

TRUE GRIT S

Pendarvis on Portis

by Jack Pendarvis

GOOD FICTION MAKES YOU HUNGRY . If you can read *Mildred Pierce* by James M. Cain without craving a plate of chicken, you have no soul. But the king of the culinary allusion—and yes, I’m counting Proust—is the great comic novelist Charles Portis of Arkansas.

The most familiar foodstuffs in the work of Portis are those poor corn dodgers victimized for drunken target practice in *True Grit*, though I hear that the editors of *Gravy* prefer this foodways-friendly passage from *Gringos*

He held up a floppy tortilla and said that corn didn’t have enough gluten in it to make a dough that would rise. Still, heavy or not, the flat bread was good, and yet nobody seemed to know it outside Latin America and the southern United States. Corn, potatoes, tomatoes, yams, chocolate, vanilla—all these wonderful things the Indians had given us. Whereas we Europeans had been over here for 500 years and had yet to domesticate a single food plant from wild stock.

My wife’s favorite Portis quotation is from *The Dog of the South* and coincidentally fits right in: “When she’s eating chocolate cake late at night, does she also drink sweet milk from a quart bottle till it runs from the corners of her mouth?”

But for me, the pinnacle comes when the title character of *Norwood* hunks a sausage patty at his annoying brother-in-law through an open bathroom door. The ensuing slapstick concludes with this handy rule-of-thumb: “I don’t think you could put anybody’s eye out with a sausage.” 🍔

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

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