North Carolina, native and *New Yorker* writer profiled the beauty of eccentrics and the places fading into the margins of the modern world.



ONE BIG SELF: AN INVESTIGATION
by C.D. Wright
This book-length poem is inspired by the late poet's interviews with incarcerated men and women at three Louisiana prisons.

CREOLE FEAST
by Nathaniel Burton & Rudy Lombard
Lombard set out to record the unheard black voices of New Orleans's recipes, culinary traditions, and restaurants. It is a gorgeous oral history of the city itself.

Memphis Cityscape, ***oil on board by Lamar Sorrento.***

PACIFIC SOUL

STUCK INSIDE OF ORANGE COUNTY WITH THE MEMPHIS COOL AGAIN

by Gustavo Arellano

A KENTUCKIAN NAMED WILLIAM SPURGEON FOUNDED MY ADOPTED home of Santa Ana, California, in 1869. Magnolias bloom every spring around the Old Orange County Courthouse, planted there over a century ago by pioneers who brought with them the most fragrant memories of the states they left behind. Henry W. Head, the assembly member who represented the district when it seceded from Los Angeles County in 1889, served under General Nathan Bedford Forrest and fought at Shiloh.

Our connections to the South aren't just moldering in the archives. For the past twenty years, Memphis has taught OC how to eat and drink and live well—not the city on the Mississippi River, but Memphis Café in Costa Mesa. Run since its debut by chef Diego Velasco, it's one of the most influential restaurants in Orange County history. It introduced pan-Southern cuisine to us with its jambalaya, ribs, and mint juleps, ushered in the era of the celebrity chef in OC, and fostered a nascent music scene by bringing in DJs and bands that created a new national image for the region—a place *USA Today* would go on to call America's "capital of cool."

Here's the funny thing: Memphis Café isn't named after Memphis, Tennessee. It's named after Memphis, an Italian arts and furniture collective from the 1980s that café co-owner Dan Bradley studied as an arts undergrad at the University of California-Los Angeles. And *that* Memphis, in turn, isn't named after the city but rather "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again," Bob Dylan's seven-minute epic about...something, anything, except Memphis, Tennessee.

Southern culture has stood for many things, but this particular interpretation is a beautifully postmodern one: The *idea* of Memphis helped a Chicano from Southern California teach one of the squarest places in the U.S. how to be hip. Gimme a Hammond B-3 organ riff courtesy of Al Green, and let's begin this tale...

MEMPHIS CAFÉ IS a squat, dark space with an open kitchen, a bar serving more than 100 whiskies, and a soundtrack that veers between 1980s new wave and yacht rock. It sits just south of the 405 Freeway, Costa Mesa's own Big River. I've patronized the place for fifteen years now, drawn by Velasco's California take on Southern standards. Popcorn shrimp fill tacos, pulled pork sits on Hawaiian rolls, and the po-boys come slathered in a Sriracha-spiked mayo. He can do a mean crawfish boil and a fine shrimp and grits, but Velasco—who, with perfectly tousled hair and an immaculate soul patch, looks more music producer than chef—doesn't claim authenticity.

"Whenever Southerners come in, I tell them my food is Southern cuisine for an Orange County demographic," the forty-three-year-old says, almost apologetically. "I'm intimidated whenever a Southerner comes in! I tell them, 'Before you throw the book

Delilah Snell

Diego Velasco holds court behind the bar at Memphis Café.

at me, realize where we're at. It's a resemblance.'"

Velasco's career is a testament to the South's eternal lure. He was raised by a single mother in the Mexican-American suburb of Montebello, on the outskirts of East Los Angeles. Velasco's family worked in the Garment District in downtown LA, but young Diego quickly gravitated toward the kitchen. From a young age, he

learned to love the holiday spectacle of food, especially Ash Wednesday for Mexicans, with its tortas de camarones (shrimp balls served in a red chile broth alongside cactus) and capirotada (bread pudding). "Seeing those traditions," he says, "taught me about the importance of food to people beyond just eating."

Velasco was introduced to Southern food at eighteen, while working at a hot-springs resort in Orange County. He connected with members of The Rebels, a New Orleans swamp-rock quartet who lived in a trailer on the property. They were the house band at a local roadhouse, the kind of joint where bikers broke bottles and swung pool cues. The group—one a shrimper, another a Houma Indian, another a Cajun—took the young cook under their wings.

VELASCO'S CAREER IS A TESTAMENT TO THE SOUTH'S ETERNAL LURE.

"They had come to Southern California to make it big," Velasco says. "But on their time off, all they did was cook—gumbo, black-eyed peas, sticky chicken. I remember once during a Super Bowl, they cooked like the dickens—dark and deep and soulful and haunting and awesome."

Velasco was so moved by their food that he roomed with the band members for a year. Afterward, he made a pact with two friends: One would manage a restaurant to learn how to run one, another would find funding, and Velasco would leave business school at Cal State-Fullerton to enroll in the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco and learn "why the South cooked like that."

He was an anomaly in those days, when most aspiring chefs in the West focused on French, Italian, California, and Pacific Rim cooking. But Velasco and his partners were undeterred. They opened Memphis Café in 1995, in an old dive bar.

"I remember thinking we were going to get squashed," Velasco admits. Cuisine in OC in those days consisted of overpriced white-linen spots or chain restaurants—and definitely didn't bother with regional American. "But we weren't trying to do everything for everyone. We just did what we wanted to do."

Memphis Café arrived at a seminal moment in Orange County history. In the 1990s, the notorious Stepford suburbia suddenly became a tastemaker for America's youth, from music (No Doubt, Social Distortion, The Offspring) to fashion (Quiksilver, Vans, Oakley). Memphis Café became the crossroads for disparate scenes, in the same way its eponymous city could host Sun and Stax records, Elvis, Justin Timberlake, and Three Six Mafia, all drinking from the same replenishing well.

At the Costa Mesa mothership and its Santa Ana branch (my main watering hole), businessmen rubbed elbows with politicos, artists, hipsters, gang members, musicians, and immigrants. The Memphis bar program became the cocktail equivalent of a Bear Bryant coaching tree. Its alums now work at OC's best restaurants, and they taught the county how to love old fashioneds and Manhattans.

Delilah Snell

Memphis Café's Creole Fashioned and shrimp po-boy.

Velasco sheepishly admits that he made his first trip to Memphis, Tennessee, only four years ago. Before that, he went by feel.

"It's in the ambiance," he says. "It's professional but friendly. More laid-back. It's about how we treat people."

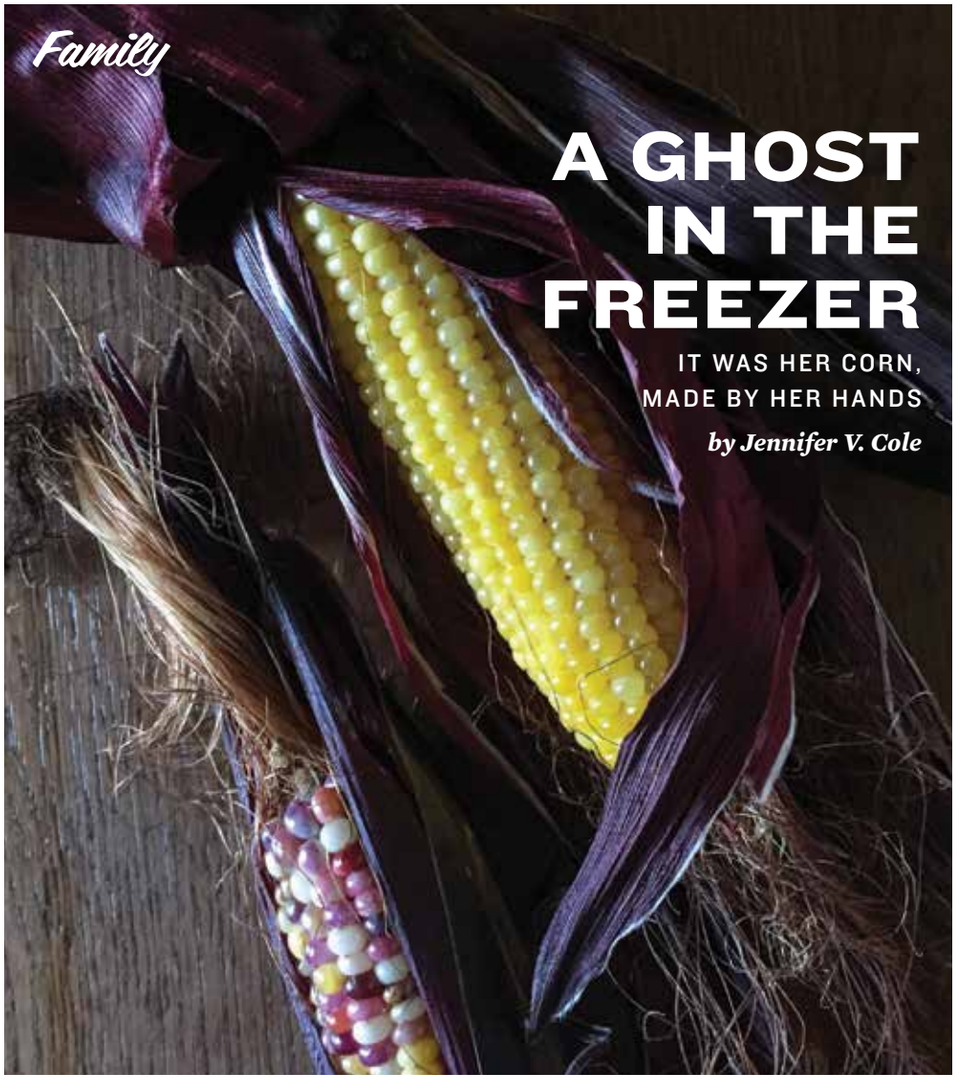
And Velasco isn't slowing down. He recently introduced jalapeño shrimp and grits, covered in red-eye gravy and a thick slab of country ham. "Even twenty years later, Southern food still excites me," he says. "And I'm just beginning to learn."

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION is a tricky thing. OC's Memphis may not be a simulacrum of the Bluff City, but it exemplifies its best qualities: the funkiness of the Bar-Kays, the heaping portions at any rib shack, the camaraderie and hospitality tourists feel at Graceland. Proud to be of the South, whether in the Volunteer State or in the Land of Real Housewives.

Years ago, a friend of mine—a Memphis native who, in yet another awesome cross-cultural turn, now runs one of the most influential Chicano presses in the country from El Paso—was in Orange County and needed a restaurant recommendation. I meekly suggested Memphis. "An OC restaurant named after Memphis?" he snickered. But he went.

"It wasn't Memphis," he wrote the following day, "but it was *wonderful*."

Gustavo Arellano is the editor of OC Weekly *and* Gravy*'s columnist.*



A GHOST IN THE FREEZER

IT WAS HER CORN, MADE BY HER HANDS

by Jennifer V. Cole

Angie Mosier

A Wife, A Mother, Our Ti Ti
Passionate Teacher and Defender of the Unchampioned
A True Southern Spirit

These were the last words I wrote for my grandmother, the woman who taught me to read at age four and coaxed my writing along. For her tombstone.

Nearly six years ago, we lost her in a car accident on the way to our annual family beach vacation. Granddaddy was driving, a fact he'll never unburden himself from. For the next year, as we took turns spending nights at the house, family members would often report seeing her, always in her purple nightgown. Last year when I had unexpected kidney surgery, I swear she sat with me and stroked my hand while I was asleep on the operating table. As I awoke, pulling away from the tug of anesthesia, I couldn't figure out where she had gone and felt I had lost her all over again. We continue to feel her presence, though less spectrally these days. Her cooking haunts me most.

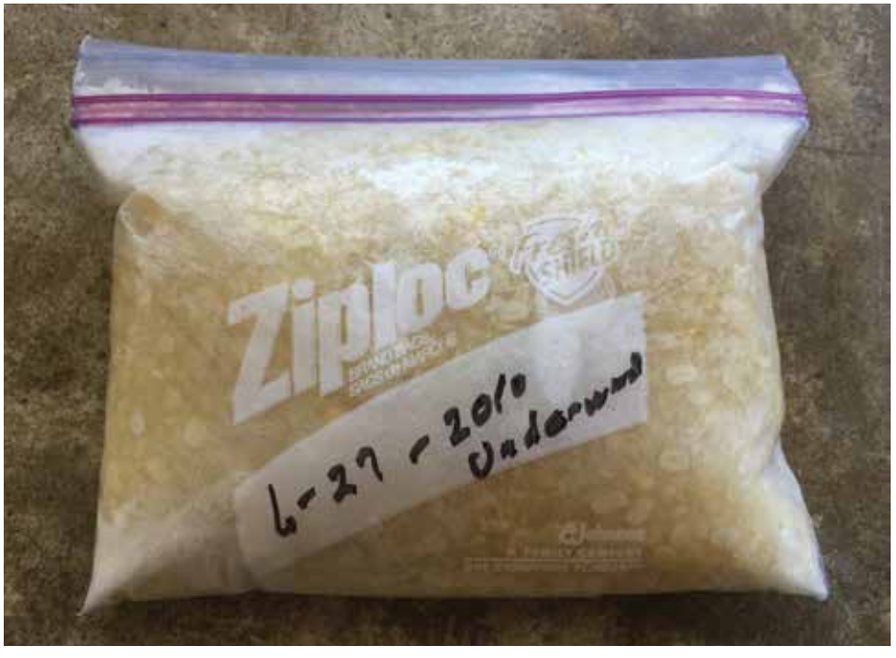
Ti Ti wasn't a great cook. (Ti Ti, pronounced *tie-tie,* comes from Vashti—*vass-tie*—which is also my middle name.) She would trot out newfangled recipes from this or that magazine for every family holiday. Dishes she'd never made before. Ninety-nine percent of the time, they were colossal failures. Holiday leftovers took on proportions as ample as a funeral spread, with family members accepting gallon-sized Ziploc bags for the ride home, all the while lightly protesting, "No, *y'all* will eat this. We don't need to take any." Thank goodness for the ham Granddaddy insisted on buying every year to supplement her feast.

But she baked my favorite biscuits on the planet. They were cakey and dense, the top and bottom crisped by a Crisco-swathed cast-iron skillet. She always flipped the biscuits halfway through cooking to make sure both sides got a smoldering kiss from the pan. And man, could these biscuits soak up some cane syrup, poured in amber ribbons that stretched from the bottle like pulled taffy. The week following her death, our family took up camp at my grandparents' house. We all needed to be there. We were also scared of letting Granddaddy, his ribs bruised and his being shattered from the wreck, retreat to the house alone.

During that week, my cousin Jamie and I used Ti Ti's biscuit bowl as therapy. We'd made biscuits at her side for years, the privilege of being one of her girls. But she had left no written recipe. Self-rising flour, buttermilk, and Crisco, mixed by hand. That's all we remembered. Proportions? Tackiness? No clue. We were determined to get as close as possible to the taste memory still fresh in our minds. I bet we turned out twenty dozen biscuits that week. We made one batch somewhere in the middle that was perfect.

WE CONTINUE TO FEEL HER PRESENCE, THOUGH LESS SPECTRALLY THESE DAYS. HER COOKING HAUNTS ME MOST.

As the daughter of a poor Mississippi Delta farmer, Ti Ti also knew her way around vegetables. That is, she knew how to cook them the way Granddaddy—who tended a garden for decades, massaging the earth every growing season—liked to eat them. She always had a simmering pot of butterbeans cooked down to



Ti Ti's corn

Jennifer V. Cole

nuggets of velvety paste barely contained by the thin skins. Her shining glory was creamed corn, which she called fried corn. She wouldn't use just any corn. Her family had their own hybrid they'd cultivated for years, a starchy dent variety they called Underwood corn, the family name. Forget the taste and mouthfeel of plump kernels bursting with sunshine. Even at its peak, Underwood corn is hard and chewy. You have to coax the cob with a sharp knife and blistering determination to yield any milk.

After they married, Granddaddy planted fields of Underwood corn for Ti Ti. She would spend summer days and nights over the kitchen sink, scraping cob after cob until well past the point her hands lost their grip. She wouldn't ever let anyone help. "I can do it myself, thank you very much," she'd say in a singsong voice. The woman was fierce. For days she'd stand at the stove, stirring enough butter and cream into the skillet to render that unbending corn supple, and tuck it in the freezer alongside the bream and crappie that she pulled from the pond.

A few months ago, as I was putting ice cream away in my Birmingham home, I came across a quart-sized bag of Ti Ti's corn. I have no clue how it got there. I don't recall raiding Granddaddy's deep freeze. As I looked at the Sharpie-scrawled date on it—6-27-2010: UNDERWOOD—in her unmistakable handwriting, I realized it was the last batch of fried corn she ever made. She died the next week.

Tethered to our agrarian past with the foods that fill our tables and stock our larders, Southerners hold the land as our legacy. As words like heritage and heirloom fill menus across the country, seed savers are the modern community bank, holding memories of past meals in the mason jar equivalent of a safety deposit box.

Recipes live on, textual proof of our generational ties. My paternal grandmother, Mamaw, a master of the kitchen, generously shares her recipes for caramel cake, chocolaty "Jane Cole Cupcakes," and chicken pie. After she's gone, I'll have memories of feeding the sourdough starter in her kitchen and will feel confident that I can replicate her tender loaves. Until I found that bag of frozen corn, I hadn't realized the heady emotional pull of an actual foodstuff. My Ti Ti was gone, but if I wanted, I could eat a final bite of her home cooking. It wasn't a recipe for creamed corn; it was her corn, made by her hands.

When I told friends about finding Ti Ti's corn, they responded with stories of their own. "I have a jar of green beans that my beloved grandmother put up. If it's up to me, it'll be buried with me to sustain me on my journey to the sweet hereafter," said Sheri Castle. April McGreger recalled harvesting the greens left in her grandfather's fields shortly after his death, crying as she held the leaves he had cajoled from the soil before his departure. Food is the product of love and labor, usually in equal parts. When left behind, it reminds us that our loved ones were once very much alive.

IT WAS THE LAST BATCH OF FRIED CORN SHE EVER MADE. SHE DIED THE NEXT WEEK.

I have fantasies of sitting down with my Granddaddy at his kitchen table, plates overflowing with Underwood corn and biscuits as close to hers as I can get, and savoring the memory of Ti Ti with him. Of giving him one more actual taste of his life with her—a life that ended too soon. I consider hanging onto it until he's gone and sharing it with my Momma as a tribute to her parents and a celebration that they are finally together again. Sometimes I think about selfishly eating it alone and listening to recordings of her voice I made six months before she died. For now, that Ziploc bag waits inside my white Kenmore, alongside my guarded rations of bacon—a reminder of her love, frozen in time.

Jennifer V. Cole is a writer based in Birmingham, Alabama. At the age of six months, Ti Ti baptized her with bourbon to help with her teething. She never lost the taste.

THE VIPER AND THE TORTOISE

IN MEMPHIS, A TASTE OF MEXICO CITY

by David Ramsey

JOSÉ "PEPE" MAGALLANES NEVER STOPS. ON A RECENT VISIT TO the restaurant he founded, Las Tortugas Deli Mexicana in the Memphis suburb of Germantown, the dapper seventy-one-year-old regaled me with tales of the restaurant's beginnings, the unique joy and spirit of Mexican cuisine, the unlovely history of flour tortillas and Tex-Mex burritos, how he came to meet Walter Payton and Muhammad Ali, and his adventures racing motorcycles and skydiving. As the stories spun, he backslapped regulars, fetched me aguas frescas ("the way the lime cleanses your palate, it's perfect, yes?"), gave me an iPad tour of restaurants in his native Mexico City, and explained his passion for the vibrant, colorful food he grew up with.

Photographs by Houston Cofield

Magallanes bears a passing (if clean-shaven) resemblance to the "Most Interesting Man in the World" of the ubiquitous television commercials. Part of the pleasure of visiting Las Tortugas is the chance to meet Pepe, a wind-up doll of *joie de vivre*, too-good-to-check stories, and folk wisdom. "Mexican food," he says, "is part of the celebration of living. It's not just going to eat so you don't starve. Eating in Mexico is part of the party; it's part of the fun."

When I inquire about the huge serpentine ring Pepe wears, he smiles and says, "I'm glad you asked." Pepe is an adrenaline junkie. He's been riding and racing motorcycles since he was a teenager. Now he owns around twenty. The snake ring references his biggest and baddest motorcycle, which is built with a Dodge Viper engine. "So people started calling me Viper Man," he says. "I decided to take up the alter ego of a kind of superhero."

Viper Man flies, too. Pepe started skydiving at age nineteen, when the sport was just beginning in the early 1960s. "One of my friends joined this parachuting club," Pepe says. "It was not skydiving as it is today—it was just jumping out of an airplane and hoping for the best. So I got very interested." He's done more than 6,000 skydives. Pictures of the airborne Pepe, falling thousands of feet with a rapturous, windblown smile on his face, hang on the restaurant's walls.

Las Tortugas is tucked in a nondescript strip mall. Past a shoe store, a bank, Clipps Hair and Nail Salon, and State Farm Insurance, there's a simple sign on the corner: DELI MEXICANA. Consider it a surprise attack—some of the finest Mexican food in this country is hidden away in the kind of spot you might expect to house a Subway.

Pepe opened Las Tortugas in 2003 as a personal mission. The incredibly diverse food scene in Mexico City is marked by elegant simplicity, beautiful presentation, and fresh ingredients. By contrast, most Mexican restaurants stateside were serving up huge portions of cheap, processed food, with Americanized twists. "The reason I opened this place is that I wanted to show people the experience of quality that I grew up with in Mexico City," Pepe explains.

He modeled Las Tortugas after the taquerías and tortarías that serve the "light, fresh food that people eat every day," says his son Jonathan, forty-one, who runs the place nowadays. (Pepe still helps out and holds court.) "He was trying to be faithful to the places he loved in Mexico City. Places where the owner was the chef who went out to the market, brought in food, and made it in front of you. It's an intimate thing—and the flavors and colors, it's just a totally different experience."

Before we get sidetracked with heady talk of cultural authenticity

or the values and pitfalls of culinary fusion, let me just get to the point: The food at Las Tortugas is astonishingly delicious. The core of the menu is tacos—served on corn tortillas, along with a creamy-spicy, avocado-based salsa verde and a snappy pico de gallo—and tortas, traditional Mexican sandwiches. Meat options range from the classic (the juicy marinated pork in the pastor tacos brought me back to my favorite hole-in-the-wall finds in Mexico) to the luxe (a five-ounce portion of filet mignon grilled to order).

The eponymous *tortuga* (Spanish for turtle) is the restaurant's take on the traditional torta, inspired by Pepe's favorite tortarías in Mexico City. As soon as loaves of bread come out of the oven, the middle is hollowed out—like the shell of a tortoise, thus the nickname—and the bread is grilled and then stuffed with goodies. In addition to generous portions of meat or seafood, the fillings include perfectly ripe avocado, tomatoes, queso fresco, poblano peppers, and sliced sweet onion. Pepe jokes that if New Orleans is famous for po-boys, you might call these rich boys.

"The torta is really a staple of Mexican cooking and cuisine, as popular as hamburgers in the United States," Jonathan says. "Great meat or seafood, vegetables, salsa—the same things you see in a taco, it's just as easy to put them in a torta."

The daily specials depend on what's available and in season. The showstopper, if it's available: a torta stuffed with bright red Gulf shrimp. Gulf shrimp at a Mexican restaurant in landlocked Tennessee? Turns out they've partnered with a shrimper on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi who drives up with his fresh catch on ice, packed in coolers in the back of his pickup truck.

Pepe calls the style at Las Tortugas "the most upscale presentation of Mexican traditional light eating," adding, "this is not a food truck, okay?" While the restaurant often puts a high-end spin on street fare, the atmosphere remains casual. The dining area is small, simple, and festive. The walls are filled with laminated signs offering up rants and aphorisms from Viper Man. One sign lists the top ten questions customers ask at Las Tortugas (Number 1: "Is Jonathan married?"); another floats the idea of Pepe for President.

The key to ordering is the initial chat at the register with Pepe or Jonathan, in which you get tips on what's fresh today and hear the specials, like smoky brisket from nearby Claybrook Farms. Jonathan welcomes returning customers by name; Pepe estimates that his son has 3,000 names memorized. New customers get the lowdown on the menu and the core values that inspired Pepe to open Las Tortugas, a tradition that Jonathan is proud to carry on. Their homage to authentic Mexican cuisine isn't just about the style of cooking, Jonathan explains to first timers. Just as Pepe used to do, Jonathan starts each morning with several hours of shopping, selecting every item that the restaurant will serve. "This is what Mexican food is famous for," Jonathan says. "When you go to Mexico and the food is good, this is why. Because they just bought it fresh. The evidence of this is in the food: You are going to taste it."

Tapping in to a network of local farmers and scouring more than half a dozen markets, Jonathan does as much local sourcing as he can. "It's constantly evolving, someone new entering the fold, someone leaving," he says. "It's up to us to always be on the hunt and find new opportunities—eggs from this farm, pork from that farm." Two years ago, Las Tortugas started ordering whole Berkshire hogs from Newman Farms in Myrtle, Missouri, to butcher in-house. Customers have come to learn that the menu will always be in flux depending on what Jonathan can find. "We have to protect their expectations about the food," he says. "If we can't find what we're looking for, we're not going to serve something inferior."

During the summer, Jonathan can nab beautiful corn, watermelon, tomatoes, and cantaloupes grown in Tennessee and Mississippi. For spices and chocolates not available locally, he works with a Memphis-based importer—bringing in fresh tamarind from Mexico, for example, which the cooks shell and seed by hand for a bright, punchy agua fresca. Meanwhile, he partners with

"THE SAME THINGS YOU SEE IN A TACO, IT'S JUST AS EASY TO PUT THEM IN A TORTA."

produce managers at several supermarkets and gets first pick from what comes in on the trucks in the morning.

Jonathan has developed techniques to maximize quality for produce that doesn't grow in the mid-South, like mangoes and avocados. When I mentioned that

NO CHEESE DIP, NO DOLLOPS OF SOUR CREAM, NO BURRITOS, NO FAJITAS.

I was surprised at the consistent perfection of the avocado garnishes, he explained his method: "I only buy avocados that are green and hard as a rock, the most unripe I can find—because I want to control the environment that the avocado ripens in. A ripe avocado in the store is almost always bad because it's moved between warm and cool climates. If it matures in a constant temperature, it's going to mature wonderfully, but the only way to ensure that is if you get them green and do it yourself." He stores hundreds of avocados at the restaurant, allowing him to pick the best ones at just the right moment of maturity.

The Las Tortugas tradition also means, as Jonathan puts it, "staying true to the identity of authentic Mexican food." That's part of his spiel to new customers: No hard-shell tacos or flour tortillas, no cheese dip, no dollops of sour cream, no burritos, no fajitas. Some of those laminated signs echo the point. My favorites were a couple that took the form of Pepe-penned letters to Californians and other border-state residents. "To Californians with an attitude implying that Memphians are ignorant about Mexican cuisine," begins one, "we've got news for you.... We are from Mexico City." Another manifesto establishes the Las Tortugas mission: "setting the record straight about what is truly fresh classic Mexican cuisine with absolutely no influence of the American way of cooking."

If you want cheese on top of your tacos, Jonathan and company will politely decline. "My father has a passion for preserving the integrity of the dish," Jonathan explains.

PEPE'S FAMILY owned a strip-mining company back in Mexico City. His father instilled a work ethic in him from a young age; before he could drive a truck or a bulldozer, he worked as a peon. "I worked in that place since I was nine years old," Pepe remembers. "Taking rocks from here to there, that kind of deal."

He used to sneak into the kitchen as a boy to spy on the family cooks, and slowly taught himself their tricks—he once ate all thirteen eggs the cooks had prepared for the family just so he could watch them make another dish. "I remember the cooks used to complain—I would go over there

and elbow them out," he says.

As a college student in Monterrey, Pepe met Nancy Martin, an American student from Memphis doing post-graduate work in Spanish. He fell in love, and they kept up a long-distance courtship when she returned home. Four years later they married, and Nancy joined Pepe in Mexico City, where Pepe ran the mining business.

In 1980, Pepe and Nancy, now with two sons in tow, moved to Tennessee. Nancy worked as a Spanish professor at the University of Memphis ("she speaks Spanish better than I do, grammatically speaking," Pepe says), while he continued to run the mining operation back home. "When it came time for us to move, I thought it was going to be a good adventure—but my business was still in Mexico," he says. For the next twenty years, he commuted back and forth between Memphis and Mexico City.

By 2000, he had earned enough money to retire, and sold his part of the business. He and Nancy moved to Naples, Florida, to relax. (Pepe's version of relaxing included skydiving and racing motorcycles at speeds of almost 200 miles per hour in Daytona.) The life of the retiree, however, was not for Pepe. "When you have too much fun, you lose the flavor," he says. "I retired, and it was boring. Work is how I enjoy life—not fishing."

Less than three years later, they returned to Memphis to open a restaurant. He had no history in the food business. Pepe says that his naiveté turned out to be the secret to his success.

"I thought when you opened a restaurant, you went out and bought food, bring it back, cook it, and do the dishes," he says. "I didn't know anything about food service companies. I went out and picked up the best of everything. So that was the reason for the success."

Jonathan, who had been working in sales in Florida, came back to Memphis to help his father with the restaurant two years after it opened. In 2010, Pepe passed the torch to his son.

The first time Jonathan put up his own dish on the special board, a pumpkin-seed green mole, customers loved it. "It was the first time that people ever paid money for something that I had made," he remembers. "To have someone come up and tell you that's the best mole they've ever had—I've never experienced anything else like that. To have the creative liberty to choose what you want to make and have the confidence that people are going to like it—that's it, I was done, I could not imagine a more satisfying career, period."

Like Viper Man, like son.

David Ramsey is a writer in Nashville, Tennessee. His work has been anthologized in Da Capo Best Music Writing, Best Food Writing, Cornbread Nation, *and the* Norton Field Guide to Writing.

SOUTHERN, REBORN

MY BOILING SPRINGS BECAME A WELLSPRING

by Monique Truong

I WAS BORN IN SAIGON, South Vietnam, in 1968.

I was reborn in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, in 1975.

Not a "rebirth" in the religious sense of the word but in the shape-shifting transformation that refugees and immigrants undergo upon our arrival here in the U.S. With a new language, often a new name, and always a new daily bread, we necessarily become someone new. For a child, this metamorphosis is even more acute and thorough.

I was seven when my family came to Boiling Springs as refugees from the Vietnam War. I didn't add the English language to my Vietnamese. I traded it wholesale. Now when I try to speak my first language, I'm told that my accent is *cứng*, which in this context means the opposite of supple. In my new home, the given name that I answered to during my young life became, literally, a dirty word. I went from Dung—the "D" is pronounced like a "Y"—to Monique, a name on my Catholic

Courtesy Monique Truong

The author marches in the 1977 Shelby Christmas Parade.

baptismal certificate but otherwise never used. As for my daily bread, it found companionship and comfort with slabs of hickory-smoked bacon, thick slices of sugar-cured ham, and country sausages, flecked with black pepper and generous with sage.

Within two years in Boiling Springs, I was a baton twirler, one of the quintessential rites of passage of Southern girlhood.

I've a photo that was taken in 1977 in the nearby town of Shelby, North Carolina.

I was nine years old, marching with my baton-twirling troupe in the annual Christmas Parade. Our mothers had been given mimeographed sheets with detailed instructions about our costumes. Where to mail-order the skirted red leotard, how much white fur trim would be needed for hand-sewing around its neck and skirt, satin ribbon for our hair, a pair of Keds (brand new or well-painted with white shoe polish, which I think was the frugal option we went with), white ankle socks (my mother bought two pairs because she didn't want my feet to get cold), beige pantyhose (also two pairs for the same reason of ensuring warmth). On the morning of, underneath the leotard's polyester, my mother stuffed me into a thick acrylic sweater (again, for the frigid temperature, which judging from the photo and the way that the folks lining the street were dressed, was probably in the low fifties).

The author, age nine.

Courtesy Monique Truong

When I look at this photo, I'm truly surprised that I'm smiling.

The inner sweater was unbearably itchy; my sneakers didn't fit because of the extra pair of socks; sweat was dripping down my back because Shelby was a small town in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, not the Antarctic; and, in all honesty, I still wasn't quite sure why I was waving a metal rod around. Was it a kind of dance? A form of martial arts? Had my mother enrolled me in a paramilitary corps, like those cookie-pushing Brownies?

This was the first and only time that I would march in the Shelby Christmas Parade. My family moved to Centerville, Ohio, the following summer. My baton twirling days were over. In southern Ohio, girls my age played soccer. Maybe they twirled batons, too, but I was never again one of them.

Photographs are taken to memorialize something consequential—a moment of celebration, a noteworthy place and time—and they are also taken as evidence and proof.

I LIKE TO THINK THAT I'M A PART OF THEIR COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS MUCH AS THEY ARE A PART OF MINE—THAT WE BELONG TO EACH OTHER.

I like to think that this nine-year-old and her baton showed up in other people's photos from that day, too, inhabitants of Cleveland County who had lined the parade route, whose photos are now as faded as mine, their Kodachrome colors washed-out, except for the still-vivid red. I like to think that in this way I'm a part of their collective memory as much as they are a part of mine. You know, that we belong to one another.

This photo documents a small Southern town being itself. Whites, African Americans, one lone Vietnamese American girl, we are all inside this frame. The photo isn't an idea of a small Southern town, constructed elsewhere, mass-marketed, and reflected back onto itself and places beyond for instantaneous messaging and ready consumption. It takes more than a split second to understand. It requires explanation, context, and a willingness on the part of a beholder to embrace complexity, plurality, and flux.

SO, WHAT HAPPENS when this little girl grows up and writes a novel, conceiving it as a re-imagined Southern Gothic, setting it in Boiling Springs and Shelby, and writing a version of herself as the novel's narrator, a child who is profoundly different from her community in many ways, beginning with her synesthesia, a neurological condition in which her words are accompanied by phantom flavors, most of them lifted from a Southern table? (The word "later," for instance, brings with it the richness and tang of pimento cheese, "fiduciary" a sweet pull of Cheerwine, and "character" serves forth pickled watermelon rind, with its equal parts vinegar and sugar with a linger of cloves.)

In other words, what happens when I claim my Southern rebirth as an inspiration, as raw source material, and as the living connective tissue to a specific alimentary *and* literary tradition that gave birth to my novel? Harper Lee, Carson McCullers, and North Carolina's own George Moses Horton—a man who began his life as an enslaved person and who became the first African American poet to be published in the U.S.—I wrote their names into the pages of my novel in homage to what they meant to me as a reader, a writer, and a human being.

All this and more I shared with my publishing house when I was asked to fill out an author's

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I CLAIM MY SOUTHERN REBIRTH AS AN INSPIRATION, AS RAW SOURCE MATERIAL, AND AS THE LIVING CONNECTIVE TISSUE TO A SPECIFIC ALIMENTARY AND LITERARY TRADITION THAT GAVE BIRTH TO MY NOVEL?

questionnaire, detailing background and personal information, in order to help them with marketing and publicity: How did I get the idea for the book? What's my personal connection to the subject matter? What areas of the country do I have a connection to?

My publisher wanted to know how best to package my book and how best to package me. My novel would emerge out of this process a fully fungible object, encased in a shiny wrapper, designed to entice readers and to promise, in a glance, what they would find on the pages inside.

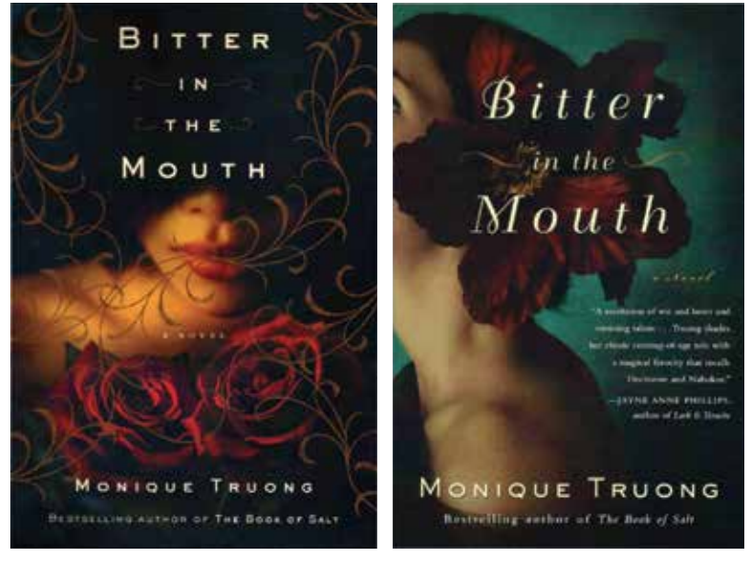
A novel's cover design is the clearest indicator, an unequivocal pictorial representation, of what the publisher has distilled its content and its author down to. At first, I was shown two proposed covers for my second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*.

One features a bare-chested woman made modest by two strategically placed red roses, festooned with golden arabesques, and hidden in the shadows. Maybe, behind that scrim of darkness, she's in fact sitting in front of a jumbo plate of chopped pork and hushpuppies from Shelby's own Red Bridges Barbecue Lodge. For her sake, we can only hope that's the case, as it would have kept her warm in her inexplicable state of undress. The other cover depicts a partially clothed gal in profile with a platter-sized, wine-red hibiscus in her hair. She looks like she's starving for a meat and three.

Neither one of these images signals to me a novel set in the American South; a coming-of-age novel and a family narrative that takes place from 1975 to 1998; nor a food-laden snapshot of a girl whose words are coupled with the foodstuffs that graced the Southern table as well as the food facsimiles that disgraced that table during an era when convenience relentlessly pummeled flavors. The South in the mid-70s for me was a Janus-like feast of boiled peanuts, Red Velvet cake, buttermilk biscuits, ambrosia salad, fried okra, and peach cobbler at one end, and at the other sodden corpses of vegetables in cans, albino sponges marketed as loaves of bread, and gelatinous condensation of soups, which we were all encouraged to use for making absolutely everything as long as it wasn't just soup.

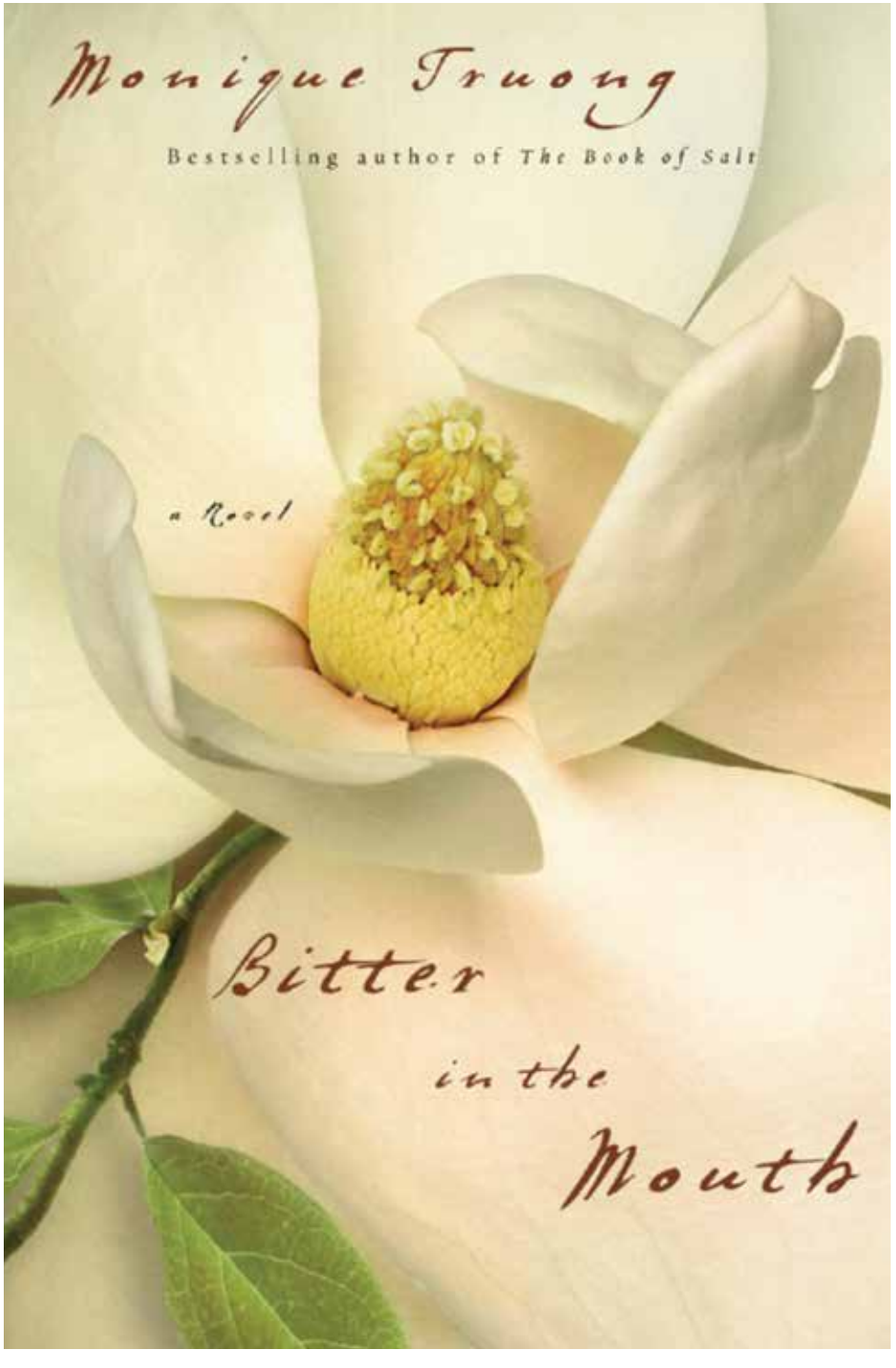
I found these two cover designs laughably and disturbingly misrepresentative of my novel. As a former attorney, I would even say that they constituted false advertising. Couple these designs—and there were others that were far worse, and none included a morsel of food—with the face-to-face meeting in which I was told that the marketing and publicity material wouldn't in any way characterize my book as a Southern novel. Though I can't remember the exact words, they were something close to this: *We're going to steer clear of that*. My publishing house wanted to steer clear of my novel's regionality, as if its Southern milieu was roadkill or a pothole or an unexploded landmine. Better back it up and go another way. From the look of these designs, I think the direction that my publisher was heading toward was South America. An Isabel Allende or a Gabriel García Márquez novel would look almost at home underneath these covers.

What was left unsaid during the meeting was too embarrassing and damning to say to my face: My publisher believed that American readers would not buy, literally and figuratively, my book if it was packaged as a Southern novel. Their assessment was that a Vietnamese American woman writing a coming-of-age novel set in and fed by the American South wasn't a selling point because I, the author, was an anachronism. I was hard-to-believe and improbable. My palate and my dinner plate were limited by my race. I had no easily understood or identifiable role within the publisher's flat, static, binary, black-and-white idea of the American South. In the parochial world of New York publishing, if



Courtesy Monique Truong

Two covers rejected by the author for her second novel.



Courtesy Monique Truong

***The final hardback cover for* Bitter in the Mouth.**

the editors, marketing executives, and publicists can't imagine it, then, of course, the book-buying public at large—rubes that we all are—couldn't as well. Within the limited territory of my publisher's imagination, that was the end of the story, and it would *not* be a Southern story.

Except in my case, it wasn't the end, because I had a dogged literary agent on my side, a bestselling novel already to my name, and was—and still am—stubborn as a mule. The point for me was Crystal Gayle clear: To deny the Southern origins of my novel was to deny me of my Southern girlhood. It was hard work twirling that baton, hard work to attend classes every week with little girls—all of them white—who assiduously ignored me because my newly arrived mother had no idea that by enrolling me in their class that she and I had violated an otherwise well-understood color line, and even harder work to smile through it all. No New York publishing house was going to erase me from Boiling Springs and Shelby. These places belong to me, and I to them.

In the end, I had to come up with my own ideas and proposals for the book cover, which finally led to an agreed-upon design: the interior of a wide open magnolia rendered in the soft hues of nostalgia.

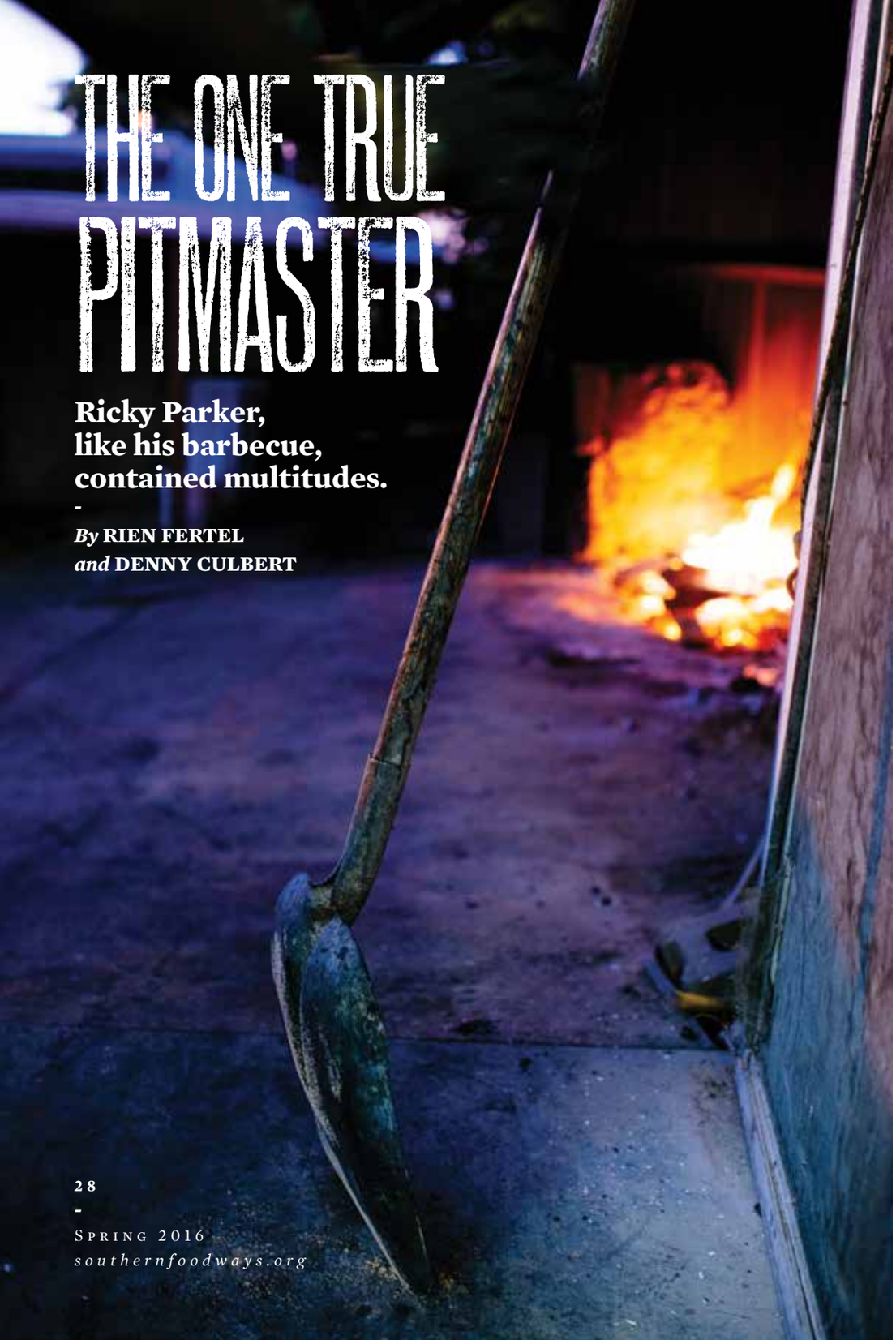
Of course, I told my publisher that the state flower of North Carolina is the dogwood, not the magnolia, which is Mississippi's own. That was too fine a point for them. Despite their better judgment, they were heading southward after all, but they weren't going to consult a map and get all state-specific about it. Mississippi's magnolia went on my paperback cover as well.

On both editions, you'll notice that my bio includes no mention that I lived in Boiling Springs. It says only that I live now in New York City. In my interviews and during my readings and appearances, I always offer up this fact and connection because it's meaningful and poetic justice that my Boiling Springs became a wellspring.

Given my publisher's haphazard steering, I'm amazed that the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* found their way to *Bitter in the Mouth*. The *Charlotte Observer* did too, and the novel and I ended up on its front page. Even the Earl Scruggs Center, located in the very heart of Shelby, found it and me. Every time another Southern institution contacts me, I give thanks that I stood up for my novel and for a depiction of the American South supple enough to include this little girl.

As Theodore Roosevelt would say if he, like me, had been reborn a little girl in Boiling Springs, "Speak softly and carry a big baton."

Monique Truong is the author of two novels, The Book of Salt *and* Bitter in the Mouth. *Her third novel,* The Sweetest Fruits, *is forthcoming from Viking Books. She presented a version of this piece at the 2015 Southern Foodways Symposium.*



THE ONE TRUE PITMASTER

Ricky Parker, like his barbecue, contained multitudes.

-

By **RIEN FERTEL**
and **DENNY CULBERT**

A DYING BREED

RICKY COULDN'T SAY FOR SURE HOW MANY HOGS HE'D prepped since 1976, when he began tending the pits at Scott's Barbecue, the year Early Scott took the thirteen-year-old boy on as an apprentice and, eventually, son. It was immediately clear to Scott that no one could smoke hogs like Ricky. He was a pitmaster, body and soul, born to the rough trade. He would master pit, fire, and hog. Shovel, sauce, and spice. He would master barbecue. The young Ricky could remain on his feet for twenty hours straight: cleaning the pits, stoking the fire, shoveling coals, smoking hogs, serving customers. And the customers liked Ricky: courteous, handsome, a bit wild. Dedicated to finishing the job and doing it well, Ricky would eat standing up—"I eat on the run," he liked to say—and rarely if ever slept for more than three hours a night. Sleep didn't come easy when you were cooking with live flame. He'd close his eyes and experience terror-filled dreams of his pit catching fire, his hogs rendered inedible, the Henderson County Fire Department arriving too late to save his smokehouse, which now lay a conflagrated heap of charred timbers and sheet metal. Ricky would rather stay awake to watch the fire.

His eating and sleeping patterns, or lack thereof, remained constant through the summer of 2008, when I first watched Ricky Parker smoke a pig. At first sight of him—slender and gangly, his skin bronzed from working in close quarters to fire—I questioned how he could possibly find time even to dress himself, energy enough to shave that perfectly sculpted Van Dyke beard. Three hours of sleep and working like this? How can he be standing? How can he be alive?

But Ricky assured me that this was all part of the whole-hog pitmaster's life. He repeated a boast that he recited to just about everyone who came to interview him: "I got to buy four or five pair of shoes a year. I do a lot of walking, a lot of pacing." He told me that he was married to his work more than he was to his wives, past and present. He spoke in self-mythologizing tones. He was special, an original, a dying breed. For all he knew, he was the last of the great pitmasters, a man who strove to smoke as many hogs as humanly possible.

Ricky counted sleep in hours and shoes in pairs, but, above all else, Ricky counted his life in hogs.

Annually, beginning with my first visit in 2008, I'd make a pilgrimage to eat Ricky Parker's barbecue. Each year, as I ate my chopped pork sandwich, he'd tell me about a future date circled on his mental calendar: July 4, 2013, the holiday weekend over which he aspired to cook one hundred whole hogs. One hundred! Hardly an arbitrary number crudely culled from a beer-fueled backroom bull session, but the apogee of human achievement. The age of modern Methuselahs. In sports, the most notable of statistical achievements. One zero zero. A symbol of perfection. One hundred pigs. One pitmaster's dream. Three digits' worth of whole hogs. A century of swine.

Ricky Parker knew with some certainty that no pitmaster, living or dead, had ever reached that number. Through a complex formula of weather data, gasoline prices, hog futures, and unemployment rates, Parker calculated that 2013 would be his year. He could stop counting hogs after this achievement. He could slow down, ease into retirement, pass the pitmaster's shovel off to his son Zach. He might even learn to sleep.

But until then he would keep on cooking. Because no one could smoke hogs like Ricky. No one worked to make barbecue like this anymore. Few cared like Ricky Parker, the world's greatest pitmaster, the man who counted hogs to keep both himself and barbecue alive.

THE BALLAD OF RICKY PARKER

THE WHOLE HOG IS THE PERFECT blend of barbecue: Every little bit of the animal can be consumed in a single, decadent, maybe even gluttonous bite. "You got a little bit of everything," Ricky Parker liked to say. Ricky gave the world his all by providing everything the pig had to offer. This is what made the offerings of Scott's Barbecue distinctive: this everything, the very wholeness of whole-hog barbecue itself.

Ricky Parker's menu offered two sizes of wax-paper-wrapped sandwiches—regular and jumbo—alongside barbecue sold by weight (priced at $7.50 per pound when I first visited) and stuffed into a paper tray decorated in red and white gingham. Ordinarily, the meat arrived cleaver-chopped to a medium coarseness. But whether delivered by bun or tray, the barbecue could be ordered crudely hacked, finely minced, or pulled, straight no chaser, from the hog.

Depending on one's tolerance for heat, the barbecue could be dressed with sweet, mild, medium, and hot homemade sauces, all made fresh by Ricky Parker. Most locals ate their sandwiches topped and dripping with coleslaw, which came in two varieties: the standard mayonnaise-heavy version, called white slaw, and a red variant made with ketchup and vinegar. Sandwiches could be further tricked out with fat rings of raw Vidalia onion.

Scott's sold a few varieties of potato chips and often stocked some fried pies made by a John Gordon from his house up the road, but there were no other sides except baked beans, which were burdened, in the best way possible, with heapings of barbecued pork.

Smoking whole hogs allowed Ricky to provide eaters with any edible portion of the pig; in addition to portion sizes and spice levels, customers, as if peering through the window of a butcher shop's display case, could select their individual cuts to get the taste and texture they wanted. At Scott's, one could eat a different barbecue sandwich every day of the week. The combinations and permutations were near limitless.

For example, a customer could request the wetter, fleshier meat from the inside of the shoulder, or the crusty exterior bark charred by flames. One could go even deeper, literally, into the very heart of the pig, to demand the meat from the undersides of the ribs, or the rib bones themselves; the jowly flesh nearest the neck, or the delicate tenderloin. Cuts could be mixed and matched—a pulled part from this, a chopped bit of that—to imagine the perfect sandwich.

Over a ten-minute stretch perched at Scott's lunch counter one summer afternoon I witnessed the full range of possible orders. Through the Plexiglas window that separates the meager prep area from the dining room, customers shouted rapid-fire lists of ingredients and techniques, combinations that ranged from the mundane to the extraordinary, the unusually healthy to the distressingly heart hazardous.

A quarter pound of plain barbecue, please.

Regular barbecue, white meat, extra chopped, no fat.

Jumbo, dark, pulled with a lotta fat on it, mayo slaw, extra hot. Occasionally, a customer would drop terms that reminded me of the so-called "secret menu" at In-N-Out Burger, a West Coast fast-food chain where a rabid fan base fetishizes an in-the know language of keywords and food hacks. At Scott's, these orders sounded foreign, like they could not possibly come from a pig.

A medium middlin'. Or, even more bizarre: You got any catfish today?

Middlin' is what most people commonly refer to as bacon, the fatty underside of the hog, which earned its vernacular nickname for its location at the animal's midsection. The catfish is a rarer cut of swine, a six-by-three-inch strap of meat embedded under the tenderloin with the shape and fleshy shade of a catfish fillet

He served five, ten, as many as two dozen hogs a day, every day but Sunday.


SORRY
WE ARE
SOLD
OUT

Smoking whole hogs allowed Ricky to provide eaters with any edible portion of the pig. At Scott's, customers could eat a different barbecue sandwich every day of the week.


Zac

IF EVERY SPECTACLE includes and concludes with an explosive ending, the climax of Ricky's whole-hog cooking was the "flip," that final moment, after twelve or more hours of cooking, when with a heave and heft he flipped each hog so that the outer, or skin side, of the whole beast was rotated upward to earthward revealing what had long remained hidden: what was once a fleshy pink corpus transformed into a beautiful mess of slightly charred rib bones protruding from a ruddy-gold mass of roast meat.

Whether by hand-cranked spit or engine-spun rotisserie, the heat source for roast meats needs to be distributed evenly to ensure a well-cooked pig, side of beef, whole fish, or what have you. Think of the perfectly toasted marshmallow, its caramelized surface achieved by twisting it over the campfire; without motion, the marshmallow will burn unevenly, blacken, and might even combust.

But a whole hog is not a marshmallow. Two-hundred-pound pigs are much too heavy, too bulky to reliably turn on a spit. Conceivably, a pitmaster could rotate a hog every hour or two, but the energy involved in hefting the carcass up and over, anywhere between four and twelve times in a cooking cycle, within arm's reach of fiery coals, as the meat becomes hotter to handle and increasingly grease slicked with rendered fat, would make the endeavor unbearable. Multiply that by twenty hogs all cooking at once, and even the most vigorous of pitmasters is faced with an impossible task.

For anyone who's turned even a spit full of chickens over a roaring fire, the work becomes quickly monotonous and tiresome. Before the modern-day mechanization of the rotisserie, turnspit dogs kept meats slowly rotating over the open fire. In the sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, throughout Britain and its colonies, including America, households might have owned a *Canis vertigus*, Latin

I traveled up to Lexington every year to sate my hunger for another plate of barbecue, but I also went to satisfy my curiosity about Ricky Parker.

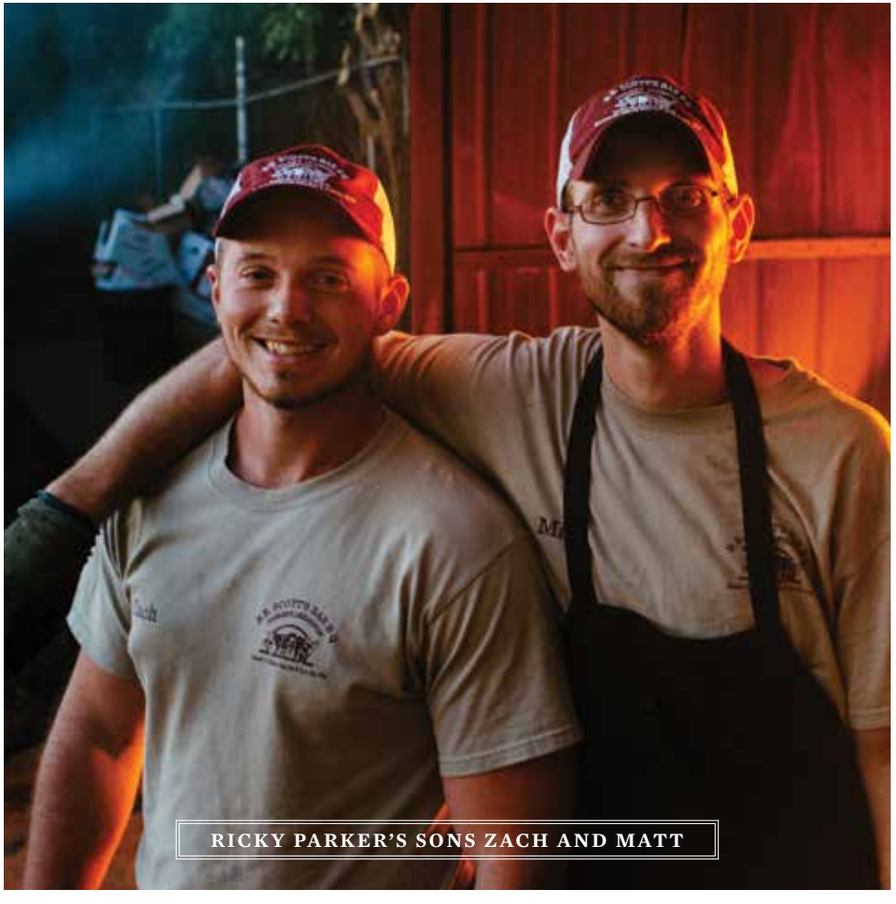
for "dizzy dog," a specific breed raised to run in a wheel— like those favored by hamsters—which spun a chain connected to a fireplace spit. Also called kitchen dogs, cooking dogs, underdogs, and the *Vernepator cur*, or "the dog that turns the wheel," these short-legged, long-bodied Sisyphean pups also worked in early New England sculleries. The cruel treatment of the turnspit dogs eventually fell out of favor, and helped lead to the formation of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the *Canis vertigus* became extinct.

Luckily, for the sake of mutt and man, pitmasters long ago figured out that whole hogs did not need constant turning if they remain belly, or meat side, down. Well-insulated pits, hardwood coals shoveled at timed intervals and deposited consciously around the carcass's perimeter, and vigilance against flame and flare-ups will keep a pig evenly heated, its meat uniformly browned. But eventually all hogs need to be rotated, flipped upward so that the meat can meet its maker and greet the world as barbecue.

Ricky Parker, naturally, had his flip technique systematically diagrammed, a series of steps from which the pitmaster and his pit hands would never deviate. First, he needed to determine that a hog had been cooked through to doneness. Tenderly squeezing its thick, round hams, like a doctor probing for foreign bodies, he could feel if the skin had separated from the flesh underneath. It felt, to me, like handling a slightly deflated basketball: applying a bit of pressure formed an indention that would snap back into shape when released. He then enveloped the hog's outer upturned skin with a single layer of tinfoil. A steel grate, the exact same lattice-type framework that held the pig on the pit, was placed atop the now foil-topped hog. Ricky then tightly fastened these two grates together with strands of wire, sandwiching the hog in between. With a great inhale and flexing of biceps, he hoisted this massive hog sandwich up and toward his chest, using the bars of the pit's grill to guide and glide the bottom-most grate, before pushing out and, releasing his weight to gravity's fortunes, upending the hog to land belly up.

One by one, day by day, across thirty-five years, Ricky Parker flipped hog after whole hog. I attempt to total the numbers but my head spins dizzily just thinking of Ricky: our *Vernepator pitmasterus*, the man who spun the wheel.

RICKY PARKER HAD MET the enemy and it was a stainless-steel box, the size and shape of a pool table, a closed-lid oven big enough to fit a whole hog, with four legs on wheels for added mobility, in case one needed to roll it closer to any 240-volt electrical outlet. A product of nearby Jackson, Tennessee, this contraption went by the generic name Hickory Creek Bar-B-Q Cooker—though there is no Hickory Creek anywhere on this side of the state. This was the very latest in smoking technology, a modern marvel that promised to take the work out of barbecue, and it was everything Ricky hated. Within a half-hour's drive of Lexington, I had met several pitmasters—though you could hardly still call them that—who switched from wood-fired pits



RICKY PARKER'S SONS ZACH AND MATT

Tenderly squeezing its thick, round hams, like a doctor probing for foreign bodies, he could feel if the skin had separated from the flesh underneath.

Turn to page 4 to read more about Rien Fertel and Denny Culbert.

THE SOUND OF ONE CHIP DIPPING

A SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF ARKANSAS CHEESE DIP

by Phil McCausland

Heights Taco & Tamale Co., Little Rock.

Photographs by Kelly Kish

My first experience with a gallon vat of cheese dip was more emotionally complex than I expected. The giant vessel stared out from the refrigerator and called to mind alarming questions. How many bags of tortilla chips would be necessary to eat my way through it? Could I afford that many chips as an unpaid magazine intern in a small Arkansas town? Would my roommate help me? Should I let him? And would I have to consume the cheese dip while perched sadly on the futon mattress (sans frame) that functioned as my bed and couch?

I did know that it would trump all other sustenance in the house. There are only so many days in a row you can make supper out of rice, a can of black beans, and a container of salsa. I ripped open a bag of Tostitos, plopped on my floor mattress, and introduced myself to the world of Arkansas cheese dip. A novice, I didn't know Arkansans ate it warm. At fridge temperature, the dip was defiant.

Conway, Arkansas, where I lived, is known for three colleges, archaic liquor laws, and native son Kris Allen. When Allen won season eight of *American Idol* in May 2009, local diner Stoby's offered him free cheese dip for life. For one brief, brilliant segment of network television, the rest of the world learned about Arkansas cheese dip. But, as with Kris Allen's career, everyone but Arkansas soon forgot. My upstairs neighbors, who made Stoby's dip for the restaurant in a small-scale industrial setup, gave me the container as a sort of welcome-to-the-boarding-house gift.

"I fucking love Stoby's cheese dip," the bartender at ZaZa—a salad and pizza restaurant, and one of the few places in Conway to get a drink—told me as she filled a pitcher of beer.

"It's pretty good," I said with a nod, not looking up from the crawly snake I'd made with a straw wrapper.

Her tone turned to gravel as she wiped the sides of the pitcher with a rag. "*Pretty good?* How're you here only for a couple weeks and already have a connection for it?"

I shrugged, ignorant of the vaunted place of cheese dip in central Arkansas cuisine. I knew nothing of the debates, passions, or loyalties it inspired. Still, I promised to bring the vat to the house party she planned to host later that night. She grinned.

Many Southerners know the cheese-dip drill: Toss cubed Velveeta, a can of Ro*Tel, and maybe some cumin into a Crock-pot. Heat until liquefied. Arkansas restaurants finesse their own recipes. The degree of complexity varies, as do the secret ingredients. Stoby's recipe is the pride of Conway—and my unsophisticated palate assumed it deserved top honors—but it earns sneers in Little Rock.

After logging a bit more time in the state, I learned of Arkansas's long history with the dip and the expectations that surround it. My most important directive from the cognoscenti of Arkansas was to never confuse it with the white stuff called queso. That's blasphemy. In this state, the dip is orange, but even that is hardly a firm rule. (Stoby's has a B-side white dip, slightly spicier than the original.)

I KNEW NOTHING OF THE DEBATES, PASSIONS, OR LOYALTIES CHEESE DIP INSPIRED.

Some Little Rock establishments eschew Velveeta and instead borrow from French techniques to build a Mornay-style sauce or some variation of queso flameado. As an outsider, I could

ABOVE: Mexico Chiquito, North Little Rock. CENTER: Stoby's, Conway.

never discern the vagaries that determine where a restaurant's dip lands on the spectrum from good enough to canonical.

Though locals tend to look kindly on all cheese dip efforts, they're also proud as hell of their personal favorites. More often than not, it is familiarity or reputation, not recipe, that determines allegiance. And anyway, most restaurants' cheese dip methods are closely guarded secrets.

In 2009, Nick Rogers—a former Little Rock attorney, current sociology PhD student at Georgia State University, and the founder of the World Cheese Dip Championship, held annually in Little Rock since 2010—made a twenty-minute documentary called *In Queso Fever: A Movie About Cheese Dip*. In the film, he claims Arkansas as the birthplace of cheese dip, placing its genesis at a Hot Springs restaurant named Mexico Chiquito in 1935. *The Dallas Morning News* responded that Texas was the true home of cheese dip, and told Rogers he would rue the day he entangled himself in the debate. After months of research, the reporter contacted Rogers again and said she couldn't prove Texas had an earlier claim. Cheese dip was Arkansan—probably.

Rogers considered that a big win for the state. "The revelation that cheese dip appears to have originated in Arkansas gives Arkansas a culinary cultural identity that it has always wanted and lacked," Rogers says. "Arkansas, by virtue of where it is geographically—just to the north of Louisiana, just to the south of Missouri, just to the east of Texas—is at the intersection of these different regions of the Midwest and Southwest and Cajun Country and the Deep South. As such, Arkansas is a little bit all of those and a little bit none of those. It's a melting pot of its own." A melting pot that defines its cuisine by a liquefied cheese product.

Most Arkansans agree on the gist of the cheese dip origin story, though it's the kind of history that would elicit a nervous laugh from an academic. The tale begins with a man named Blackie Donnelly, owner of the aforementioned Mexico Chiquito. Like any eighty-year-old oral history, the vague and the unconfirmed abound. Donnelly worked as a pilot and flew a small twin-engine plane between Texas and Mexico for a time. Some say he ended up in Arkansas because he crashed his plane there. According to the current owners of Mexico Chiquito, Donnelly's wife came up with the cheese dip recipe—informed by their frequent trips across the border. It allegedly showed up on the Mexico Chiquito menu in 1935.

If we were to accept this narrative and get Biblical, following "the law of first mention," Mexico Chiquito cheese dip is God's cheese dip. Not a bad slogan, if the owners were ever inclined to use it. But because the recipe has remained secret for more than eighty years, no one is really sure what's in it. A few enterprising souls on the Internet think it might just be Kraft American cheese, milk, flour, hot sauce, cumin, and some other powdered spices—but it's the combination of an ambiguous history and a secret recipe that is so enticing.

Donnelly brought his business to the Little Rock area in 1936, explains Lisa Glidewell, who owns and operates Mexico Chiquito with her husband and siblings. Lisa's father bought the restaurant and its *very* secret recipes in 1978 and turned it into a local franchise. Today, Little Rock is still ravenous for Mexico Chiquito's dip.

"It was kind of outside North Little Rock," Lisa says of the Protho Junction location, swirling a chip into a bowlful of the

ABOVE: Heights Taco & Tamale Co., Little Rock.

THE FOOD WORLD MIGHT ALWAYS LOOK DOWN ITS NOSE AT CHEESE DIP.

dip that serves her family like a trust fund. "You actually had to drive there. It was probably a good thirty minutes because the interstates weren't so great. It was this old, old building with dirt floors. It was just a place that you came to because you loved the food."

ON MY MOST RECENT visit to Little Rock, I wanted its citizens to utter the ineffable: to explain why cheese dip mattered. Was Arkansas's cheese dip phenomenon akin to attaching a "World Famous" sign to an unexceptional burger joint? The assertion of provenance is a secret known only to Arkansans, who are unaware that it's a secret to anyone else. Acquaintances in Little Rock told me of their shock on leaving central Arkansas for the first time and not finding cheese dip on menus. One man said his son insisted a Colorado restaurant make it for him. The confused waiter returned with a bowl of melted cheddar cheese.

The ConcheeZtadors, cheese dip champions.

This dichotomy is what makes Arkansas cheese dip so fascinating to an outsider. Arkansans claim cheese dip as part of their culinary history, yet I kept wondering if that gooey birthright was a mere accident of geography. Gumbo, discussed to the point of cliché, tells the story of Louisianans mixing the traditions of its native and immigrant cultures: Choctaw, French, German, Spanish, and West African. It relies on ingredients with deep ties to people and place—andouille sausage, filé powder, okra, Gulf shellfish. The terroir of Arkansas cheese dip isn't rarefied. A delivery from the Sysco truck, or a visit to any American grocery store, yields the necessary components.

Despite Arkansans' insistence that cheese dip is their creation, it's also a first cousin, if not a sibling, to Tex-Mex. When critics first differentiated Tex-Mex from Mexican food thirty years ago, it was a cuisine deemed an edible mess—an American bastardization marked by huge platters with too much dairy. It described a food as both native and foreign. There has been a small shift in appreciation since then, and chefs aren't as afraid to attach themselves to a cuisine that was once considered a slur. But the food world might always look down its nose at cheese dip.

Courtesy Mexico Chiquito

Blackie Donnelly in front of Mexico Chiquito, North Little Rock.

As I left Little Rock, I burrowed deeper into these viscid rabbit holes. The numerous origin explanations, the slack history, and the shadow of Tex-Mex added to my frustration. I couldn't ascribe a tidy symbolism.

Maybe cheese dip matters simply because Arkansans love it. While the region evolves, cheese dip is unflinching. Most people have a nostalgic affinity for a food that is less than haute cuisine. For me, a Pennsylvania-raised child of Irish and German parents, it's Oscar Meyer's spreadable liverwurst or a plate of corned beef hash that almost certainly came from a can. I associate these dishes with happy memories, and they just taste good. Beyond my need for basic sustenance, that's all I really want out of a meal.

Arkansans get that every time they hit the drive-through at Mexico Chiquito or slide into a booth at Stoby's or switch on their Crockpot, and it's even better because it's naturally social. No matter the petty divisions created by politics or religion or pop culture, the people of central Arkansas will unite around a bowl of cheese dip—even if one of them thinks there's a better version just up the road.

Phil McCausland is a New Orleans–based writer whose work has appeared in The Oxford American, The Atlantic, VICE Munchies, *and* Eater.

GREEN, I LOVE YOU, GREENS

THE COLOR OF MEMORY

by Jessica B. Harris

Verde que te quiero verde
"Green, how I love you, green"[1]

Illustrations by Matt Ferebee

So wrote the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, evoking all of the pastoral beauty of the color that is connected with country gardens and ripening fields. It's connected with virility and with youth. French King Henry IV was called *Le vert galant*—The Evergreen Gallant, or The Gay Old Spark. The Spanish call a dirty old man *un viejo verde*. In China, green is considered yang and is associated with female virtues. Green was the color of protection in ancient Egypt, and the god Osiris, known as the Great Green, was often depicted with green skin in paintings and statues. Green is the color of the prophet Muhammad and is venerated in Islam, where Paradise is supposed to be full of lush vegetation (as is only natural for a religion that began in the desert!). While green can symbolize sickness and envy, it more often means hope and growth, as it is the color that represents nature in all of its possibilities. Iemanja, the water mother of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, takes blue-green viridian as her color, symbolizing life itself.

[1]Note: There are several ways to translate this line. This is among the most straightforward.

For artists, green is composed of blue and yellow, and is the strongest of the secondary colors. Impressionists embraced the color in the late nineteenth century, when the innovation of pigments in tubes allowed for painting *en plein air*. Farmers know the exact shades of green that signal all is well: the celadon of a ripening lettuce or the malachite of a citrus leaf, the lush, deep hues of growing. It is the green of an increasing number of chefs and restaurateurs who grow and cook, who have reacquainted us with the tastes of true freshness and with old savors rescued from oblivion.

For me, green is also the color of memory, because as an African American Northern Southerner, green is about greens. We eat them on New Year's Day for folding money—unless we're in New Orleans, where we smother cabbage. Jazz great Thelonious Monk, a native of North Carolina, wore a collard leaf as a boutonniere.

African American poet Langston Hughes wrote in his 1961 work, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*:

> IN THE POT BEHIND THE
> PAPER DOORS WHAT'S COOKING?
> WHAT'S SMELLING, LEONTYNE?
> LIEDER, LOVELY LIEDER
> AND A LEAF OF COLLARD GREEN
> LOVELY LIEDER LEONTYNE.

"Leontyne" is the great African American soprano Leontyne Price from Laurel, Mississippi, and the poet is riffing on the seeming contradictions between the lieder, a genre of German Romantic music, and the decidedly funky scent of the cooking greens.

My paternal grandmother was an urban farmer before her time. She was also a forager, known to cull the dandelion greens from the lawns of Fisk University when she visited Nashville from her Napier, Tennessee, home. By the time I knew her, she lived in the South Jamaica projects of Queens, New York, and grew her Southern staples (peanuts, okra, mustards, turnips, and collards) in the small allotment that was available in those days. She wasn't a particularly good cook, but at greens and beaten biscuits she was a wizard. A mixture of collards and mustards, her greens forever marked me. When I went away to school, she'd wrap them in funky care packages that filled me with delight.

I began my career as a culinary historian back in the dark ages of the 1980s, and I remember proclaiming that collards were African. At some point, I said as much on a television show. Soon after, I was blindsided by a phone call from the culinary historian Karen Hess. Karen and I were friends, and I knew she took delight in finding errors of scholarship. I did my best to avoid her wrath. When I picked up the phone, she rather gently asked, "You *do* know that collard greens are *not* African?" I didn't, but I damned sure checked further and got myself straightened out after that.

GREENS ARE A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF THE CULINARY CROSS-FERTILIZATION THAT CREATED THE CUISINE OF THE SOUTH.

Collards, although claimed by African Americans with a vengeance, are European. "Collard" is a corruption of "colewort," and colewort is any non-heading cabbage. The Africanism in the pot, if you will, is the consumption of the potlikker in which they were cooked. Greens, then, are the exception to what seems to be the Southern culinary rule: The misattribution favors the African American hand in the cooking pot. Confusion persists. Greens are firmly planted in the African American experience. They are a perfect example of the culinary cross-fertilization that created the cuisine of the South.

Northern European greens are simply a New-World substitution for an Old-World food. The Old World here is Africa. European collards replaced a myriad of leafy greens that go by so many different names as to be bewildering to all but the most intrepid botanist. In the New World context, we get spinach, mustards, turnips, and the ubiquitous kale, as well as the less-used dandelion, purslane, creasy, poke, and more.

A culinary curve bending from Africa through South America and the Caribbean to the United States traces the migration of leafy green stews from Old World to New. It begins on the African continent with the greens-inflected meat and fish stews like Nigeria's efo, Benin's sauce feuilles, and Senegal's soupikania. Across the Atlantic in Brazil, the leafy greens turn up in efo, a dish that maintains its Nigerian name as well as the Nigerian use of palm oil. Move up that curve and you'll next find the callaloo of the Caribbean, a soup that depends on leafy greens as its main ingredient, along with the bounty of the local waters.

Collard Green Room at Project Row Houses, Houston, TX.

Photo by Carol M. Highsmith/Library of Congress

Finally, you arrive at New Orleans gumbo. Leah Chase's Holy Week gumbo z'herbes, at its origin, celebrated the tradition of foraging. It traditionally uses nine, eleven, or thirteen varieties of greens, indicating the number of new friends to be made in the year. Recently at Patois, also in New Orleans, I had a turkey andouille gumbo that was remarkable for its addition of small strips of collard greens to the soup, a fillip that may have been born of kitchen necessity, but one that brings us full circle, to my grandmother's greens.

We return not to her small, cramped kitchen in Queens, but to white-tablecloth restaurants, where trends celebrate this multicultural dish and return us to the past. The matrix vegetable may be European in origin, and the African hand is still tasted in the seasoning of the pot. The chef might even add foraged greens or a spice that indicates the increasingly complex tangle of cultures that is now the South. Expertly handled, the final result resonates with the toothsome flavors of fresh vegetables, celebrates the multiple heritages that have gone into the preparation, and simultaneously offers a taste of memory and a taste of the New South. It's all there in a leaf of collard, green.

Jessica B. Harris is a founding member of the Southern Foodways Alliance. After speaking at the first SFA Symposium, she encouraged John T. Edge to date Blair Hobbs, who is now his wife. She delivered a version of this talk at the 2016 Blackberry Farm Taste of the South.

LET THEM EAT CAKE

NEW ORLEANS CONFECTIONS, SACRED AND PROFANE

by Emma Sloan

A king cake–flavored doberge by Debbie Does Doberge.

Pableaux Johnson

EACH JANUARY, AS Americans lean into the well-trodden "new year, new me" mantra, New Orleanians have a mere five days before they face down the bacchanal of Carnival. Beginning on January 6—Twelfth Night—a parade rolls down St. Charles Avenue, parties rock the city, and king cakes flood the market in a purple, green, and gold blur.

Like Mardi Gras, king cake bespeaks deep Catholic roots that have been embraced and appropriated as a city tradition, not merely a religious one. The market is wide open on king cakes—pretty much every bakery and grocery store has its own version—so quality, price, and flavors vary widely. At the very least, you can expect a sweet bread twisted into an oval shape, filled with cream cheese, fruit compote, or classic cinnamon, gently iced, and heavily sprinkled in purple, green, and gold. King cakes also come with a tiny plastic baby—but you already know that. Dutiful celebrants will make sure every office party and social gathering has at least one king cake.

The Lenten season that follows Mardi Gras reminds you of what comes after celebration: thanks, reflection—and for some, self-discipline. The citywide celebration shows the power of a communal experience, one in which everyone is a king for a day. A birthday celebration, crowned with a cake, is the recognition for making it through one more year. New Orleans birthdays are often graced by a particular local dessert: the doberge cake. It honors the personal experience rather than the public experience that king cake does.

I remember my first doberge. When I was ten or twelve, my dad brought home a huge box for my mom's birthday. Inside was a cake: round, tall, and covered in a shiny and seamless dark brown icing decorated with big white roses. It looked nothing like the grocery-store sheet cakes that dominated the birthday-party circuit. My mom cut and lifted out a perfect, triangular slice: six layers of cake and five more of a dark chocolate filling.

I was in awe when they explained that this doberge cake had come from a New Orleans bakery called Gambino's, which sounded fantastically cosmopolitan for a girl growing up in south Mississippi with a pet pig and more trees than neighbors. Mom told us how my grandparents began the family doberge tradition, bringing home a cake each time they passed through New Orleans or Baton Rouge (which has its own Gambino's).

THE CAKE IS SO TIED TO NEW ORLEANS THAT IT'S HARD TO TASTE THE CULTURAL AMALGAM FROM WHICH IT SPRANG.

Sam Scelfo Jr. tells me that Gambino's recipe and method for doberge has never changed. He says

that Beulah Levy Ledner created the original recipe in Depression-era New Orleans. She sold it to Joe Gambino in the 1940s. Gambino did not alter the recipe, and neither did Scelfo, who bought the bakery in 1978. Doberge traditionally comes in two flavors: chocolate and lemon. For the indecisive consumer or taste-divided families, Gambino's offers a conjoined doberge that is half chocolate and half lemon. These are the two flavors that Ledner created, and Gambino's honors the tradition.

Doberge is based on the Dobos torte, a nineteenth-century Hungarian confection first served to Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria-Hungary. Ledner lightened the recipe; instead of the buttercream that fills a Dobos torte, she layered the cake with custard. Doberge is the product of many cultures. Created by a Jewish baker, inspired by a Hungarian cake, and adopted by an Italian bakery, it was ascribed a French-sounding name to make it more palatable in a Francophile city. Yet doberge feels like none of these things. The cake is so tied to New Orleans that it's hard to taste the cultural amalgam from which it sprang.

King cake is much more visible as *the* New Orleans confection. The product of a centuries-old baking tradition, king cake's history is more lore than concrete fact. It's generally traced back to medieval Europe, when the Catholic state ruled France and Spain. The cake's royal designation stems from its celebration of Twelfth Night, when, according to the New Testament, three kings arrived in Bethlehem bearing gifts for the baby Jesus. The king cake blueprint—an oblong brioche dusted with sugar—came to New Orleans and, as most things decadent in the city, has blown up over time.

King cakes are omnipresent from January 6 to Mardi Gras, sometimes impolitely showing up at the end of December. This year, Haydel's Bakery, frequently cited as one of the best bakeries for a king cake in New Orleans, teamed with Uber to deliver orders on Twelfth Night. Smoothie King offered a king cake–flavored smoothie that tasted like cough syrup without the buzz. I'll cop to enjoying the king cake–flavored vodka mixed with a cream soda, but at some point, all of this king cake stuff can feel like a sugary circus. Like catching beads at a parade, after the fifth or sixth time, do you even want it anymore? It is still just as special as it was on Twelfth Night? It feels unfair to hold king cake to such a high standard. High demand, simple structure, and ability to be shipped nationwide (FedEx even has a specially sized king cake box) have turned it into the Bourbon Street of New Orleans desserts.

If king cake is like hitting up Bourbon while in town, doberge is akin to scoring an invite to a chef's private dinner party. Doberge is beyond the purview of most home cooks. Your Louisiana grandmother might have passed down her recipe for gumbo; it's unlikely she ever made a doberge. Most home bakers aren't up to the task of baking multiple cakes, cooking the custard filling, assembling the layers, and then icing the beast. So they leave it to local bakeries, making doberge cake that much more special.

Pableaux Johnson

The King of King Cakes from Willa Jean Bakery in New Orleans.

My maternal grandparents grew up eating Gambino's, and because of this, we are a Gambino's family. There's no reason to consider switching it up. Every bite of Gambino's doberge tastes the same and offers the same feeling. With each bite, memories of eating it float to the surface.

There's a reason why a forty-day period of fasting feels welcome after the weeks-long revelry of Mardi Gras. Such a yearly celebration is perfect. Doberge is a special instrument of memory, a welcome herald of times past, present, and future. Though Gambino's has kept a lock on Ledner's original recipe for almost a century, other bakeries in town successfully bake and sell their own renditions of the doberge cake.

Debbie Does Doberge (no, it's not a Dallas-based company) experiments wildly with flavors outside of the lemon-chocolate binary—goat cheese, peanut butter and jelly, Key lime—and their irreverent name hints at a willingness to flout tradition. They offer a king cake doberge year-round: white cake with cinnamon, cream cheese icing, and your choice of fruit filling.

It's easy to diagnose this Frankencake as a crime, one that tarnishes the integrity of both the doberge and the king cake. Breaking the unwritten laws of tradition by experimenting with flavors and casting a blind eye to season may feel like an affront to the plastic baby Jesus. But I'm going to roll with it.

Emma Sloan is a freelance writer based in New Orleans. Her writing has appeared in Vice Munchies.

Illustration by Emily Wallace

DON'T CALL IT A POT PIE

WINSTON-SALEM'S MORAVIAN CURRENCY

by Debbie Moose

Moravian chicken pie isn't just comfort food. It's currency. At Moravian churches in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the price of building fellowship halls, replacing copiers, or repairing sanctuary roofs has, for generations, been stated not in dollars but in chicken pies.

The chicken pie has become such a part of food-related fundraising in the city that churches of all denominations hold sales. Some are once a year at holiday bazaars, others are year-round operations with commercial freezers and armies of volunteers.

Many sweet-toothed North Carolinians know about the Moravian treats that I grew up with in Winston-Salem—paper-thin Christmas cookies and yeasted sugar cake. The Moravian church began in an area that is now the Czech Republic. Members came to America to exercise religious freedom in the eighteenth century, bringing their baking traditions with them.

Unless you've spent time in Winston-Salem, it's unlikely you've ever heard of Moravian chicken pie. You might even say the heretical: "Oh, you mean chicken pot pie."

Do not ever call it pot pie unless you want some righteous wrath to come down on you.

Moravian chicken pie is simple: Line a pie pan with crust; add cooked chicken with broth or gravy; top with another crust; bake. No peas, carrots, onions, or other vegetables inside. Some cooks sprinkle a butter-flour crumble on the top crust or offer extra gravy for serving. But there's no gussying up the pie with herbs and such.

Moravian chicken pie is the humble laborer in the vineyard, providing warm, embracing meals for the table and support for the church treasuries.

Every cook insists that his or her way of making the pie is the best. Some churches use whole stewing hens, while others go with all white meat as a bow to current preferences. The whole-hen approach is probably closer to how chicken pie was originally prepared, according to researchers at Old Salem, the eighteenth-century restored Moravian settlement in Winston-Salem.

AS IS THE CASE WITH SIMPLE DISHES, EVERY COOK INSISTS THAT HIS OR HER WAY OF MAKING CHICKEN PIE IS THE BEST.

For frugal home cooks, chicken pie was the final fate of unproductive laying hens. Meat pies are made all over Europe, so it's reasonable to think that the early Moravians brought the idea with them. Historical recipes are scarce because cooks simply made chicken pie using what they had.

Records at the Moravian Archives in Winston-Salem show that chicken pie suppers as church fundraisers go back at least to 1920. Today, nearly every Moravian church in town holds a chicken pie sale sometime during the year, as do a good number of churches of other denominations. My mother, a Presbyterian, obtained her Moravian chicken pies from a United Methodist church, where volunteers still crank out up to 180 pies at a time to freeze and sell year-round.

Moravian chicken pie is ecumenically delicious.

Debbie Moose is a writer based in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her most recent book is Southern Holidays: A Savor the South Cookbook.

GRAVY

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